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L. Elliott Binns, J. W. Hunkin and J. F. Bethune-Baker

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THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND  
THEIR FAITH

*By*

L. ELLIOTT BINNS

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## CHAPTER ONE

## THE SOURCES OF OUR KNOWLEDGE

FREDERIC THE GREAT of Prussia, who was somewhat loose in his religious opinions, is reported on one occasion to have asked his chaplain to give him, in as few words as possible, some clear evidence of the truth of Christianity. 'The Jews, your majesty', tersely replied the chaplain. Whether it be accepted as evidence for the truth of Christianity or not, the survival of the Jewish people is one of the most striking phenomena in history. They lost their national freedom on the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., but in spite of this they have remained a distinct race, although for nearly two thousand years without a land of their own. The early history of such a people must in itself be worthy of study. But if we wish to acquaint ourselves with the background of the life of Him who was, after the flesh, the greatest product of the Jewish people, and desire to understand the growth of the Church which He founded, such a study is essential. The Christian Church is rooted in Judaism, and the New Testament is the sequel, although on a higher plane, of the Old.

The story of the early years of Israel is lost amidst legend and folk-lore. Certain important events, however, like the Exodus, and certain great personalities, like Moses, stand out from amidst the general obscurity. In spite of this

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uncertainty any account of the rise of the Hebrews must be full of interest; something much more enlightening than a mere chronicle accurate in the smallest details would have been, for the story itself is a living thing still bearing traces of the experiences of its writers.

Until about a century ago our sources of information for the history of the Jewish people were practically limited to the writings which they themselves had produced, the collection of books which we call the Old Testament. During the last century, however, a whole new field of knowledge has been made available for us by the labours of archaeologists, a full account of whose skill and daring, particularly in the early days, makes a thrilling narrative.<sup>1</sup> The principal result of their work has been to rescue the Hebrews from that state of isolation which a study of the Old Testament by itself makes almost inevitable. No longer do we see them living in a kind of vacuum, but moving against the vast background of the ancient Oriental world. All this is pure gain. The records lose nothing of their religious value, whilst the Hebrews become more human and, in consequence, of greater help to us who live in modern times.

The discoveries of the excavators have been made in almost every part of the ancient East, and they throw fresh light on almost every period of its long development. They

<sup>1</sup> In a small booklet, *Modern Research and the Old Testament* (S.P.C.K.), I have given a brief outline of the story with descriptions of the more important discoveries.

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disclose, in surprisingly vivid detail, the conditions amidst which the ancestors of the Hebrews lived in their distant homes 'beyond the river'; they tell us of Egypt from the days previous to the Exodus down to the centuries before the coming of Christ; they sketch for us the state of Palestine in the years when the Hebrews were pressing into it, and give us a knowledge of Canaanite civilization and of the religious influences which affected the followers of Jehovah, such as the Old Testament by itself does not afford.

Some of the evidence for the state of Palestine, and in particular for the religious customs of the Canaanites, comes as a result of excavations carried out at various sites in Palestine itself: the chief of these are Gezer, Taanach, Tell el-Hesi (the ancient Lachish) and Tell el-Mutesellim (the ancient Megiddo). Further evidence is to be found in the tablets discovered at Boghaz-Keui (the Hittite capital in Asia Minor), and, most important of all, in the Tell el-Amarna Letters. These tablets, some three hundred in number, form part of the state archives of Amenophis IV, a king (Pharaoh) of Egypt about 1350 B.C. They include letters received by him and his father from a most varied series of correspondents; of chief value are reports from various Egyptian representatives in Palestine. The letters as a whole throw many interesting, and even amusing, sidelights on the ancient world, and anyone who becomes familiar with their contents will feel a new respect and admiration for the civilization which produced them.

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For the later periods of the history we have recovered not a few inscriptions of value: such are the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III upon which the messengers of Jehu are depicted bringing tribute to the Assyrian king; the edicts of Cyrus giving permission for exiled peoples to return to their homes; and, for the Persian period, tablets from Nippur shewing the social and commercial life of Jews living away from Palestine. Perhaps the most interesting of all the discoveries which give information of such Jews is that of the papyri found at Assuan near the first cataract of the Nile in the early years of the present century. They contain an account of a Jewish colony of the late fifth century settled quite happily in a strange land. These Jews had their own temple in which they worshipped not only Jehovah, but other deities, including goddesses, and, so far as we can tell, without any idea that they were doing anything unusual.

Unfortunately no Hebrew inscription of any value has yet been discovered, the nearest approach to one being the so-called Moabite stone, an inscription of Mesha, king of Moab (2 Kings iii, 4 f.), in which he describes, in language which might have been taken from the Old Testament, his victories over Israel.

These new discoveries, although they supplement the Old Testament, by no means supersede it, and to the Old Testament we must still turn for a record of the growth of the knowledge of God as it came to be revealed in the life of the Hebrew people.

