

THE
EARLY RELIGION OF ISRAEL

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AS SET FORTH BY BIBLICAL WRITERS AND BY
MODERN CRITICAL HISTORIANS

The Baird Lecture for 1889

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION.

THE first impression of this book has been exhausted much sooner than I had anticipated. It would be premature to refer at length to the strictures of critics while the work is still under review; and, since any value that it may possess lies rather in the main argument presented than in the exhibition of details, I have judged it expedient to allow it to reappear in its original form, although I am well aware how much it admits of improvement.

I have no reason to complain of the criticisms the book has hitherto received. Some of them have been far too laudatory; and for the more adverse I was already prepared.

It may not be out of place to remind readers that I am not to be held as committed to all the views which, for the purpose of the discussion, are provisionally not disputed, or as considering certain lines of argument to be applicable only to the extent that they are here applied.

The aim of the book is not to vindicate any distinct place for the writer, but to stimulate the intelligent reader to think for himself; for I still believe that such a reader, though neither a Hebraist nor a trained critic, is quite competent to judge fairly on the main points of the argument which is here presented.

September 1892.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION.

THE substance of the following pages was delivered as the Baird Lecture in the spring of 1889. A good deal of matter is here presented which could not find expression within the limits of six lectures; and a division into chapters was found more convenient for the treatment of the different parts. The delay in publication has been occasioned, partly by the occupations of a somewhat laborious office, partly by broken health, which allowed me to take up the work only at long intervals. But, indeed, for other reasons I have not been forward to lay my views before the public. I am quite well aware how the current of opinion on Old Testament subjects is running; and I am not insensible to the fact that, while some may find fault with me for giving up received views, a greater number, and some who are younger than I, will "have me in derision" for not being abreast of the age.

Nevertheless, one must be fully persuaded in his own mind. I have long been convinced that the substantial

value of the books of the Old Testament does not depend upon our knowing their authorship; and I doubt whether we can ever accurately determine the circumstances of their composition. At the same time I am as firmly convinced that, in critical discussions on the Old Testament as these have been conducted, there is much more involved than the dates of books and the literary modes of their composition. Whatever may be said of the "traditional view" on these subjects, it is to be remembered that the "traditional view" of the history of the religion is the view of the Biblical writers; and if it is declared to be incorrect, our estimate of the value of the books must be considerably modified. It is this aspect of the critical inquiry that has chiefly engaged my attention. I have patiently and honestly tried to understand the position of critical writers, to follow the processes and to grasp the principles on which the historical inquiries have been conducted. But I find myself like one standing by the side of a Highland stream, while another more nimble goes over on improvised stepping-stones. He gets over, apparently dry-shod; but I cannot follow him, because the stepping-stones have been submerged by his weight. I look in vain to the critics for a passable road, with a firm bottom, which a man of plain understanding may tread. Many, no doubt, will call me unreasonable or stupid; but it may happen that not a few others are as dull as myself, if they would care to own it.

"Conservatism," it has been said,¹ "is the habitual attitude of Orientals." One poor orientalist here and

¹ Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, first series, p. 4.

there may be pardoned for having so much in common with them, when so many scholars are of another mind. I may plead, as a special excuse for my sympathy, the fact that I spent some dozen years—the years of life also during which one receives the most lasting impressions—in familiar intercourse with Orientals on the very borders of Palestine, where it would have been easy, so to speak, to get models for Old Testament portraits. When I found simple, unlettered people, with crude enough moralities and no lack of superstition, reasoning and talking like Old Testament characters, drawing the widest generalisations from the smallest incidents, and withal carrying about a habit of religion that commanded reverence, it never occurred to me to explain similar combinations or inconsistencies in Old Testament characters by contradictory traditions; nor did it seem at all incredible that a high tone of religious conception should be found in what might appear a primitive and rude age. In reading the Old Testament Scriptures, I seemed to be holding converse with living men; and I came to the conclusion that the best way to understand a book is to be in sympathy with the man that wrote it.

My interest in the subject, therefore, is not primarily of a dogmatic or theological character. I am less concerned to defend a theory than to claim for the Biblical writers—what I think they have not received—fair play. On both sides of the controversy, the books have been wrangled over, as if they had been some legal deed or Act of Parliament, while the personality of the writers has been left out of view. I am not opposed to criti-

Statements such as those I have quoted amount, in my opinion, to a set of critical canons quite different from those of Wellhausen; and Dr Driver would have been no more than just to himself if he had (as König has done) accentuated the difference.

