

The Old Testament and History: Some Considerations

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1. COULD ANCIENT WRITERS REPORT ACCURATELY?

Any historical study of ancient texts has to begin by establishing their reliability as records of events or situations. The historian has to consider whether it is proper to suppose the documents he is able to use may relate faithfully what happened, or not. All will agree that every document from the past has historical value. A single name scratched or painted on a cup is witness to the currency of that name, and probably of its parent language, and of the script, in a society where the cup was inscribed at some stage of its existence. The writing and the cup may be mutually illuminating in matters of date and origin. A long royal inscription can offer much more information. If it includes narratives of the king's deeds, their form and style will throw light on literary practices and traditions, their content may give a precise date for their composition. Their content will also indicate the way the author or authors thought, and perhaps reveal the purpose of writing the work. Whether a name on a cup or a campaign record, a ration-list, or a religious hymn, all ancient documents yield such incidental information.

The mundane papers of daily administration, the deeds of sale, divisions of inherited property, marriage settlements drawn up in accord with the law, are evidence that those things were done. They were the actions of everyday through which the state and society function. Such things are the basic sources of the historian; with them he builds his reconstruction of an ancient society and its career. He will fit them together to produce as consistent and as complete a picture as he can. That picture he will present as the most plausible interpretation of the knowledge available that he can offer. Historians will expect the picture to conform with well-known and widely observed patterns of human behaviour. If it involves absurd anachronisms such as Julius Caesar riding in a motor-car, or otherwise unknown experiences such as creatures arriving from other planets guided by strange man-made markings in the landscape, it will be dismissed.

Now of course the modern historian is not the first to try to tell the tales of the ancient states; many have told them before. And for the past century or so, more and more ancient, native, often contemporary, records have entered the historian's repertoire. They have brought to the fore the question of how the modern historian should treat ancient 'historical' writing, a question some scholars had asked earlier about the Greek and Latin and biblical histories. Should the historian repeat the narrative of the ancient writers in his own work as history? Should he accept their claims at face

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value? Should he discount any particular record unless he can find corroboration elsewhere? Should he select those elements he considers reasonable and consonant with his own view of the period, and leave others aside?

During the nineteenth century there grew up a strong consensus that ancient works of 'history' were to be treated with great scepticism, any but the most ordinary statements raising doubts about the accuracy or veracity of the records. Whatever fell outside the scope of recent human experience, that savoured of folk-lore or involved the supernatural was, by definition, unhistorical; to be taken as evidence of ancient beliefs, but not as in any way reliable accounts of events that occurred. Especial suspicion fell on stories that had discernible motives, most of all if the motive could be defined as 'religious'.

This attitude was an understandable reaction to the wholesale credulity found in some mediaeval and later 'histories' and to the fantasies of 'travellers' tales'. Its ancestry is traced back to the Greek historian of the fifth century B.C., Thucydides. He composed a history of the war between the Greek states that occurred during his lifetime, making careful inquiries of eye-witnesses to establish the true course of events to the best of his ability. In this he differed from his predecessor Herodotus of Halicarnassus, writing a little earlier in the same century, who is called 'the father' of history. His nine books are full of anecdotes more or less relevant to the events of the Persian war against the Greeks, his main theme. Mingling with the battles and the political intrigues are accounts of impressive sights the author had seen, of strange customs and wonders others had told to him. Herodotus frequently states that he is relying on what he was told, and sometimes comments that he does not believe the report. He may give more than one account of something, with a note of which he prefers. Not surprisingly, many have impugned 'The Histories' of Herodotus as containing little more than gossip. Yet today his accounts of Scythian kings buried with retainers and numerous horses, or his description of Babylon are accepted as valuable sources of contemporary information because archaeological discoveries have largely substantiated them.¹

Repeatedly, modern distrust of earlier writers has proved ill-founded. In the study of the British prehistoric monument at Avebury, the largest stone circle in Europe, scholars have long known about an avenue of standing stones leading to the south entrance. An eminent eighteenth century antiquary, William Stukeley, recorded its existence before local people destroyed the stones. Two hundred years later, parts of the avenue were excavated and some stones re-erected. The same writer recorded a second avenue leading to the west entrance of the great circle. Scholars writing later have refused to believe this existed, attributing it to Stukeley's 'too-vivid imagination'. In 1968 the digging of trenches for electricity cables in two places not far from Avebury proved that large stones had stood along the line of this second avenue. Thus the testimony of a leading scholar of the eighteenth century, a man

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whose observations of certain other features had already been confirmed by aerial photography, finds confirmation after decades of derision.²

For an example of such misplaced scepticism about very ancient writings, we turn to cuneiform texts from Assyria and Babylonia. Among the vast quantities of cuneiform tablets recovered during the nineteenth century was found a story about an early king, Sargon, who rose from obscurity to become king of the city Agade, and established a great empire. A king named Sargon ruled over the Near East from Assyria, c. 721-705 B.C., (he is named in Is.

¹ See *The Unesco Courier* 29.11 (Dec. 1976) for the Scythians: O.E. Rain, *Herodotus' Description of Babylon*, Copenhagen (1942).

² See A. Nurk, *Prehistoric Avebury*, London and New Haven (1979).

