

ARTICLE XI.

CRITICAL NOTES.

THE AGE OF ISAAC.

IN a frequently quoted passage Dr. Driver states one of the most effective of the higher critical objections to the chronology of Genesis:—

“We all remember the scene (Gen. xxvii.) in which Isaac in extreme old age blesses his sons; we picture him as lying on his death-bed. Do we, however, all realize that, according to the chronology of the Book of Genesis, he must have been thus lying on his death-bed for *eighty years* (cp. the ages of Isaac and his sons, xxv. 26; xxvi. 34; xxxv. 28)? Yet we can only diminish this period by extending proportionately the interval between Esau's marrying his Hittite wives (Gen. xxvi. 34), and Rebekah's suggestion to Isaac to send Jacob away, lest he should follow his brother's example (xxvii. 46), which from the nature of the case will not admit of any but a slight extension. Keil, however, does so extend it, reducing the period of Isaac's final illness to forty-three years, and is conscious of no incongruity in supposing that Rebekah, *thirty-seven* years after Esau had taken his Hittite wives, should express her fear that Jacob, then aged seventy-seven, will do the same!”¹

It has been shown in former articles that the Septuagintal materials often suggest that chronological difficulties have arisen from erroneous notes being incorporated in the biblical text. We are too familiar with marginal notes containing well-meant but erroneous chronological data in modern editions of the Bible for such phenomena to create any surprise. In an age before printing, the contents of such notes could find their way into the text only too easily. Hence, when we are confronted with a difficulty such as this, our first task must be to inquire whether any important variants

¹ Contemporary Review, vol. lvii. p. 221.

have been preserved. It happens that this is indeed the case. There is a suggestive textual variant in xxxv. 28, and there is a no less suggestive difference of *translation* (involving no alteration of the Hebrew text) in xxvii. 41. First, as to the variant reading. According to the Massoretic text of xxxv. 28, Isaac was 180 years old when he died. According to Septuagintal MSS. d p, the number should be 150. It is remarkable that these are the very MSS. which presented such valuable chronological variations in the case of the difficulty with regard to Ishmael's birth.¹ It seems certain that they represent a recension of the Septuagint which in some important matters goes back to a textual tradition that differed from the Massoretic.

The number 150 may or may not represent the original reading of the Hebrew, but it provides a useful reminder that nothing is more susceptible to corruption than numbers. It also — and this is a more important point — reminds us that numbers of this kind are merely round numbers, not to be taken literally. It is astonishing to find Dr. Driver placing reliance on such numbers as 60 and 40 in xxv. 26 and xxvi. 34. It is well known that these numbers are often used in the Bible where we should employ such phrases as "several," "a considerable number of," etc. That is to say, they frequently express an unknown or indeterminate period of some duration. Hence calculations based on them are apt to be fallacious, and this part of the argument is therefore unsound.

More interest perhaps attaches to the rendering of xxvii. 41. "We picture him as lying on his death-bed." Yes, but why? Chiefly because the English versions represent Esau as stating, in this verse, that the days of mourning for his father are at hand. We thus appear to have the unimpeachable authority of the eldest son for the view that Isaac was in a critical condition. But this rendering is not the only one possible, nor was it adopted by the Septuagintal translators. In their view the Hebrew ex-

¹ See *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October, 1910, p. 686.

presses a ferocious wish: "May the days of mourning for my father approach, in order that I may slay my brother Jacob." That is a very different thing from a statement that they actually are at hand. And this translation surely has the advantage of representing far more truly and vividly the fierce, unbridled character of the man and the intensity of his hatred for his brother. He prays for his father's death, in order that he may kill Jacob. Assuredly the view of the Septuagintal translators is more in accordance with the known character of the nomads of the desert than the kid-glove alternative of the English versions.

If the chapter be read in the light of this modification, we find that the idea that Isaac is dying has no substantial basis. When we look at the real nature of the event, we see that the patriarch, being an old man, thinks that he may die at any time, and had therefore best put his affairs in order. "Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death. . . . make me savory meat. . . . that my soul may bless thee before I die" (ver. 2, 4). Most people to-day must be familiar with cases of old men who could have said the same thing, made their wills to meet the eventuality with due prudence, and lived for many years after. Such things are, after all, matters of everyday experience in any large community. The only modern touch that is wanting in the picture is, that Isaac had not been "given up" by the most celebrated physicians of the day. But I have no doubt that old men sometimes lived much longer than was expected, even when there were no doctors to prophesy their impending demise. Any reader of mature age could cite cases from his own experience in which a man has lived twenty or thirty years after his death had been confidently anticipated. Surely the Bible narrative is not to be condemned as unhistorical on the simple ground that it presents us with episodes that in their main essentials could be paralleled from the most ordinary experience.