Some other points, referred to in Professor Driver's Preface, will be found touched upon in the following pages. Thus I have "admitted that traditions are coloured to some extent by the age in which they find literary expression" (below, p. 128; cf. p. 424); and on the literary habit of placing speeches in the mouths of historical characters, I have stated my views at some length (chap. xvi.) I still adhere, however, after reading his remark (Pref., p. xvii), to what I have said in regard to the topographical accuracy of the Old Testament writers (p. 97 ff.), and think that the case might even be put more strongly.

To one other point touched upon in Professor Driver's Preface I feel constrained to refer—the relation of modern criticism of the Old Testament to the authority of the New Testament, and to the subject of inspiration. Were there nothing in dispute but the dates of books, the matter might be allowed to rest as he states it (p. xviii); but a much more serious issue has to be faced than the question what our Lord would have said had He been asked about the authorship of certain books. Without putting a hypothetical case as to what He would have said, I would ask the direct question, Whether the relation of the New Testament to the Old would be the same—whether Christianity, as a historically developed religion, would have equal

value to us—if, *e.g.*, Abraham be “a free creation of unconscious art,” and a great part of the narratives of the Hexateuch “the fruit solely of late Jewish fancy,” and if there be “not a particle of truth in the whole narrative” of something else? It is altogether inadequate to reply to such a question, that “criticism in the hands of Christian scholars does not banish or destroy the inspiration of the Old Testament; it *presupposes* it” (Pref., p. xix). Such scholars would do an invaluable service to the Church at the present time if they would explain what they mean by inspiration in this connection, and define wherein their position differs from that of critics who profess no such reverence for the Old Testament. I can quite well understand the position of one who should say it does not matter whether the Old Testament story is true or not, provided we can draw from it good religious instruction. So in a certain sense one might call the religious novel inspired Scripture. But the Christian scholar must be prepared to meet the objector who insists on meting out the same measure to the New Testament writers; for, in spite of what Professor Driver says (p. xvii), we are dependent upon the evangelists for the picture of the Christ, and, in the field of Old Testament history, critics find room for great “modifications of tradition” within the space of half a century, not to say more. So it is quite inadequate to the case when Horton, speaking of the Law and Christ’s references to it, says,¹ “Now, supposing the book had been compiled actually by His contemporaries, this practical value of it would remain just what it is.” For the question

¹ Inspiration and the Bible, p. 179.

recurs, Would the historical value of Christianity remain just what it is ?

I have a strong conviction that it is their connection with a divinely guided history, more even than their high tone of teaching, that gives to the Old Testament books their special authority ; and for this reason I regard it as most important to determine what the movement and character of the history were. Professor Briggs tells us¹ that the higher criticism can never determine whether the writings contain the Divine Word ; but I think that, inferentially at least, it can. I believe a sober and unprejudiced criticism will show that Israel, at the dawn of its national existence, had a very exalted conception of God and a high rule of duty, and that these things were neither borrowed from their neighbours nor excogitated by themselves. If the inference is legitimate that they must have come "from above," then the writings which exhibit the process of this revelation contain no "cunningly devised fable," but have from their connection a divine character. Criticism, as an exercise of human reason, having come so far, may reverently give place to another faculty with a nobler name, by which divine things are "spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. ii. 14).

¹ *Biblical Study*, p. 220.

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
INTRODUCTION,	1
I. THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL,	11
II. TWO CONTENDING THEORIES OF THE HISTORY,	27
III. WRITINGS OF THE NINTH AND EIGHTH CENTURIES B.C. AS LITERARY AND AS RELIGIOUS PRODUCTS,	50
IV. THE "EARLIER PROPHETS,"	74
V. TESTIMONY OF THE NINTH AND EIGHTH CENTURIES TO THE ANTECEDENT HISTORY,	106
VI. THE KEY OF THE CRITICAL POSITION,	136
VII. PRE-PROPHETIC RELIGION—NAMING OF THE DEITY, . .	167
VIII. PRE-PROPHETIC RELIGION CONTINUED—THE DWELLING- PLACE OF THE DEITY,	192
IX. PRE-PROPHETIC RELIGION CONTINUED—VISIBLE REP- RESENTATIONS OF THE DEITY,	215
X. PRE-PROPHETIC RELIGION CONTINUED: MOLOCH-WOR- SHIP—HUMAN SACRIFICES—FIRE-WORSHIP,	241
XI. THE JAHAVEH RELIGION,	266

