

The Present Position of Old Testament Studies.

THE British Society for Old Testament Studies last year celebrated its twenty-first birthday by special meetings at Oxford under the presidency of Mr. G. R. Driver, and by the publication of a volume of essays edited by Dr. Wheeler Robinson.¹ This book is of special interest to Baptists: the editor is the Principal of our College at Oxford; at least four of the essays—two by the editor, and one each by Dr. T. H. Robinson and Dr. H. H. Rowley—are contributed by Baptists; and three Baptists—Dr. Johnson, Mr. A. J. D. Farrer and Mr. L. H. Brockington—are responsible for the translation of the essays by the French and German scholars. It is, however, of more than denominational interest; it is a notable contribution that no Old Testament student can afford to miss. The book will deservedly increase the already wide reputation of Dr. Robinson, and every reviewer will agree with Dr. Rowley, who reviewing it in the *Baptist Times* wrote—scarcely with that humility one would expect from an Old Testament scholar, nor in the true succession from Moses, who “was very meek above all the men which were upon the face of the earth”!—that *all* the essays are excellent.

The book challenges comparison with the previous volume issued by the same society in 1925 under the editorship of Peake and entitled *The People and the Book*. That volume contained fifteen essays, all by British members, six devoted to religious subjects, four to questions of Biblical criticism and interpretation, two to the history of Israel and its neighbours, and the remaining three to the study of language, psychology, and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The present volume contains eighteen essays by sixteen writers—of whom four also contributed to the *People and the Book*—and the editor has made more attempt to group the essays and give the book unity. Three on literature, three on history, four on religion, and two on theology are in groups, and the other six are left in separate essays, although even here it is possible that the unity of the book might have been improved if Professor Hooke's more general article on “Archaeology and the Old Testament” had been used as an introductory, and Dr. Montgomery's and

¹ *Record and Revelation*, edited by H. Wheeler Robinson, M.A., D.D., (Oxford University Press, 10s. 6d. net.)

Professor Thomas's had been included in the literature group of which they form a natural part. This grouping would again have left three concluding essays, one on exegesis, and one each on the place of the Old Testament in the two great religions which flowed from it—Judaism and Christianity.

The editorial introduction states that the aim of the book is to bring out the contribution of the Old Testament, when critically studied, to both Jewish and Christian theology, and claims that this is in harmony with the general trend of Old Testament studies. It is obvious, at least from the contributions of the overseas members, that an attempt has been made to restrict the scope of the essays to work that has been done since the publication of the previous volume; consequently it is from this angle that the volume must be valued. If the book can be regarded as representative of the present position of Old Testament scholarship—and perhaps it might have been more representative if, as in the earlier volume, each essay had been by a different writer—it should be possible to discover in it the achievements of the past thirteen years and the movements that to-day are discernible. Dr. Eissfeldt's chapter is a fine example of an essay which confines itself to the limit designed for the volume and yet gives a full and comprehensive statement of the trends in literary criticism.

The outstanding contributions to our studies during this period have undoubtedly come from archaeology, comparative Semitic philology, and comparative study of the religions of the ancient Near East, and it is of interest to trace the effect of these contributions on the essays. To the first subject two essays are devoted; the one by Professor Montgomery on "New Sources of Knowledge" has as its main interest the origin and development of the alphabet, though a third of the essay is given to the Ras Shamra tablets and serves to introduce the excellent booklet by Dr. J. W. Jack, published for the Old Testament Society in 1935, and, I understand, already out of print. Attention may perhaps be called to an error in the footnote on page 8 of this essay—the bronze dagger referred to was found at Lachish by Starkey and published last year by that paper which is rendering such excellent service to archaeology, the *Illustrated London News*. The second of the two essays is by Professor Hooke. This again does not give that general survey of archaeological activities bearing on the Old Testament which one desires, but concentrates on the light thrown by archaeology on the origins of the Hebrew peoples, their law, and the pattern of myth and ritual common to all the Near East, including Israel—a subject which Professor Hooke has made peculiarly his own.

Traces of the effects of archaeology are seen also in many

of the other essays, though one would have expected fuller use to have been made of archaeological results in Professor Hempel's essays and in the essays on the history of Israel. Just as new light has been thrown on old French literature by theories of Epic or Pilgrim routes and of the feminine origin of the romances, so the Ras Shamra discoveries have shown the kind of cult poetry which probably lay behind the patriarchal narratives. These contacts between the patriarchal accounts and early poems do not enable us to assume the "substantial" accuracy of these accounts, as many of the writers in this volume appear to do in a fashion that is amazingly reactionary. The opposite is in fact true. The contacts between the literature that has been called Post-Exilic and these fourteenth-century documents are so strong that even though—as is doubtful—we still divide the Pentateuch into J, E, D and P, we can no longer say that the first three are pre-exilic and the last one post-exilic; we have to assert that all contain pre-exilic material and have come to us through the hands of post-exilic authors. Professor Rowley's essay would also have gained by a freer use of the available archaeological material—the considerable evidence for the economic conditions in the country, and the extremely interesting guild system by which whole towns were devoted to specific trades (weaving, dyeing) and all the houses were of the same size.

