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R. L. Ottley

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I.

## THE PRIMITIVE RELIGION OF THE SEMITES.

IN a former volume the external history of the Hebrew people has been briefly sketched. We traced in *Introductory.* broad outline its progress from the dim and remote period when its ancestors formed an insignificant group among the nomad Semitic tribes who wandered in the deserts of Northern Arabia, to the time when it finally lost its independence and was merged in the Roman Empire. But Israel's importance for the world was at no time merely political. If at the present day the Jewish race survives the strange vicissitudes through which it has passed, it can no longer be said to form, in any true sense, a separate nation. The children of Abraham, in spite of their famous history, are virtually homeless,

‘like glowing brands  
Tost wildly o'er a thousand lands  
For twice a thousand year<sup>1</sup>.’

Israel's unique claim to glory consists in the fact that Almighty God entrusted it with a religious mission to mankind. ‘The Law,’ says Athanasius in a memorable passage, ‘was not for the Jews alone, nor were the prophets sent for them only, but, though sent to the Jews and persecuted by the Jews, they were

<sup>1</sup> J. Keble, *Christian Year*.

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for all the world a sacred school of the knowledge of God and of the spiritual life<sup>1</sup>. In fact the Old Testament history, which describes how God Himself founded a kingdom upon earth and educated a people to be the instrument of His redemptive purpose for mankind, depicts the early stages of a movement which finds its climax and continuation in the New Testament. The Gospel message was originally preached upon the soil of Palestine; it was addressed in the first instance to *the lost sheep of the house of Israel*; it proclaimed the fulfilment of the age-long hopes and ideals which Hebrew saints and prophets had cherished, and the foundation of a spiritual kingdom which Israel's national polity had vaguely foreshadowed. Thus, although the Incarnation marked a new beginning in human history, yet regarded merely as an historical event it stood in the closest relation to the previous career of the Jewish people. In one aspect at least it was the crowning point of a slow and continuous development. It was a culminating manifestation *in the fulness of time* of Him who had progressively revealed Himself to His chosen people *by divers portions and in divers manners*. The new revelation did not supersede the old, but rather filled it with hitherto unperceived significance. At each stage of Israel's history, in proportion to Israel's spiritual capacity, God disclosed His nature, His purpose, and His moral requirement, and finally in the gift of His Son He satisfied the yearnings and anticipations which His own Spirit had inspired<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly since, to use our Lord's words, *salvation is of the Jews*<sup>3</sup>, no study can be more full of interest than that of the history of Hebrew religion, inasmuch as it discloses to us the actual method by which God gradually accomplished His purpose of salvation. Moreover, it illustrates the infinite forbearance with which He led the chosen people onwards from very lowly ideas of Deity to a doctrine which the incarnate Son could claim as His own and

<sup>1</sup> Athan. *de Incarnatione*, XII. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Irenaeus, *c. Haer.* III. 3. 3.

<sup>3</sup> St John iv. 22.

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re-enforce with divine authority ; from very rude and imperfect notions of righteousness to a type of character which is not essentially changed, but only invested with supreme lustre and power in the sinless holiness of Jesus Christ ; from crude nationalistic hopes and aspirations to the triumphant assurance that the true Messiah, the Son of God, *is come in the flesh, is risen indeed*, and is enthroned *on the right hand of the majesty on high* ; that He *upholds all things by the word of His power* ; that *He must reign till He hath put all enemies under His feet*<sup>1</sup>.

It is of primary importance in the study of Hebrew religion to remember the principle that 'the beginning finds its true interpretation in the end.' The religious history of Israel is in fact the record of an *evolution*, and everything depends on the point of view from which it is approached. In the light of the result actually aimed at and attained, that which looks *prima facie* like a purely natural process is to Christian eyes transfigured. Even in the earliest and lowest stages of the upward movement the presence of an inspiring and controlling idea can be discerned—an idea not indeed consciously realised by the men of the time, yet to some extent moulding their thought and directing their actions. Thus institutions which in themselves appear common and rudimentary acquire dignity and significance ; conceptions rude and distorted dimly suggest sublime and far-reaching truths. It was the great function of *prophecy* to elucidate the spiritual ideas which underlay the peculiar institutions of Israel and the successive events of its history. In each generation the prophets were the leading spirits, quick to discern the inner meaning of what was passing, or daily enacted, before their eyes, and continually pointing their contemporaries to a time when the ideas embodied in the history should find their fulfilment. Accordingly in studying Hebrew religion we have to bear in mind that

<sup>1</sup> 1 St John iv. 2 ; St Luke xxiv. 34 ; Heb. i. 3 ; 1 Cor. xv. 25.