20.1) so scholars proposed that his deeds were projected back to a hero of a remote age, for the manuscript of the story stemmed from the century after Sargon of Assyria.³ Consequently, the story of the early king was reckoned valueless for the historian of his reign. Continuing discoveries of inscriptions and other remains prove that there was in fact an important city in northern Babylonia named Agade, although its site remains to be discovered. Agade was the seat of a major dynasty, a high point in Babylonian culture, whose kings have left us their own records in contemporary and later copies. The founder of the dynasty was a Sargon who ruled about 2300 B.C. and campaigned in western Persia, Syria and Anatolia. Whatever may lie behind the story current in the seventh century B.C., telling of his ignominious birth and exposure in a basket on the Euphrates, the accounts of his imperial achievements have a firm factual basis and are not read back from the deeds of a later king.⁴

Rehabilitation of statements made by men of times past and the manner of these examples has become quite frequent. Each case is proof only of the reliability of a particular record or claim. It would be naive to suppose all are utterly reliable, or to jettison any criticism. Every case does, however, warn the historian against facile dismissal or deprecation of texts from antiquity. Any record held to be suspect should be carefully tested. Ideally there should be visible pictorial complements, or independent written accounts. Circumstances and attitudes involved should be harmonious with what is known of the period, with due allowance for local variations, for innovations, and for incomplete information. Nevertheless, lack of comparable data alone is never an adequate basis for rejecting ancient statements. Nothing should be dismissed simply because the modern critic finds it unbelievable!

What has just been discussed over a wide range of times and places also applies to the Old Testament. Plain statements in the biblical books have repeatedly been derided, contradicted, or dismissed. Further research and new discoveries have then led to the re-instatement of the Jewish writers and the rapid abandonment of scholarly positions often put forward with great assurance. At this juncture one example will suffice.

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Writing a commentary on the book of Daniel, a German scholar could find no mention of Belshazzar outside Daniel, and concluded he was pure invention by the author Daniel ch.5.⁵ His work was published in 1850. Barely four years later, a British official, J.G. Taylor, made some soundings in the ruins of southern Babylonia. At the site of ancient Ur he unearthed four clay cylinders inscribed in Babylonian, with a prayer for Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, (555-539 B.C.), and for his son, Belshazzar. Henry Rawlinson, one of the principal decipherers of the cuneiform scripts, announced this new information quickly: 'By the discovery, indeed, of the name of Bel-shar-ezar, as appertaining to the son of Nabonidus, we are, for the first time, enabled to reconcile authentic history... with the inspired record of Daniel'.⁶ Hitzig's verdict was refuted entirely.

³ See G. Maspero, *The Dawn of Civilization*, London (1885), 599.

⁴ For the reign of Sargon and his dynasty see C.J. Godd, in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 3rd. ed., Cambridge (1971) ch.xix.

⁵ F. Hitzig, *Das Buch Daniel*, Leipzig (1850), 75.

⁶ Letter of January 25th, 1854, in *The Athenaeum* 1377 (March 18, 1854), 341-3; cf. E. Sollberger, *Anatolian Studies* 22 (1972), 137.

If the negative attitude scholars have taken, as seen in such an example, is agreed to be a wrong way of approaching ancient texts in general, then it is a wrong way of approaching the Old Testament in particular. Should not the Old Testament texts that claim to be accounts of events in human history or to reproduce contemporary documents be treated as what they claim to be? There are further objections to so straightforward an attitude. Whatever specific instances gain credibility in the ways illustrated, the Old Testament is a religious work, or a compilation of writing mostly with a primary religious interest or aim. The religious outlook will have coloured both the parts and the whole. The narratives are selective, and therefore are likely to be very biased in their telling of events, at best, and at worst quite untruthful. To compare other ancient books with the Old Testament is alleged to be misleading, for their nature is not the same. In considering this attitude, two issues need attention, the effect of the authors' interests on 'historical' narratives, and the evaluation of 'miracle' stories in them.

2. THE QUESTION OF BIAS

The application of literary criticism and ideas of religious development in ancient Israel encouraged the attitude which sees the Old Testament as the product of Israelite faith growing over several centuries, and the New Testament as the statement of the post-resurrection Christian Church. Both collections of writings and their separate constituents are forms of propaganda for particular points of view. Now all can accept this; the Bible is clearly a religious document, and a series of common themes runs through many of its parts. Above all, it claims to represent God and God's point of view. It follows that the writers of the books set down opinions and described events in this light. Again, historians recognise preconceptions and bias of some sort exist in every writer's work, consciously acknowledged or not.

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From here, however, many biblical scholars take a further step, a step into paths of assumption and speculation that leads to increasingly subjective hypotheses. Religious interests are held to have led writers to distort and even invent in order to produce acceptable 'history'. If the information given by their sources was unacceptable, then it could be tailored to fit their pattern. Here is an example of the way such a transformation is envisaged, as expressed by the patriarch of such studies with reference to an episode in Chronicles which is absent from Kings.

"The Book of Kings knows no worse ruler than Manasseh was; yet he reigned undisturbed for fifty-five years—a longer period than was enjoyed by any other king (2 Kings xxi.1-18). This is a stone of stumbling that Chronicles must remove. It tells that Manasseh was carried in chains by the Assyrians to Babylon, but there prayed to Jehovah who restored him to his kingdom; he then abolished idolatry in Judah (xxxiii.11-20). Thus on the one hand he does not escape punishment, while on the other hand the length of his reign is nevertheless explained. Recently indeed it has been sought to support the credibility of those statements by means of an Assyrian inscription, from which it appears that Manasseh did pay tribute to Esarhaddon. That is to say, he had been overpowered by the Assyrians; that is again to say, that he had been thrown into chains and carried off by them. Not so rapid, but perhaps quite as accurate, would be the inference that as a tributary prince he must have kept his seat on the throne of Judah, and not have exchanged it for the prison of Babylon. In truth, Manasseh's temporary deposition is entirely on the same plane with Nebuchadnezzar's temporary grass-eating. The unhistorical character of the intermezzo (the motives of which are perfectly transparent) follows not only from the silence of the Book of Kings (a circumstance of no small

importance indeed), but also, for example, from Jer. xv.4; for when it is said there that all Judah and Jerusalem are to be given up to destruction because of Manasseh, it is not presupposed that his guilt has already been borne and atoned for by himself".⁷

Whatever one may think about the peculiar and complex problems of Chronicles, this passage reveals plainly the attitude we have described: if a narrative has an explanation in terms of religious interest, any question of a factual element may be dismissed, or ignored, and all the more if there appears to be some lack of harmony or contradiction with other passage, or with modern thought.