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THE ALTAR OF JOSHUA XXII.

ONE or two reviewers of "Essays in Pentateuchal Criticism" have raised a question as to Joshua xxii. Nobody has been found to suggest that Wellhausen and his followers are capable of discriminating between a house and a mound, but the application of the distinction between lay altars and horned altars to this chapter has been the cause of some trouble, and I am satisfied that I have failed to express my reasoning with sufficient clearness. It is well, therefore, to return to the point; and in order to deal with it the more satisfactorily, I propose to begin by quoting the ablest presentation of the difficulty that I have seen. It is from the pen of Professor J. Oscar Boyd, and will be found on page 489 of the *Princeton Theological Review* for July, 1910. He writes:—

" . . . For instance, what about the altar of Joshua xxii.? All that Wiener says about it (p. 198), is that it was because this was a 'horned altar' that it awoke the resentment of the cis-Jordanic tribes. Yet a reading of that chapter seems to place the emphasis, not on what sort of an altar it was, but on the fact that any altar at all was erected for sacrificial purposes other than that at Shiloh. The incensed tribes are pacified when they learn that the altar is not intended for sacrifice."

Another reviewer went further and suggested that I was quite arbitrary in declaring that this altar was a horned altar. How could I know?

Accordingly I shall deal with this point first. In verse 28 we read the words "Behold the *pattern* of the altar," etc. Now the ordinary lay altar could have no fixed pattern, because it was made of earth or unhewn stones, and the stones could not be made to conform to any fixed pattern without being wrought (Ex. xx. 24-26). If we turn from the law to the historical instances of lay altars, we find this truth illustrated. A lay altar may consist of a single large stone (as in the case of the altar used by Saul after the battle of Michmash), or of a dozen stones (as in the case of Elijah on Carmel), or of a rock (as in the instance of Manoah's altar), or of earth. The nature of the materials thus makes it impossible

that any particular pattern should characterize them, just as it makes it impossible that these lay altars could have horns. A stone altar could have horns only if the stone were dressed, and the law provides that "thou shalt *not* build it of hewn stones; for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it." Thus no doubt is possible as to the nature of the object that evoked the anger of the cis-Jordanic tribes; and there is nothing arbitrary about my statement, though it would have been clearer if made in an expanded form.

But then how about Professor Boyd's objection? Is he not right in saying that the "reading of that chapter seems to place the emphasis, not on what sort of an altar it was, but on the fact that any altar at all was erected for sacrificial purposes"? I think the answer to that question is "Yes and no." If he will forgive my saying so, I believe that our difficulty comes merely from the fact that we have to read this chapter without the background of intimate knowledge of the practice and circumstances of the epoch which the narrator naturally postulates. The result is that expressions which to contemporaries could have had but one meaning appear to us most naturally to designate something entirely different, and it is only when we have succeeded in recapturing something of the contemporary point of view that we begin to see what was originally intended.

Let me digress for a moment to offer a modern illustration of the whole Wellhausen confusion as to altars and sacrifice. A Christian of our time may without the slightest difficulty or inconsistency engage in no fewer than three different kinds of prayer within the course of a few hours. He may attend a public service in his church or chapel, and so engage in public prayer. He may offer up grace at a meal or have household prayers, and so engage in domestic prayer. He may offer up his supplications to the Deity alone, and so engage in private prayer. It would of course be easy to prolong the enumeration of possible varieties, but these are sufficient for my purpose. No Christian to-day who is accustomed to this system would in reading current literature have the slightest difficulty

in understanding references to any or all of these three kinds of prayer or be in any danger of confusing them. But suppose that the professorate of some other non-Christian planet were confronted with a Christian literature that contained numerous regulations relating to public prayer, and occasional incidental references to domestic and private prayer, dire confusion might easily ensue. That is what has happened in the case of the Wellhausen discussion.

Returning now to apply this to ancient Israel, we must first picture to ourselves the lay altar and then contrast it with the horned altar. In an article that I am contributing to a forthcoming Bible Dictionary I am exhibiting in juxtaposition a picture of a cairn of stones (used as an altar) and a restoration of the altar of burnt-offering, and I hope that these illustrations will make it impossible for any reader of that work to confuse the two. Here I write without illustrations, but I feel confident that my readers must all have seen large stones, rocks, and mounds, and also pictures of the altar of burnt-offering, and if they will but recall these things to their minds they need have no great difficulty in deciding as to Joshua xxii.

