

Old Testament Criticism and Modern Discovery

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Towards the end of last century a leading Old Testament scholar summed up advanced critical opinion on the Old Testament in the words: "Modern criticism has won the war against the traditional theories. It only remains to fix the amount of the indemnity." It is fairly common property that the present century has done much to weaken this confidence; in particular, the rediscovery of the historical background of the Old Testament through archæological research has necessitated a revision of many opinions in the literary and historical study of the books. Many valuable works have been published, presenting the results of this research to the ordinary reader, such as those by Petrie, Garstang, Duncan, Yahuda, Marston, Caiger and others. Complaints have of ten been made, however, that Old Testament critics have shown a strange unwillingness to pay due attention to these discoveries and modify their theories in the light of them. At last, however, a book has appeared which affords us welcome proof that some of our leading Old Testament scholars have begun to learn this lesson and are not afraid to admit it.

Record and Revelation (Oxford, 1938) is by no means a work on apologetics, and is not concerned to demonstrate the truth of the Biblical record. It is a collection of essays by members of the Society for Old Testament Study, designed to cover the whole field of Old Testament science at the present time, and edited by Principal Wheeler Robinson, Oxford. The authors include some who have the reputation of being fairly radical critics, but this fact adds all the greater force to the following quotations, as they have no "conservative" axe to grind. We shall restrict ourselves to quoting from three of the essays, commencing with the opening one on *The New Sources of Knowledge*, by Prof. J. A. Montgomery, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. According to him:—

"That remarkable record in Gen. 10, the Table of the Nations, gives the earliest historical survey of ancient geography and ethnography. For instance, the verisimilitude of Abraham's wanderings from Ur of the Chaldees via Harran into Canaan is coming into recognition" (p.2).

"We are learning that much of what was formerly regarded as late and purely idealistic legislation in the Mosaic Law is of great antiquity" (p.4).

"The Muse of History has thus ironically turned the tables upon us critics who with no earlier datable text than the Moabite stone of c. 850 B.C. were at least sceptical towards the tradition that Moses wrote the Ten Commandments, and so forth, and with gentle satire has disclosed for us these early remains of the alphabet in the very desert where the Wanderings of Israel were experienced. We are given an archaeological background for the statement that at Sinai-Moses 'wrote upon the tables the Ten Words' (Exod. 34. 28), and also was bidden even to record an historical event, the defeat of the Amalekites (17. 14)" (p.8).

"We have thus discovered the land of... Canaan to have been the arena of a welter of competing essays at writing, an art which is the most distinguished invention of the human race... In letters it was the home of all school-book education of the Western world" (p.9).

From Germany, the home of the older criticism, comes an essay on *Modern Criticism*, by Prof. O. Eissfeldt of Halle-Wittenberg. In the section of this essay dealing with the criticism of the Pentateuch he shows how considerable has been the departure from the usual documentary theory of the composition of these books associated with the names of Graf and Wellhausen, and the epithet "scholarly" is no longer denied to works which maintain the Mosaic authorship, among which he mentions *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*,* by British Chief Rabbi, Dr. Hertz. Two citations from Eissfeldt will suffice:—

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"Finally, however, one does observe an actual mistrust of the analytical method, which is felt to have gone too far; and sometimes this finds expression in a definite opposition to any attempt at analysis and an assertion of the literary unity of the Pentateuch" (p. 75).

"Obviously the view that the Pentateuch is a consciously composed literary unit is here taken seriously in a way which only a few years ago would have been held to be quite impossible" (p. 81).

These remarks from Eissfeldt are the more striking as he is himself a leading documentary theorist, having actually added a source of his own, L (i.e. Lay-source), to the traditional J, E, P, D.

Lastly, we shall complete the international triangle by giving some extracts from the essay on *Archæology and the Old Testament*, by Prof. S. H. Hooke, London. Prof. Hooke reviews the latest evidence—the rediscovery of the Hittites and Horites; the South Arabian inscriptions, with their illustration of Semitic worship; the Lachish letters, dating from the closing days of the kingdom of Judah and confirming the picture of affairs we get in the Book of Jeremiah; and the Ras Shamra tablets found in Syria, the most important find in Biblical archæology since the discovery of the Tell el-Amarna tablets fifty years ago, dating, like them, from the time of the Exodus, and attesting the credibility of the patriarchal narrative and the Levitical ritual. When we read in these tablets of a magical rite in which a kid was seethed, apparently in its mother's milk, we can understand why this practice was forbidden to the Israelites. This is but one of the parallels they afford to the Mosaic legislation. From Kirkuk, in Iraq, the centre of the ancient Horite civilization, comes an interesting piece of information which helps to explain why Rachel was so careful to steal her father's *teraphim* and Laban so anxious to retrieve them. These *teraphim*, or family images, secured the divine right of inheritance to that member of the family who gained possession of them.

Those who are familiar with the common disparagement of the historical worth of the Books of Chronicles will be agreeably surprised by Prof. Hooke's statement:—

"Incidentally it may be remarked that there is a growing tendency, in the light of recent archaeological discoveries, to attach greater weight to the traditions preserved in the Chroniclers' narrative" (p. 370).

* A really valuable work (published in 1 vol. by the Soncino Press at 8s. 6d., 990 pp.), containing Hebrew, and English texts side by side, with commentary and notes. These are illuminating and sound, due allowance being made for the fact that they are written from the standpoint of orthodox Judaism. Haftorah (Heb. hapharah, "conclusion") means a lesson from the Prophets recited in the synagogue immediately after the reading of the Law.

We may close with another extract from the same essay, none the less telling for being so cautious as almost to be an understatement:—

“The outstanding result of recent archaeological research has been the reconstruction, in far fuller detail than has hitherto been possible, of the whole Hebrew history from the fourteenth century to the sixth...

“It is safe to say that the general effect of the discoveries of the last decade has been to confirm the substantial accuracy of the picture of life in Canaan in the second millennium B.C. as described in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, and to provide some ground for the view that written sources for this period may have existed at a much earlier date than has been commonly supposed” (p. 372).

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