Much Old Testament scholarship today follows the lines which Wellhausen laid down. A comment on a study of monarchy in Israel is typical, 'biblical texts are handled as if they provide rather more of historical information than is likely to be the case'.⁸ At greater length, an eminent writer has recently issued a volume devoted to arguing that the account of the deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army of Sennacherib in 701 B.C. 'is a product of

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distinctive royal Zion theology, which emerged during the reign of Josiah in the seventh century.⁹ For this writer there was no deliverance; Hezekiah submitted to the Assyrian and retained his throne, the enemy army then, presumably, continuing on its way, unhindered by an 'angel of the Lord'. A combination of literary criticism, form criticism, and historical criticism helped to produce this conclusion. The literal sense of the story in 2 Kings 18:17-19, 37 is the result, according to this study, desired by a school of religious propangandists; it is not an account of actual events in 701 BC.

If one account or another can be re-interpreted in these ways, then it would appear all may be. In fact, very many parts of the Old Testament are so treated, as those acquainted with current work will be aware. Followed consistently, this approach to the text and related ones could result in its being emptied of any significance for history apart from its testimony to a religious faith. Extra-biblical documents prevent anyone from going to this extreme by corroborating a few of the Old Testament's historical statements. At least the existence of a Judean king named Hezekiah and an attack on him by Sennacherib is beyond dispute. Where there are no sources apart from the Old Testament, the protagonists of such attitudes may be free to treat those passages as totally fictional, the products of religious fantasy. King David can be turned into an entirely imaginary figure, on these lines of argument, a necessary ancestor for the dynasty of Judah, credited with powerful kingdom, to make him glorious, with heroic acts to exalt the figure of the king, and with moral failings balanced by a religious conscience to encourage orthodoxy. Here the question imposes itself: Is this a proper way to treat the biblical writings? Are we confined to a state where accepting the Bible as a religious composition compels us to doubt, or even to discount, any and every apparent statement of fact?

Although all the records that survive from the Old Testament world were written by people for whom religious beliefs were an integral part of their lives, it is not normal to treat them in

⁷ J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, Edinburgh (1885), 206f.

⁸ P.R. Ackroyd, *The Expository Times* 91 (1979) 24, referring to T. Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel*, Berlin (1977).

⁹ R.E. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem*, Sheffield (1980), 95.

this way, whether or not other sources support their claims. Thus the Assyrian kings, who can be characterized as excessively vainglorious, took care to acknowledge that their campaigns were undertaken at the behest of their gods, and that their victories and booty were the gifts of the same gods. They had the reports of their achievements written so that future generations would learn from them, remember the prowess of their predecessors, and honour the gods of Assyria. These kings, or their historians, naturally wrote the records in the framework of their own beliefs. They believed their gods, and others, were at work in the events they observed, much as the Israelite writers did, and sometimes they asserted there was divine intervention (see below, part 3). Additional texts from different sources complement only a few of the narratives, either, in other cuneiform tablets (e.g. letters), or the records of other nations (e.g. Aramean states, Urartu). Nevertheless, the Assyrian kings' inscriptions are basic to modern histories of the ancient

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Near East. Overt theological intent and the authors' clearly held beliefs in gods involved in human affairs have not brought rejection of the 'historical' narratives, nor cast much doubt upon them.¹⁰

Occasionally allegations are made that an ancient document is historically unreliable because of its bias. One case is a well-known Assyrian text called *The Synchronistic History*. It purports to relate victorious Assyrian campaigns against Babylonia over a period of seven hundred years, (c.1500 to 780 B.C.) Peace treaties terminated many of the campaigns, with boundary demarcations usually in Assyrians favour. The introduction to the text is lost. An epilogue implies that the text was engraved upon a stele to display the glory of Assyria and the wickedness of the treaty-breaking Babylonians. In editing the tablet, an Assyriologist speaks of its blatant pro-Assyrian prejudice and arbitrary selection of facts, claiming that one victory ascribed to the Assyrians was really won by the Babylonians. He concludes that the composition was intended to be a historical justification of a particular boundary line, 'the line existed of course only in the author's imagination, but this did not prevent him from regarding any Babylonian violation of this boundary as a crime'.¹¹ Here, according to the editor, is a piece of ancient 'history writing' which shows a heavy bias, totally in Assyrians favour, producing distortion of facts and invention. At the same time, several lines are demonstrably quoted from the inscriptions of earlier kings, up to four centuries older than the text.

Upon further investigation, so negative an evaluation of the document is seen to be ill-founded. Part of the editor's mistaken conclusion arises from treating this *Synchronistic history* beside another series of records, the *Babylonian Chronicles*. The latter win the editor's approval as reliable and sober accounts of affairs, for the most part, and thus precipitate a contrast with the former as if it is pretending to be a text of a comparable type. Yet it does not; it belongs to a different genre. It claims to be a copy of an inscription on a boundary marker, dealing principally with changes in the boundary over previous generations. There is nothing unlikely in this. Stone pillars or blocks marking the extent of an estate were customary in Babylonia. Special ones had details of the terrain inscribed upon them, occasionally with a plan and measurements, sometimes with the history of the ownership of the property and details of litigation in the past. The *Synchronistic History* is more like the 'Babylonian Boundary Stones' than it is like the *Babylonian Chronicles*, and that is what it claims to be.