XII. ETHIC MONOTHEISM,	296
XIII. AUTHORITATIVE INSTITUTIONS—THEIR EARLY DATE, .	326
XIV. AUTHORITATIVE INSTITUTIONS—THEIR RELIGIOUS BASIS,	353
XV. THE THREE CODES,	381
XVI. THE LAW-BOOKS,	414
XVII. LAW AND PROPHECY,	440
XVIII. CONCLUSION,	464
NOTES,	493
INDEX,	521

EARLY RELIGION OF ISRAEL.

INTRODUCTION.

Attitude of the reader of the English Bible to recent critical studies of the Old Testament—Preliminary difficulties of a technical kind—Attempt to present the argument in a new form—The fundamental matters in dispute are not questions of scholarship—The temptations of specialists—The final appeal must be to intelligent common-sense.

WITHIN recent years there has been such an advance in the critical study of the Old Testament that a perceptible change has taken place in the attitude of ordinary readers toward the whole subject. So long as the matters in dispute were questions as to the age, authorship, and mode of composition of certain books, particularly of the Pentateuch, and these subjects were handled simply or mainly as matters of technical criticism, the general reader, if he did not altogether abjure "unsettling" discussions, was perplexed by inquiries demanding special skill and training for their prosecution, or took little interest in problems which appeared to admit of the most diverse solutions. But since a thorough-going theory was adopted

by prominent critical writers, and especially since it was applied in the formal exhibition of the history of Israel from a new standpoint, the whole subject of Old Testament criticism has assumed a more pressing interest for the ordinary reader. The question of the history of books gives place to an inquiry into the history of a people; and the uninitiated reader is called upon, if not to determine the manner in which certain documents were composed, to pronounce an opinion upon the value of these documents as materials for understanding the course of Israel's religious history. Those who have made a special study of these matters have reached a stage at which they can exhibit the results of their investigations as a completed whole, and challenge the assent of others who have not the ability or the leisure to follow the processes for themselves. Dr Robertson Smith, in his preface to the English edition of Wellhausen's 'Prolegomena to the History of Israel' (p. viii), says: "In this as in other sciences, when the truth has been reached, it can generally be presented in a comparatively simple form, and the main positions can be justified even to the general reader by methods much less complicated, and much more lucid, than those originally followed by the investigators themselves." The same writer, while insisting on the fact that the matters with which Professor Wellhausen deals "are such as no intelligent student of the Old Testament can afford to neglect," claims (p. vi) that the book referred to "gives the English reader, for the first time, an opportunity to form his own judgment on questions which are within the scope of any one who reads the English Bible carefully, and is able to think clearly and without prejudice about its contents."

To what extent English readers have without prejudice

formed their own opinions on the matters in dispute it would be hard to say. There can be no doubt that not a few, while disclaiming all pretensions of being able to appreciate the technical critical arguments on which Wellhausen proceeds, profess themselves satisfied in their own minds that the scheme of Israel's history which he presents is in the main correct. Others, not prepared to go so far, have a general feeling that some reconstruction of the received views is needed; while others again, who have made some attempt to follow the arguments, are unable to come to any decision. It would not be fair to class all who accept the new theory among those "clever superficial men and women who think that everything has been found out, when next to nothing has been found out at all, who disbelieve in Authority, and do believe in 'authorities.'"¹ Yet perhaps the main reason for the ready assent on the part of some, and the hesitancy on that of others, is the fact that these investigations have been pursued by skilled Hebraists and critics, who are naturally supposed to have special means of determining the delicate questions involved. The results are set forth with such an array of learning and with so much confidence that the one class of readers give deference to authorities whom they take to be competent, while the other class decline to assent to a process of reasoning which they themselves are incapable of following.