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The record, even if we do not accept the early narratives of Genesis as historical documents, covers a vast extent of time. From the wilderness period to the final loss of any vestige of independence in the days of Herod the Great is a period of over 1200 years, possibly a great deal more (see below, p. 38). To trace the course of the religious development of the Jewish people through this great tract of time is a task beset with insuperable difficulties. For one thing our sources of information are seldom contemporary; a story which professes to represent the conditions of an early age may be in reality the product of a much later time which read back into the past the ideas of its own period. Again it has to be remembered that religious development in any people is seldom or never uniform. Different sections of the people will have reached at any given date very different levels of religious attainment. This is true of ourselves today, it is still more true of a country like India, it was certainly true of Palestine. In the big towns foreign influences worked much more speedily as well as more radically than in the country villages; the prosperous north was more open to such influences than the rugged and less accessible south. We have therefore to be on our guard against attributing to the nation as a whole ideas and ideals which were the possession of only a few of its members.

Before proceeding to discuss in greater detail the Old Testament records, it is necessary to say something of the methods of ancient historians, methods very different from those of scholars today. The modern historian prepares

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for his task by collecting all available information. He then proceeds to write his history in his own words, or if he quotes from his sources or from other writers, he signifies it by the use of quotation marks. Before, however, accepting the evidence of any source he enquires into its reliability: he asks when, where, and by whom it was written, what were the means of information at the author's disposal, was he prejudiced, and so forth. The answers to such questions can seldom be either full or completely satisfactory, and ultimately the historian must rely on his own judgement: none the less the enquiry must first be made. In ancient times this process of criticism, as we call it, was hardly ever applied; the writers of the Old Testament in particular seemed quite unable to discriminate even between contradictory accounts of the same event: in some cases they simply placed the two side by side (e.g. the accounts of the creation in Gen. i and ii), sometimes they went further and tried to combine them, whilst still retaining the contradictions (e.g. the story of the deluge in Gen. vi, 5–ix, 17). Again, the ancient historian, instead of recasting his material in his own words, preferred to incorporate it, with but slight alteration, in the narrative, without any sign, such as inverted commas, to shew that it did not come from his own pen.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we have to

<sup>1</sup> Those who wish to study further the methods of ancient historians should consult A. H. Sayce, *The Egypt of the Hebrews and Herodotos*, pp. 176 ff. and also E. R. Bevan, *Historical Methods in the Old Testament* in *Cambridge Biblical Essays*, pp. 1 ff.



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remember that the writers of the Old Testament were not writing history for its own sake—they did not indeed claim to be writing history at all—everything was done to illustrate the dealings of Jehovah with His people and to enforce certain religious ideas. Hence, like many medieval churchmen, they included anything that was of service to this end and never stopped to ask if it were true or not: edification and not history, as we understand it today, was the end in view. It followed that much that was of value from a secular point of view was neglected. A good illustration of this neglect is the treatment of the reign of Omri, one of the most important of Israelite kings in the eyes of foreigners, but in the eyes of his own chroniclers worthy of little more than a bare mention. So too the early writers were careless to inform us about details, especially of exact names. The habit of referring merely to ‘Pharaoh’ (i.e. the king) has caused much confusion (e.g. if we knew the name of the Pharaoh of the Exodus the date of that event would be settled). It is quite possible that as the tradition came down no name was actually mentioned, just as a medieval story might be handed on about the ‘Emperor’, without specifying which Emperor was meant.

The Old Testament is not a single book but a collection coming from many different authors and from very varied periods. In all probability the traditions which it contains, and especially those which deal with the earlier periods, existed in an oral form before being reduced to writing. We can imagine the Hebrews gathered round

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their camp fires listening to one of their number as he told stories of the past. Before the different tribes were united to form a single nation each of them would already have its own cycle of legends: after the union, no doubt, these stories would tend to become the property of the whole people. This accounts for a great many of the differences in detail in the Old Testament stories. Many of the most primitive of them are connected with famous shrines, probably these would be told to the pilgrims as they went up to the great festivals at those shrines.

The Old Testament, as we know it, is a collection of books. The Hebrews themselves had it in the form of three collections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The books in the English Bible do not follow the order of the original Hebrew Bible, but that of the Vulgate, or Latin version. The first collection was the Law. This consisted of the same five books as in our version but at first they were not given the name of Moses.<sup>1</sup> Behind these five books, often referred to as the Pentateuch, lie many different traditions. Scholars have arranged these traditions into a number of separate groups or sources, which for convenience of reference are called by different letters. J, for example, represents the group of traditions which came from the south; this source uses the personal name for God, JHVH (the original pronunciation has been lost,

<sup>1</sup> The book which Hilkiyah found in the Temple (2 Kings xxii, 8) was simply called 'a law book': contrast 'the book of Moses' in Neh. xiii, 1.