¹⁰ For current approaches see *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons*, ed. F.M. Fales, Rome (1981).

¹¹ A.K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, New York (1975), 53.

Since that negative evaluation of the Synchronistic History was made, further discoveries have given additional reason for accepting it at face value. Two stelae have been found, erected by Assyrian kings to signal the boundaries they had set between warring subject rulers. On one of them, the arrangements made by one Assyrian king were re-inforced by his son who added his inscription on the other side of the stone. Those two monuments delineated territories in the north of the Levant, but their discovery—no others are known—

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makes it likely that stelae of similar type stood to mark the disputed and often shifting line between Assyria and Babylonia. If we allow this, then we may interpret the Synchronistic History as a copy of the Assyrian inscriptions of a series of such stelae. It contains precisely what might be expected on those monuments: Assyrian reverses have no place, but can be seen to be tacitly accepted when the boundary appears to have been re-drawn in Babylonia's favour. Read thus, the major objections raised against the Synchronistic History disappear, and it can be treated positively by historians.¹²

Undoubted bias, therefore, need not provoke the modern reader to a totally adverse attitude to a document, nor give rise to allegations that the accounts are untrue or imaginary. Recognition of the unsealed standpoints of many ancient documents has resulted in fuller understanding of their contents, without any recourse to a devaluation or discrediting of them. The fact that the modern interpreter does not share the beliefs and aims of the writers does not prevent him from respecting them and giving them their due weight. When Pharaoh Ramesses II returned from the Syrian expedition culminating in the Battle of Wadesh (c 1274 B.C.), he had inscriptions and records made. They illustrate the point well, their *raison d'être* clearly being the glorification of the king. His exploits are plainly exaggerated, as is the magnitude of the victory. The accounts and their details are accepted as primary documents which can serve as the basis for reconstructing a major episode in Egyptian military history.¹³

Turning back to the biblical narrative concerning Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33, it is easy to see how presupposition about the Chronicler coloured the comment quoted earlier. Within the Old Testament itself the grounds for certain of the observations are hard to find; there is no substantiation of the long reign of a wicked king being a stumbling-block to the Israelite historian, nor is it taught that Manasseh's imprisonment atoned for his idolatry. The text observes explicitly that people continued to worship at Manasseh's high places, albeit worshipping the Lord (2 Ch.33:17). Even if a sin is forgiven, the Old Testament consistently explains its consequences cannot be avoided therewith. Assyrian records name Manasseh as a vassal of Esarhaddon and of Ashurbanipal; nothing is said of an imprisonment in Babylon. That is no basis for denying it happened. Both kings were concerned with affairs at Babylon, and in each reign a revolt took place in which the king of Judah could have taken part, as his father had done. To deport a rebel king, hold him a while, then return him to his throne would not have been a novelty in Assyrian imperial politics. That is not to say it did happen, simply that it could have done. Surviving Assyrian records are far too meagre to allow anyone to suppose that their lack of reference to an imprisonment of Manasseh is evidence that he was not held captive in Babylon. On the basis of the treatment normally accorded to ancient writings, the absence of the story from 2 Kings is equally unsatisfactory evidence for its fabrication by the

¹² See A.R. Millard, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 100 (1980), 366f.

¹³ See K.A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant*, Warminster (1983), ch.4.

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Chronicler. Instead of discarding the Chronicler's account from Judean history, we would see it as preserving a piece of information that otherwise would have been lost.¹⁴ The information as useful to him not to explain Manasseh's long reign, but to demonstrate that even so determinedly wicked a man could repent; could still reach God's mercy.

The case of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah is more complicated, and deserves a detailed re-examination. Among the facts that oppose the arguments for Sennacherib's capture of Jerusalem are those derived from his own inscriptions. Both the king's own 'annals' and the Old Testament agree that Hezekiah paid tribute to Sennacherib. In the Assyrian inscription the payment is clearly placed after the emperor had returned to Nineveh: 'Hezekiah... did send men, later, to Nineveh...! Nowhere in the Assyrian monarch's proud display of his achievements is there notice of a conquest of the Judean capital of Hezekiah surrendering it, nor of Assyrian troops entering it. As to the destruction of the Assyrian army, its commander-in-chief said nothing, as might be expected. A divine intervention, as expressed in the Hebrew narrative, may be unacceptable to the modern writer, but rejecting the form of expression should not carry with it rejection of the possibility that a notable occurrence lies behind the expression (see further, part 3 below). That attitude reveals more bias on the part of the modern writer than it accounts for in the ancient text.

3. DIVINE INTERVENTION IN HISTORY

Throughout the Old Testament, history is viewed in the light of Israelite faith. Whatever occurred was part of God's plan; whatever men did, Israelites in particular, was judged right or wrong, good or bad, by a religious standard. While the Israelite history books are unique in several points, they share this feature with other ancient, near-eastern, 'historical' compositions. For ancient man the distinction of sacred from profane, of religious from secular, was unknown. Gods and goddesses, spirits and demons had a role in every part of life. The will of the gods was sought before major political moves, for religious occasions, in marriage, building a house, travelling abroad. That is not to say everyone consulted the soothsayer on every occasion, doubtless many did not, but that was the mental attitude in general.

a. God commands; man acts

Assyrian kings had their triumphs described in 'annals' which were sometimes publicly displayed and more often buried as 'foundation stones' in the temples, palaces, and city-gates they built. These are commonly quoted for their bombastic tone, their seeming joy in reciting the slaughter of enemies and the sack of cities. What has been called the 'calculated frightfulness' of Ashurnasirpal II (c.883-859 B.C.) is seen in such passages as:

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In a clash of arms I besieged and conquered the city. I killed 800 of their warriors with the sword. With their corpses I filled the streets of their city, and reddened their houses

¹⁴ Note the treatment by B. Oded in *Israelite and Judean History*, ed. J.H. Hayes, J.M. Miller, London and Philadelphia (1977), 452-6.

with their blood. Many soldiers I took alive and carried many of them away captive. I razed the city, destroyed and burnt it. I conquered the city H. with 30 cities around it. I massacred them, and took captives, with oxen and sheep. I razed the cities, destroyed and burnt them. I burnt their youths and girls.¹⁵

The savagery of numerous accounts like this one have given the Assyrian kings a reputation as merciless imperial aggressors. Not all the 'annals' are so full of blood-letting as Ashurnasirpal's, but all concentrate on the triumphs of Assyrian arms. Their intention is plainly to glorify the king. Often there is a prologue, almost a hymn, of titles and epithets applied to the king. At the end of an inscription, a plea is usually included to a succeeding ruler who might unearth it, asking him to treat it with reverence and re-inter it. A prayer may follow that the gods will curse anyone who destroys the text or erases the king's name.

Preserving the king's repute for posterity was evidently the purpose of these compositions when they were buried in foundations, engraved on stone obelisks and palace walls, impressing subjects and foreign visitors. The narrative is predominantly in the first person; the king tells his own deeds. Yet the Assyrian victories were not depicted as the work of the king alone, despite the impression created by repeated phrases 'I destroyed, I burnt, I razed' or 'my hands conquered'. Almost invariably the wars were undertaken in the name of the national gods. The paragraph quoted above from Ashurnasirpal begins with a report that the cities concerned 'had withheld the tribute and corvée of Ashur my lord'. So 'at the command of Ashur, the great lord, my lord, and the divine standard which goes before me... I mustered my army Similar phrases are found throughout the Assyrian royal inscriptions, some being even more specific, e.g. 'The god Ashur, the lord, commanded me to conquer the land M'.¹⁶

Beside their military actions, the kings recorded their building activities, usually at the end of a text, and might claim that divine commands instigated the work on a temple. Certain kings at the end of the second millennium B.C., and early in the first, included lists of wild animals, lions, wild bulls, elephants, in their 'annals'. These, too, were hunted 'by the command of the god Ninurta'.¹⁷

Assyrian inscriptions are numerous and readily accessible in English translations, so they furnish good examples of this attitude in ancient 'historical' sources. The same thing is present in Sumerian and Babylonian, Hittite, and occasionally in Egyptian texts, and in the rarer inscriptions of the immediate neighbours of the Israelite kingdoms, Moab and Aram. All ancient people accepted

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the control of their gods over events, and believed that they might reveal their wishes to their worshippers. When the accounts of the events were written, this was made explicit. The documents concerned are not specifically 'religious', nor are they deliberately contrived propaganda for a new, or unusual, or minority opinion; they are representatives of a normal idea, an idea that was readily and easily expressed. The documents are also contemporary. Some were inscribed within the year the events took place, others shortly afterwards. If an

¹⁵ A.K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions II*, Wiesbaden (1976), cf. 560.

¹⁶ Tigalath-pileser I, *ibid.*, cf. 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, cf. 43, 45 etc.

interval occurred, the attitude remained the same, and it can be followed from the third millennium B.C. through to the first.

In considering the ancient Israelite narratives, therefore, the mention of divine commands, of God speaking to Moses or other leaders, should not affect the historian's evaluation of the affairs described. The presence of these concepts is entirely in accord with the outlook of ancient near-eastern peoples. There is no need to suppose they are signs of writing by authors or editors with a particular intent, working long after the time in which the events are set. They are not necessarily a part of a single theological construction, the product that characterized one school of thought. The gods of Babylon spoke to their worshippers, the gods of the Hittites to them, and Chemosh to the Kings of Moab. Seldom do the biblical and extra-biblical texts explain how the leader or king was aware of the deity speaking to him. Occasionally an oracle was given through the customary processes, the Urim and Thummin in Israel (e.g. 1 Sam. 23:9-12; 28:6), the skills of the diviner in Assyrian and Babylonia (e.g. Ashurbanipal's defeat of the Elamite Te-umman: 'At the command of Ashur and Marduk, the great gods, who helped me, with good omens, the oracle of an ecstatic, I brought about his defeat within Tell-Tuba'¹⁸). Although these means are rarely stated, they may have been assumed as normal, as Numbers 27:21 implies for Israel, and so only mentioned occasionally in special circumstances or to emphasize divine sanction for acts that might be challenged (as in 1 Sam. 23). There are similar occasional references to utterances made by prophets or other individuals under 'inspiration'. Whether or not modern readers share the belief that supernatural powers communicated with ancient leaders and others, the statements remain, and they remain as the contemporary origin or justification for many actions. The fact of the ancient belief has to be accepted, the words attributed to the divinity can be essential to any historical reconstruction.

b God acts

(i) By unspecified means

Biblical writers report more than the commands of God to the leaders, and their fulfilment; they relate some incidents as the acts of God. These vary in detail and in relation to other actors. A

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warrior might be told to move into battle because God had put the enemy in his power, or had gone before to strike the enemy. A promise of divine aid might come in the ways already noted where a command to go to battle was heard, especially through consulting an oracle. A straightforward example occurs in the history of David's war against the Philistines.