For, notwithstanding the appeal to the ordinary reader of the English Bible, a great deal of preliminary investigation must have taken place before that point is reached at which such a reader is able to follow the critic; and much has to be taken as proved, because the process of argumenta-

¹ Andrew Lang in 'New Review,' August 1889.

tion is too intricate for those who are not specialists in this department of inquiry. The English reader, on taking up, for example, Wellhausen's book, comes upon a statement like this: "The assumptions I make will find an ever-recurring justification in the course of the investigation; the two principal are, that the work of the Jehovist, as far as the nucleus of it is concerned, belongs to the course of the Assyrian period, and that Deuteronomy belongs to its close."¹ Moreover, he finds himself on almost every page confronted with statements as to earlier and later elements of the same document, and assertions as to interpolations and later revisions; and he naturally concludes that it is from linguistic peculiarities and by purely scholarly processes that such distinctions are made. There is a continual assumption of something which the reader has been no party in establishing, a building upon foundations which are underground. Whether the assumptions are supported by arguments to which he would yield, whether the foundations are securely laid, he does not know. He must therefore either surrender himself to his critical guides, or get perplexed over the mass of intricate details.

It would manifestly be an advantage if the subject could be treated in such a way that the ordinary reader would, from the first, be able to appreciate the arguments employed. Since it is he who is called upon to give his verdict, he ought to have some firm ground on which to stand, some standard to which to appeal. If certain critical processes are necessary, those critical canons at least which control the processes should be distinctly laid

¹ Prolegomena to the History of Israel, p. 13. For brevity, the English translation of this work is in the sequel referred to as Wellhausen's 'History of Israel.'

down and accepted as valid. If certain books, or portions of books, for example, are rejected as unhistorical and untrustworthy, or if certain passages are declared to be interpolations or additions, the ordinary reader ought to be satisfied on what grounds this critical sifting is exercised. If he is told that this is done on scholarly grounds, of whose validity he is incapable of forming an opinion, it comes to this, that the advocate of the theory constitutes himself the judge also, and there is no case for the jury. But it may turn out that the critical processes in question are controlled by canons of whose validity the ordinary reader is quite competent to judge. Either, therefore, the processes themselves and the conclusions drawn from them must be entirely left aside at the outset, or else they must be able to justify themselves to the plain reason of the ordinary reader. It is the advocate's aim to maintain his thesis, but it is the duty of the jury to see that it is sustained on proper evidence. The appeal to the ordinary reader is nugatory unless he is put in possession of a standard by which to judge.

In the following chapters an attempt is made to approach the subject in such a manner that an intelligent reader of the English Bible may not be placed at a disadvantage, and to present the questions in dispute in such a shape that he will be able from the first to follow the argument. This of course implies starting from neutral and undisputed ground. The reader must be prepared to hold in abeyance any prepossessions to which he may have been accustomed: if he is not to defer to "authorities," neither must he rely on bare "Authority." And there are certain circumstances favourable to such a mode of procedure at the present time. For one thing, the heat of controversy in regard to many points in dis-

pute has so far subsided that it has become possible to look calmly at certain conclusions, the bare enunciation of which not long ago stirred up angry feelings. The claim of criticism to deal with such questions has been acknowledged, and ordinary people are able without passion to consider the arguments which are urged in support of theories which may be very much at variance with received views. And then there is this other great advantage, that the modern theory of Israel's history can now be exhibited as a completed whole, and, taken merely as a hypothesis, can be brought to the test of admitted phenomena and facts. "It is always something to be thankful for when, in any department of human knowledge, a hypothesis is adequately stated, defended, and worked out. If it turn out an error, it is an error to which full justice has been done, and which may be finally put aside."¹ The only way, however, in which the truth or error of a hypothesis can be shown, is to apply it to the explanation of actual phenomena—that is, in a case like the present, to bring it to the test of certain undisputed facts of literature and history, in face of which it has to justify itself. Accordingly, the method of our inquiry is to take our stand at certain clearly marked points in history or undisputed phenomena of literature, and to ask what account is given of them respectively by the Biblical writers and by modern historians of Israel. Such an inquiry is not beyond the ability of the intelligent reader of the English Bible; in its prosecution he will be able, at all events, to distinguish between what demands technical skill for its settlement, and what appeals to ordinary sound reason.