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prophecy contains the true interpretation of the history, and that the distinctive conceptions of Old Testament theology were developed in close connection with the national life.

In the present volume the growth of Israel's religion will be described. The sources of information are virtually identical with those which are available for the external history of the Hebrews, but the way in which they will be used is to some extent different. The chief incidents and turning-points in the national history need to be considered in their relation to the development of religious ideas, and the writings of the prophets, historians, psalmists and wise men of Israel assume for the student of Old Testament theology a new importance. These writings do not merely imply or record a particular series of historical events; they embody the religious thoughts of successive generations. Consequently, it becomes a matter of interest to determine, at least roughly, the chronological order of the Old Testament books, since the account given by different writers of the successive stages in Israel's religious history will of course vary to some extent with the critical presuppositions of the historian. For present purposes it must suffice to give a summary of the main points on which modern critics of all schools are agreed.

1. As regards the pre-Mosaic period, we have to depend on narratives compiled in a comparatively late age (the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.). These narratives embody certain traditions concerning primeval history which were shared by other Semitic peoples; they give us, in fact, a view of the earliest period which is coloured by the definite religious conceptions of the writers, and it must be borne in mind that probably this 'religious colouring' is more important for the purposes of an historian than the actual details of the narrative<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Smend, *Alttestamentliche Religionsgeschichte*, p. 18, 'Was die Genesis über die Religion der Erzväter erzählt, beruht zumeist auf Zurücktragung späteren Glaubens an die erste Anfänge der Geschichte.'

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2. The religion of the Old Testament may be said to begin with the work of Moses. It is impossible to determine precisely how much of the legislation ascribed to him actually belongs to his epoch; but it is generally admitted that Moses was Israel's earliest lawgiver, and that the Hebrews were subjected to the discipline of a legal code, consisting chiefly of moral and social enactments, for some centuries before the beginnings of written prophecy (c. 800). The 'Book of the Covenant' (Exod. xx.—xxiii.) is usually regarded as the charter of Mosaism.

3. The most creative period in the history of Hebrew religion is that which is represented by the earliest writing prophets. With prophecy in a somewhat advanced stage must be closely connected the appearance of the book of Deuteronomy, which exercised a powerful influence both upon religious thought and upon the estimate which historians were led to form of Israel's past career and ideal vocation. The book of Deuteronomy regarded from the ethical point of view reflects the teachings of the earliest written prophecy; regarded as a legislative code it is for the most part an expansion of the essential principles of Mosaism.

4. The fall of Jerusalem (586) marks the beginning of what is perhaps the most important epoch in Israel's religious history. Theology of the noblest type (Ezekiel and Isaiah xl.—lxvi.), a comprehensive system of legislation embracing the entire life of the community (the completed Levitical code), a devotional literature of unsurpassed depth and spiritual force (the Psalter), a body of ethical teaching which is the outcome of systematic reflection on the phenomena of nature and the problems of human life (the 'Wisdom' literature)—all these are characteristic products of the period which began with the exile. During the five centuries which preceded the birth of Jesus Christ, Israel entered as it were into full possession of its spiritual inheritance. It assimilated and in some respects developed the teachings of prophecy; it gradually arrived at

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those conceptions of God which implied the possibility of a further and final revelation; it discovered in what seemed to be a purely national faith the elements of personal religion, and in so doing imparted to Judaism an 'universalistic' tendency.

This general survey of the course of Israel's religious history suffices to show that the development of religion proceeded most rapidly at a later stage than was at one time supposed. The tendency of modern criticism is to attribute much to Moses, but even more to the prophets who succeeded him; and it assigns special importance to the age of reflection which followed the downfall of the Hebrew monarchy. It is also evident that the Old Testament itself supplies us with very few *data* respecting the primitive beliefs and ideas which formed as it were the natural basis of the Old Testament religion. In attempting to reconstruct this earliest stage in Hebrew thought we are for the most part dependent on the help of archaeology and on the analogies suggested by the study of comparative religions.