'...David enquired of the Lord, and he answered, "Do not go straight up, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the balsam trees. As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, move quickly, because that will mean the Lord has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine array". So David did as the Lord commanded him, and he struck down the Philistines...' (2 Samuel 5:22-23).

¹⁸ A.C. Piepkorn, *Historical Prism Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal*, Chicago (1933), 68.

Assyrian royal inscriptions have similar accounts, for example, when king Asurbanipal was fighting against Elam, c.650 B.C., the goddess Ishtar sent a message telling the king she would defeat his enemy:

(v 46) The goddess Ishtar heard my anxious sighs and "Fear not!" she said, and filled my heart with confidence. "Inasmuch as you have lifted your hands in prayer (and) your eyes are filled with tears, I have mercy". During the night in which I appeared before her, (50) a seer reclined and saw a dream. When he awoke Ishtar showed him a night vision. He reported to me as follows: "Ishtar who dwells in Arbela come in. Right and left quivers were hanging from her. She held the bow in her hand (55) (and) a sharp sword was drawn to do battle. You were standing in front of her and she spoke to you like the mother who bore you. Ishtar called unto you, she who is exalted among the gods, giving you the following instructions: 'You will contemplate fulfilling my orders. (60) Whither your face is turned, I shall go forth. You told me: Wherever you go, let me go with you, O Lady of Ladies!' She informed you as follows: 'You shall stay here, where the dwelling of Nabu is. (65) Eat food, drink wine, supply music, praise my divinity, while I go and do that work in order that you attain your heart's desire. Your face (need) not become pale, nor your feet become exhausted, (70) nor your strength come to nought in the onslaught of battle'. In her loving bosom she embraced you and protected your whole figure. Before her a fire was then burning. To the conquest of (your] enemies (she will march forth] at (your) side. (75) Against Teumman, king of Elam, with whom she is wroth, she has set her face'.¹⁹

(ii) By overwhelming power

The manner of the divine aid is not explained in cases such as this, although there is no doubt about it. Whatever efforts the king and his army made, some supernatural intervention was also acknowledged. Sometimes it is a little more explicit, not in concrete but in psychological terms. Gods, goddesses, and other

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divine beings emanated an aura or radiance, a splendour that could be felt, according to Assyrian thought. This power could bring an enemy to submission. Tirhakah, king of Egypt, was so affected, according to Ashurbanipal's historian: 'When he heard of the defeat of his troops, the radiance of Ashur and Ishtar overwhelmed him, he fell into a frenzy' and, eventually, 'the terror of the weapon of Ashur, my lord, overcame him, and he died'.²⁰ Four and a half centuries earlier, the annalist of Tiglathpileser I (c 1100BC) related the surrender of any enemy:

'The land Adash was frightened by my strong belligerent attack and abandoned their territory. They flew like birds to ledges on high mountains. The splendour of Ashur, my lord, overwhelmed them and they came back down and submitted to me'.²¹

When set beside other paragraphs where the Assyrian king's 'strong belligerent attack' alone brought submission,²² these lines suggest the enemy's behaviour was in some way

¹⁹ Translated by A.L. Oppenheim in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J.B. Pritchard, Princeton 3rd ed. (1969), 451.

²⁰ A.C. Piepkorn, *op. cit.*, 32, 36.

²¹ A.K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*, cf. 22.

²² *Ibid.*, cf. 32.

unexpected. Without, apparent, military 'flushing out' operations, the fugitives left their fastness and bowed to the conqueror. In his eyes the only explanation could be that they were 'overwhelmed by the splendour of Ashur'.

The uninvolved reader will attribute these reactions to fear of the consequences of opposition, to the common instinct for self-preservation, or to a careful calculation of the odds, rather than fear of the assyrian god. Fear of further military action seems a very likely explanation in the light of the idea that divine power flowed to the king as the viceroy of his national god. In many passages little distinction between the 'fear' of the god and the 'fear' of the king is visible. Nevertheless, where the ancient writers name the cause of an event as the power of the god, and that stands alone, the reader may suspect that they are relating something which was not normal, and which was not the direct result of known human action.

Perhaps comparable with the effect which Assyrians declared their gods had on their enemies, are the occasions when the Hebrew writers asserted that the God of Israel threw their enemies into panic. The Chronicler uses the phrase 'fear of the Lord came/fell on' the foe (2 Ch.14:14; 17:10; 20:29) of contests during the Monarchy. Earlier, the initial defeat is described 'After an all-night march from Gilgal, Joshua took the enemy by surprise. The Lord threw them into confusion before Israel, who defeated them in a great victory at Gibeon. Israel pursued them...' (Joshua 10:9, 10). Similar is a sentence in the narrative of Deborah and Barak: 'At Barak's advance, the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariotry and all his camp into confusion at the sword's edge, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot' (Judges 4:15). On both occasions, Israelite forces were involved, with an element of surprise, yet there was need to explain the results in terms of divine help, otherwise, we may suppose, the victories would have been more costly, at least, to Israel

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(iii) By miracles

Most prominent of all divine actions is what we call 'miracle'. In the Old Testament terms for 'sign' or 'wonder' describe demonstrations of God's power and care for his people, which could not be expected in the ordinary course of life. They were frequently occasions when Israel herself, or her forces, were inadequate for survival or success. Israel's continuance, however, was not made to depend on a *deus ex machina*, on an intrusion into her ancient world of an utterly alien power or personage. No-one travelled through time to fix the course of history with a nuclear missile, no creatures glided through space to perform deeds impossible to comprehend. Again and again, the 'saving acts' of God are linked to the normal world. Thus, after the Amorites were defeated at Gibeon, the historian states '...the Lord threw down great stones from heaven... there were more who died because of the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelites' (Joshua 10:11). For the Israelites the perception of a 'natural cause' did not diminish the miracle. They believed their God controlled the universe and all in it, therefore he could take any element in it to use its normal forces for his purposes.