The essential and fundamental matters in dispute in

¹ A. B. Bruce in 'Present Day Tracts,' No. 38, p. 55.

this controversy are not questions of "scholarship" at all, in the proper sense of that term. It so happens, as a matter of course, that the men who have gone most thoroughly into these questions have been trained Hebraists; but the bare facts of a linguistic character with which they have to deal, count for very little in the essential questions at issue, as critical writers themselves have confessed.¹ These writers are specialists, it is true, but specialists dealing with matters in which common-sense may follow them, observe their processes, and pronounce upon their validity. Specialists are very prone to become theorists, and a specialist with a theory is a very unsafe guide when questions of evidence have to be settled. Modern critical writers are in the habit of pointing to the shifts which in past times have been resorted to in order to maintain some traditional theory that was untenable; and too much occasion has been given them to do so. But a little sense of humour might enable them to perceive the ridiculousness of many of the processes carried on in all seriousness in the name of criticism. The Hebrew scholar or trained critic may, by the very possession of his special qualifications, see possible combinations, and suggest possible constructions or emendations of a passage that the ordinary reader would never dream of; and he may combine and transpose and eliminate and amend, and by a triumph of ingenuity bring out a most unexpected result, while all the time perhaps a simple and plain meaning of a phrase or passage stares him in the face, from which, however, he gets away to one quite recondite or fanciful. An old Eastern friend of mine used to say there were people who, when asked "Where is your ear?" would put their right hand over

¹ See Note I.

the top of their head and triumphantly seize hold of their left ear. There is an acrobatic criticism, which is more sensational than sensible. The qualifications of the specialist render him peculiarly prone to push a theory at all hazards, when to common-sense it appears manifestly overweighted. Too much praise cannot be given to Continental critics for their perseverance, but perseverance may be carried too far. Some years ago I was amused and instructed by the industry and ingenuity of a waggoner at Leipzig, whose cart, heavily laden, had stuck fast in deep sand. After every ordinary expedient had been tried in vain, he went away, evidently to some distance, and returned with a powerful screw-lever, by the help of which the wheels were sufficiently raised to admit of the insertion of planks for rails; and so, after a long delay, he drove off without lightening his waggon. Recently I had an opportunity of observing the method of a Glasgow carter in a similar difficulty. He had inconsiderately placed his lorry on soft yielding ground, and loaded it with timber from the Exhibition buildings. As soon as he realised his position, he unloaded his cart, drew it on to firm ground a few yards off, replaced the same amount upon it, and drove off in a few minutes. Both men succeeded at last, but I confess I admired the method of lightening the cart when the ground was insecure. When difficulties increase at every step of a hypothesis, it is time to inquire whether the hypothesis itself is not at fault.

One indispensable qualification for pursuing an inquiry like the present, is that knowledge of human nature and sympathy with it which we call common-sense. There is, Matthew Arnold tells us,¹ a *mechanical* criticism,

¹ God and the Bible, chap. iii. *ad init.*

which "takes for granted that things are naturally all of a piece, and follow one uniform rule; and that to know that this is so, and to judge things by the light of this knowledge, is the secret for sure criticism. People do not vary; people do not contradict themselves; people do not have undercurrents of meaning; people do not divine. If they are represented as having said one thing to-day and its seeming opposite to-morrow, one of the two they are credited with falsely. If they are represented as having said what in its plain literal acceptation would not hold good, they cannot have said it. If they are represented as speaking of an event before it happened, they did not so speak of it,—the words are not theirs." Such a criticism, as he says, is, for negative purposes, particularly useful; and it may be prosecuted so as to bring out very surprising results. But a very ordinary knowledge of human nature and ^{*}experience of human life will be sufficient to show that conclusions drawn in this way are quite precarious or even repugnant to common-sense. Whatever view is ultimately to prevail in regard to the subject of which we have now to treat, must commend itself to the general intelligence of ordinary thinking people. There are questions raised which are of much deeper than merely antiquarian interest—questions that have usually been associated very closely with the sanctions of religion and with matters of practical life. It is of vital importance that the views held on such subjects should be gained by intelligent conviction. For practical use they are of no more value if received on the authority of scholars and experts than if accepted by tradition or custom. Nor need there be any fear of the result of an appeal on such subjects to the common-sense of reflecting people, who are neither tied fast to a tradi-

tional theory nor liable to be sophisticated by plausible special pleading. The verdict may be that views long held require to be considerably modified; it may also be that much that is now put forward as certain is at least very doubtful. But the inquiry, if conducted honestly, can only tend to the advancement of truth.

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