Now, first of all, we read (ver. 10) that the trans-Jordanic tribes "built there an altar by Jordan, a great altar to see to." I submit that to a contemporary that would only mean an altar of the horned type. Why? Well, first, lay altars were at that time mostly used for the nonce only. You rolled a stone or put together a mound, used it on one occasion, and as likely as not abandoned it a few hours after. But even if you erected your altar for more or less permanent use it was for your household or the village or the clan that you erected the altar. Now an altar that was solemnly erected by two and a half tribes was obviously at least as different from the ordinary lay altar as a church service is from domestic prayer. Assuming (as the cis-Jordanic Israelites naturally did) that it was intended for sacrifice, the great majority of the trans-Jordanic tribesmen could only use it by making pilgrimages. But as I have pointed out the pilgrimages of the Pentateuch

are to be made to the House of the Lord. No contemporary could possibly have supposed that the distances or the circumstances of the age would have permitted the majority of the trans-Jordanic tribesmen to use this otherwise than as a pilgrimage center, if the altar was sacrificial. Secondly, the building of an ordinary lay altar could not have been described in such terms. A mere stone or cairn would not have been "a great altar to see to," nor would its erection have been described solemnly as the work of two and a half tribes. Thirdly, if this had been an ordinary lay altar such as any Israelite could and did erect at any moment, contemporaries would never have reported it, just as we do not report domestic prayer in our newspapers, but lay great stress on the opening of a new cathedral.

The course of the subsequent discussion by the delegation naturally confirms this. The concession made to the possible reasons of the trans-Jordanic tribes for building what was supposed to be an altar of pilgrimage is contained in verse 19: "Howbeit, if the land of our possession be unclean," etc. Write out this reasoning at length and it is as follows: "Our land is clean because God's Dwelling (the Tabernacle with the great altar of burnt-offering) is among us. But you live in a territory that is geographically divided from ours by the Jordan, and you may therefore have thought with some reason that your land is unclean. This you have tried to remedy by erecting a separate sanctuary; but such a remedy is rebellion. Your right course is not to infringe the principle of the single pilgrimage sanctuary, but to move into our territory. And why is a second pilgrimage sanctuary so objectionable? Because it leads so easily to the worship of false gods. Is the iniquity of Peor too little for us?" etc. (ver. 17). The reference is to Numbers xxv. 2 f., "for they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods; and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. And Israel joined himself unto Baal-peor." There is throughout this chapter no reference to ordinary lay altars. The objection is to a rival horned altar

which should form a center of pilgrimage to the trans-Jordanic tribes and ultimately a center of apostacy.

Once all this is firmly grasped, the other expressions of the chapter can be interpreted quite naturally in the light of the knowledge of contemporary circumstances that we have so acquired, and all difficulty disappears. The key to the whole thing is the visualizing of the two types of altars. Once that is effected, confusion becomes impossible and a context referring to one type will never be understood of the other.

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AN INTERESTING VIEW OF INFANT BAPTISM.

FROM Rev. J. J. Lanier's "Church Universal"¹ we make the following interesting and suggestive quotation:—

"Some two or three years elapse between the time the child is born naturally until it is born psychically; that is, wakes up to self-consciousness and says *I*. What sort of an 'I' ought the child to find itself to be when it comes to self-consciousness? What ought we to be doing with the child during these most plastic years of its life? Can we so train the child that when it comes to self-consciousness, and for the first time says *I*, it will not only be a psychic, but a spiritual, consciousness, and *I*?"

"In conclusion I would like to impress it upon you that your child does begin to be regenerated as soon as it is born, and that you do begin to baptize it either into the *world* or into God as soon as it is born. For clearly realize that the world baptizes as well as the Church, and that they both baptize with spirit, water, and blood, as soon as the child is born. If you let the world baptize your child with its sin-stained water, blood, and spirit, it will be made a worldling; if the Church baptize your child with the regenerating Spirit, water, and blood of God, it will be made a Christian. And, lastly, that it is that baptism alone with which the Church baptizes your child that can overcome the baptism of sinful men which baptizes it into the world, the flesh, and the devil" (pp. 84-86).

¹ New York: The Macmillan Company. 1911.