For purposes of convenience our survey will be divided as follows:

**Division of  
the subject.**

I. The pre-Mosaic age, during which the Hebrew tribes shared to a considerable extent the ideas and practices of their Semitic kinsfolk.

II. The age of Moses, the virtual founder of the religion of JAHVEH.

III. The age that intervenes between Moses and the foundation of the monarchy—an obscure epoch but one of crucial importance in Israel's religious development.

IV. The age of the earliest written prophecy (the eighth century B.C.), when the Hebrews first came into contact or collision with the great world-empires of Western Asia, and began under the guidance of the prophets to realise their function as the people of God and the recipients of a divine revelation.

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V. The period intervening between the fall of the northern kingdom (721) and the exile (586).

VI. The exile in Babylon and the subsequent restoration of the Jews to their own land.

VII. The age of Judaism, which, roughly speaking, dates from the mission of Ezra (c. 458) and ends with the death of Alexander the Great (323).

VIII. The latest phase of the Old Testament religion, when theological ideas were progressively modified by the advance of 'Hellenism.' This phase may be said to find its limit in the final triumph of the Maccabean movement and the virtual close of the Old Testament Canon, but it needs to be illustrated by the teaching contained in various 'apocalyptic' writings which appeared during the century before and after the birth of Christ.

The date and the actual circumstances of the immigration of the Hebrews into Canaan can only be a matter of conjecture. The main facts of their earliest history seem to be correctly outlined in the book of Genesis. It is reasonably supposed that the Hebrews originally formed a nomad tribe or group of tribes, dwelling in the deserts south of Palestine; that they were closely related to the Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, and Aramaeans, and that for a long period the ancestors of these various peoples lived together and used a common language. In process of time these tribes moved westward into Palestine from the region of upper Mesopotamia. The ancestors of the Canaanites seem to have settled in the western districts; those of Moab and Ammon occupied the territory eastward of Jordan; but the Hebrew clans descended into Egypt, and after a prolonged sojourn there found a permanent settlement in Canaan. It is practically certain that the original ancestors of the Hebrews shared the religious beliefs and customs of the pastoral Semites. Our first chapter will be devoted to a brief description and estimate of this primitive worship.

Origin of  
the Hebrews.

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It must be borne in mind at the outset that no literature belonging to this pre-historic age has been preserved. The famous tablets discovered at Tel-el-Amarna in 1888 do not directly help us, since they make no indisputable mention of the Hebrew tribes. They do, however, prove that the civilisation of Palestine in the fourteenth century B.C. was affected to no small extent by the culture of Babylon and Egypt, and it is certain that in the domain of religion the influence of Babylon prevailed. But the Old Testament contains unmistakable traces of an earlier stage in Hebrew religion than that described in the historical books. Behind the positive religion founded and developed by the inspired organs of divine revelation lies a body of primitive usage and belief which 'formed part of that inheritance from the past into which successive generations of the Semitic race grew up as it were instinctively, taking it as a matter of course that they should believe and act as their fathers had done before them'.<sup>1</sup> A passage in the book of Joshua enjoins the Benê Israel to *put away the gods which their fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt*<sup>2</sup>, and it is clear, partly from the results of modern investigation, partly from peculiar customs and usages which survive in later times, that the primitive religion of the Hebrew tribes closely resembled that of their Semitic kinsfolk in Arabia<sup>3</sup>.

The first question which meets us is naturally a simple one:

**Semitic  
conception of  
Deity.**      What was the ancient Semitic conception of Deity? It has never been conclusively proved that the primitive Semites were in the strict sense polytheists; on the other hand they certainly were not monotheists, though it may be fairly asserted that in their devotion to a single tribal god they showed a tendency towards monolatry<sup>4</sup>. The word 'polydaemonism' has been suggested

<sup>1</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Josh. xxiv. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Smend, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Smend, p. 26, 'In der semitischen Stammesreligion liegt die letzte geschichtliche Wurzel des Monotheismus.' M. Renan, as is well known,