Here, too, records produced by Israel's neighbours and contemporaries display the same outlook. Having many gods and goddesses, those peoples allocated each unexpected or unusual happening to the appropriate one. Thus it was Adad, the storm-god who completed the destruction of one enemy of Sargon of Assyria: 'the rest of the people who had fled to save their lives, whom I let go for the praise of the victory of Ashur, my lord, mighty Adad,

heroic sone of Anu, uttered his loud cry over them (i.e. thundered) and with heavy clouds and hail-stones finished off the remainder'.²³ For the Hittites of Anatolia, a similar event was the work of their storm-god, Teshub: Murshilish II (c. 1345-1315 B.C.) tells in a fragment of his 'annals' how 'the noble weather-god again showed his divine guidance: he caused it to rain all night and he laid down a mist (so) the enemy did not see the army's camp-fire and the enemy did not flee' and in the morning hid the Hittite forces from their foes by a cloud as they marched, so that they caught the enemy unprepared.²⁴

Allowing for differences in the types of records, these episodes, and others like them, reveal the same attitude as the Hebrew historians held. The gods were intimately involved in the welfare of their people, especially in the king as the embodiment of the nation. In addition to their continuing and normal business, they might intervene strikingly to rescue their worshippers or prosper their plans. The interventions could be reported as answers to prayers, as the half-expected punishment of the wicked, or as unforeseen, though welcome support. Ancient Israel was not the only nation to perceive the hand of her God moving dramatically in her history.

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Orthodox Israelites also saw the hand of their God in the history of other nations. When foreign rulers threatened or attacked, the God of Israel caused them to do it. Cyrus is a unique example, for the priests of Babylon could claim Marduk had brought him to supremacy, while a prophet of Israel could claim that it was the Lord's doing (Is 45:1ff). Israel also affirmed that it was her God who directed the affairs of the other nations (e.g. Amos 6:2; 9:7). If asked, therefore, an ancient Israelite would presumably have claimed that it was his God who ordained the 'miracles' we learn about from extra-biblical sources, and gave victory to Sargon or to the Hittite king over his enemies. How those peoples saw these matters is not clear to us.

4. RECORDS OF 'MIRACLES'

Assyrian and other sources supplying the examples of reported 'divine interventions' cited in the previous paragraph are also of interest for their nature as records. At present the practices of Assyrian court historians are little known. However the royal 'annals' were produced, accounts of military campaigns were created very soon after the king or his generals returned to the capital. The surviving manuscripts of the 'annals' often include lengthy descriptions of martial achievements of the years in which they were written, or the years immediately before. Among the more noteworthy is the history of an expedition Sargon II conducted in north-west Persia, a letter to the god Ashur over four hundred lines long, apparently composed shortly after the king's triumphant homecoming in 714 B.C.²⁵ Occasionally a longer interval may have elapsed between the events and the recording of them, but in all the examples, and in the majority of others, the time was short.

Whatever attitudes the Assyrian and other writings of similar sort exhibit, therefore, are the attitudes of men involved in the events and of their fellows who know about them. The interpretation given to any happening shows how those contemporary with it understood it.

²³ D.D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyrian II*, Chicago (1926), cf.155.

²⁴ A. Goetze, *Die Annalen des Murshilish*, Leipzig (1933), 194ff.

²⁵ D.D. Luckenbill, *op. cit.*, 73-99.

Here a contrast arises between the way Israel's neighbours treated 'miracles' and the way modern commentators suppose the Hebrew accounts of 'miracles' came into being. Since the eighteenth century the majority of historians have excluded the concept of miracle. Consequently, biblical scholars have handled the miracle stories of the Old Testament as the products of extended tradition and folk-lore, of cult-legend and saga. The literary forms of the passages containing accounts of 'miracles' are determined firstly, then the stages of their growth are delineated. 'Biblical instances of miracle... are to be related to their peculiar literary sources...'.²⁶ The 'miracles' then prove to be the work of pious editors and the embellishments of old stories produced long after the times depicted. This results in a typical comment: 'Whatever undoubted historical nucleus the story may contain, that has almost certainly been expanded in saga to the proportions of the miraculous'.²⁷

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The weight given to literary forms and their effects should be balanced against other aspects of text and content. Where 'miracle' stories are present, the part they play in determining modern judgements about the literary form of their contexts should be recognized. Where they occur, they are a major reason scholars adduce for calling the passages legend, saga, or even fairy-tale. Of the widow of Sarephath's unfailling oil-supply, J. Gray stated 'The unfailling supply is a well-known motif in folk-lore, and is here an indication of the saga-character of the Elijah story.'²⁸ The miraculous elements become the product of a literary form through a circular process in such investigations.

Scholarly opinion based on literary and formal analyses of this kind varies in its appreciation of the miracle stories. At one side are those who dismiss them as 'novelistic expansion', at the other those who concede some kernel of reality is buried within them. Even when occurrences of memorable events are assumed to underlie miracle stories, they are usually reckoned to be so remote or so heavily augmented by later traditions as to be beyond the historian's reach.

The ancient near-eastern evidence speaks against such attitudes. As we have seen, the unusual and the unexpected occurring at the right moment were understood forthwith as acts of the gods on behalf of their followers. Long years of developing tradition were unnecessary, the religiously conscious were aware of a miracle as soon as it took place. The religiously conscious of the ancient near-east were not alone in this; it is widespread behaviour. In 1588 the Armada sent by Philip of Spain to conquer his sister-in-law Elizabeth's England was wrecked by gales and adverse winds, and by the harrying of the English. A medal was struck within the year to commemorate the salvation of England. On one face were engraved in Latin the words 'God blew with his winds and they were scattered'.