The effect of philological studies is seen most clearly in Professor Thomas's article. Even Hebrew begins to become interesting when we can find the reason of syntactical forms that we have had to take on trust, and use Accadian roots to explain passages that have always puzzled students and to bring new meaning to much of our Bible. But the article shows how one after another the old criteria for dating and interpreting passages are being taken away, and that now some order must be brought into the mass of new material. If, for example, the Hebrew *yada'* (to know) can as easily mean "was still, or humiliated," it will be possible to build up a new doctrine of the Hebrew attitude to sex and make a further plea for celibacy! One cannot help asking what advantage is gained by many of the alternative meanings, and also whether—in spite of the fact that students are told that every Hebrew word has three meanings, itself, its exact opposite and something else—Hebrew would have kept alive at the same time distinct and separate meanings for common words.

The main concern of the volume lies, however, with the religious value of the Old Testament. Here again it is of interest to find a considerable amount in some of the essays that could as easily have been collected into a volume called Reaction and

Restatement! Professor Porteous' treatment of the history of the development of Israelite religion, Professeur Lods' account of the origins of the religion, Mr. Snaith's reconstruction of the worship, and the editor's attitude to the myth and ritual pattern (page 314) all show a strange hesitancy in recognising some of the most persistent elements in the gradual revelation of God to men. With this hesitancy goes an almost equally strong tendency to accept as accurate the account of the religion of the pre-Mosaic and pre-exilic periods, although comparative study of religions and archaeology have shown that "the gulf between the Old Testament and the actual historical and religious conditions of the greater part of the Second Millennium B.C. cannot be bridged."

Dr. Elmslie's essay on the "Ethics of the Old Testament" shows as clearly as the later essay by Montefiore that, though the religion flowed into two separate channels when it left the Old Testament, yet to a considerable extent it was the same religion that ran along both channels. Dr. Elmslie has an excellent section on the modern application of the Old Testament system of ethics. The difficulties are mainly due to the fact that the best part of the system has always been theoretical—the theory that the earth is the Lord's, not the landlord's, broke down because town property and clerical possessions could not be regarded as on the same level as agricultural property—and to the equally significant fact that we cannot find to-day a community sufficiently compact for a real application of the ethic.

This application to modern conditions is lacking in the editor's essays. Most of his readers will accept the belief in progressive revelation through history, but the danger is that for most of them the revelation is conceived as ending with Paul's interpretation of Jesus, or John's vision of the other-worldly Prince of Peace and the New Jerusalem. Did God cease to reveal Himself through history nineteen hundred years ago at Calvary, or do we lack to-day the prophetic vision which would enable us so to interpret events that they become the media for fresh revelation? Dr. S. A. Cook, in a recent letter to the *Spectator*, wrote that in our democracy "we grope between religious, theological, and philosophical systems which the world has outgrown," and "until we are ready to face what is at bottom a religious crisis we must not expect that sturdy confidence and that *élan vital* which gave men a forward look and which made the grand certainty of the cause outweigh any fear of the possibilities of the cost." As Protestant Christians we have rejected the external discipline not only of the Jewish law

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Centennial in Canton, October 13th-18th, 1936. Again it was Dr. Liu who issued the clarion call for renewing the activities of the China Baptist Alliance. As a goal for a five-year programme six objectives were accepted: (1) Doubling the membership in the churches; (2) Preparation of a history of Baptists in China; (3) The maintenance of an all-China Baptist journal; (4) The extension of the work into places where the Gospel has not been preached; (5) The distribution of a million copies of the Gospel of John and other Scripture portions; (6) Co-operation with the Baptist World Alliance in its world programme.

So much for a bit of history. We shall not attempt to take up the role of prophet. Baptists of China—in common with all other Christian bodies—now face perplexities and problems which they have not been called on to meet before, challenging situations that are not without greater opportunities and privileges. Plans are being made for the appointment of delegates to the meetings of the Baptist World Congress in Atlanta, July 22nd-29th, 1939, when the seventy thousand Baptist Church members of China will become a more close and vital part of the great world-brotherhood.

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—whose value Montefiore rightly stresses—but of a visible Church community, and are in danger of putting in its place a disunited, spineless democracy which lacks discipline and even real allegiance to anything higher than self-centred denominational interests. Would that amid the present perplexities we could again see the prophets' vision of God in human history and hear their clarion call "Thus saith the Lord."

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