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as more accurately describing their point of view. Though they recognised the existence of different deities, bound by the tie of kinship to particular tribes, they did not apparently offer simultaneous worship to many gods. They had, however, a very strong sense of the supernatural. To them every striking natural object seemed to conceal the presence of a supernatural being, and such objects came to be regarded with reverence and awe as the *abode* of the divine power to which worship was directed. Owing perhaps to the ruggedness and barrenness of his ordinary surroundings, the Arabian nomad was occasionally impressed with a sense of the presence of *life* or *force* in things. Nature was for him full of supernatural beings, which were regarded as manifesting themselves in material objects, animate or inanimate. Such a supernatural being was sometimes called the '*El*' (Assyr. *ilu*; Arab. *ilah*) or 'strong one'; sometimes the *Ba'al*, 'owner,' of the place or object in which he manifested himself. The object itself, whether stone, cave, tree, fountain, or stream, was called *beth-el*, 'abode of '*El*' (Phoen. *bêtyl*, Gk. *βαίτυλος*, *βαιτύλιον*, Lat. *baetulus*), since the deity or demon was supposed to be actually resident in it. It was, however, a peculiarity of the Semitic conception that the sacred object was actually treated as the deity himself, who was supposed to inhabit the sacred tree or stone 'not in the sense in which a man inhabits a house, but in the sense in which his soul inhabits his body<sup>1</sup>.'

Thus the ancient Semite felt himself to be surrounded by spiritual beings, to whom he did not as a rule apply definite

maintains that 'even from the most ancient times the Semite patriarch had a secret tendency towards monotheism' (*Histoire du Peuple d'Israël*, bk. i. c. 1); but see the remarks of Prof. G. A. Smith, *Mod. Criticism and the preaching of the O. T.* pp. 118 foll.; and H. Schultz, *O. T. Theology*, vol. 1. pp. 97 foll. [E. T.].

<sup>1</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *op. cit.* p. 85. See the whole passage. Cp. Smend, p. 38, 'Eine gewisse Unterscheidung von Leib und Seele ist uralt und vom Menschen übertrug man sie nach Bedürfniss auf alle Gegenstände der Aussenwelt.'

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names, but rather *titles* expressive of reverence, awe, and submission: 'El, 'Adon ('lord'), *Melekh* ('king'), *Ba'al* ('owner or possessor'). Polytheism as generally understood attempts to *define* the separate spheres of different deities, or assigns to them distinct functions. The Semite on the other hand had a strong sense of the presence of supernatural beings in particular spots, but it may be claimed for him that his conception of deity was relatively pure, inasmuch as it never apparently gave rise, as in Greece and Babylonia, to an exuberant mythology. The titles ascribed to deity were for the most part vaguely descriptive, and even the plural word '*Elohim*, which may have been used to signify the totality of the divine denizens of a special place, was less usual than '*El*, which may have implied the notion of superhuman might<sup>1</sup>.

Little light has hitherto been thrown on the origin and growth of this undefined conception of deity. There are no clear traces of any earlier stage in Semitic religion; there is scarcely anything which points to any system of *totemism*<sup>2</sup>, and but little that gives colour to the theory that the Semites originally worshipped deceased ancestors<sup>3</sup>. All that can be

<sup>1</sup> We are reminded of the beginnings of theological speculation in Greece. Arist. *de Anima*, I. 5, καὶ ἐν τῷ ὄλῳ δέ τινες αὐτὴν (sc. τὴν ψυχὴν) μεμύχθαι φασι, ὅθεν ἴσως καὶ θαλῆς ᾤήθη πάντα πλήρη θεῶν εἶναι. On the meaning of '*El* and other primitive titles of deity see Dr Driver's *Book of Genesis*, excursus I. In no case is the meaning certain or clear.

<sup>2</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *op. cit.* pp. 117 foll. See also Kautzsch in *DB*, vol. V. p. 613.

<sup>3</sup> Piepenbring supports this idea, and suggests that the *terâphim* represented defunct ancestors (*Histoire du Peuple d'Israël*, p. 28). No particular inference can be drawn from passages in the O. T. which imply reverence for graves, mourning customs, and the use of necromantic arts (e.g. 1 Sam. xxviii. 13). The facts are collected by Piepenbring, *op. cit.* pp. 26 foll. Cp. Marti, *Gesch. der Isr. Rel.* p. 24. Kautzsch, *DB*, V. 614 foll., questions the alleged indications of ancestor-worship in the O. T. Its existence in the pre-Mosaic period cannot (he thinks) be proved, and at any rate 'no consciousness of it survived to historical times.'