We conclude that accounts of 'miracles' in the Old Testament deserve a more positive treatment than they have normally received from Old Testament scholars. As much weight should be given to the likelihood of an impressive phenomenon being remembered as a miracle as to the possible creativity of continuing tradition.

5. INTERPRETING THE ACTS OF GOD

²⁶ J. Gray, *I & II Kings*, London (1964), cf. 297.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 635ff.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

The claim that a deity acted in a certain historical incident is common throughout history. Our study has shown that the claim may be made at the time of the event by those connected with it. The people involved were aware of something which was inexplicable in terms of their ordinary experience, yet was to their advantage. They could express it only in theological terms; their god had acted, and they expressed it in these terms forthwith. Two facts lie here. Firstly, the fact of belief. Incontrovertibly, men of the past believed in

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divine intervention in human affairs, in the possibility of 'miracles'. In discussion, the miraculous is easily broadened to encompass the whole of life. 'The hand of God, it must be remembered, is as really and as fully present 'in the ordinary course of nature as in the most amazing miracle; and the ordinary course of nature is in reality infinitely more marvellous and outstanding than any miracle can be'.²⁹ This is turn and deserving of constant emphasis as man arrogates to himself more and immediate control of his environment. Nevertheless, in pondering biblical 'miracles', it is irrelevant. Throughout the Old Testament there is recognition of God's power as creating and sustaining the world and caring for his people. Beyond this, in the Old Testament there are special acts of God, recorded deliberately as unusual and notable, affecting the career of Israel. In the other ancient writings, too, what are mentioned are the unusual and particularly opportune events, the works of deities who, like the God of Israel, were also held responsible for the ordering of the world and its continuance, but who had special concern for their own people or land.

The miraculous, it may be stressed, was not unexpected by ancient people with faith in their gods, but 'miracles' were viewed as unusual, as already noted. Divine intervention was by no means a requisite of historical narrative, 'miracles' are rarely repeated, and their occurrence does not fall into any pattern that can be predicted. Kings campaigned, fought battles, and won wars time and again without any 'miracle'. David's Philistine war had its success because of specific divine aid, his victories over the Jebustites, Moab, Ammon, and Aram are related as straightforward military achievements, the strategy sometimes revealed, accompanied by a plain acknowledgement of God's over-ruling (e.g. 2 Samuel 10:12). In the Old Testament and in other ancient documents 'miracles' were really uncommon events, and so were noteworthy. The authors of the records believed unusual things had happened which were public acts of their gods, and those beliefs deserve respect from all who read them, whether they can sympathize with them, or not.

The second fact attached to miracle stories is cause. Concentration on the history of literature and tradition has led to the location of the cause of the stories in the requirements of those forms; the stories are either totally fictitious, or elaborations of an indiscernible event. Alternatively, the ancient near-eastern sources suggest the cause of miracle stories should be sought in occurrences that impressed observers or participants as so unusual that they assumed divine powers were at work. They do not suggest miracle stories resulted from a long period of legendary addition to an ordinary event, nor is there reason to suppose they were invented for cultic or theological ends.

If the assumption of impressive events underlying miracle stories is followed, the question will arise; what was the nature of the events? One may answer that they were beyond human experience and cannot be characterized beyond the phrase 'an act of God'. Both

²⁹ S.R. Driver, *Exodus*, Cambridge (1911), liii.

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biblical and extra-biblical stories stimulate further inquiry by expressing the vehicle in which the 'miracle' happened, among them storm, hail, wind. Following these hints, some have tried to conceive the 'miracles' in entirely rationalistic ways. Yet those who attempt to reduce the plagues of Egypt, for example, to a series of tricks by Moses fail to treat the phenomenon of the stories adequately. On the other hand, natural explanations of the events in many of the stories can be seriously entertained, following the indications of the texts themselves. During the Exodus of Israel and her sojourn in the Wilderness 'miracles' took place, according to the Hebrew narratives, in diverse places and ways. Diligent observations of physical features and conditions in Egypt and Sinai have made it possible to explain how some of the 'miracles' worked. These explanations are attractive because of their appropriateness to the localities of the biblical stories.³⁰ In this light, the circumstances and the impact of the events may be understood better.

To disclose the mechanism of a 'miracle' is not to deny its nature, for that lay more in its timeliness than its manner. Behind that every man will see what he pleases. According to their faith men of old saw Marduk or Ashur, Adad or Baal or the Lord of Israel as the cause. Nowadays providence or historical process may be named. The appreciation of claims that one god or another acted will depend very strongly on prior disposition toward the world and what happens in it. For the faithful of ancient Israel, and for the Christian Church the role of miracles in Israel's career has always appeared to be greater than coincidence or change could allow; they were signs of the living God.

To conclude: the 'historical' narratives of the Old Testament need to be read and studied critically, but the critical approach has to be scientifically based. That is to say, the critical historian should not treat these texts as if they are products of contemporary western writers, expecting them to conform to the standards of modern historiography. He should not apply vague or wholly subjective criteria, but work from a factual basis within the known norms of ancient societies. Only after he has read the records in their ancient context can he begin to ask 'Did this really happen in that way'. At the same time, he should go further than the present study to seek distinctive features in the Israelite writings. It is here that he will hear any message the ancient Hebrew books have for today.

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

³⁰ G. Hort, *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 69 (1957), 84-103, 70 (1958), 48-59; *Australian Biblical Review* 7 (1959), 2-16.