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R. L. Ottley

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

EARLY NARRATIVES OF GENESIS.

THE history of the Hebrew race differs in one important respect from that of all other ancient nations. It is the story of a people which believed that it had been entrusted with a religious mission to the world. Strictly speaking indeed Israel's national history cannot be said to begin before the period of the exodus from Egypt, but the Hebrew historians could never forget that they belonged to a race chosen by Almighty God to proclaim His Name to all the nations of the earth. Accordingly they took pains to collect and to preserve with scrupulous care, not merely the popular narratives which described the supposed ancestry of the Hebrew people, but even those current traditions of the Semitic tribes which dealt with the origin of man and of the universe itself. The Old Testament accordingly begins with an account of the Creation, which is followed in due order by narratives describing the antediluvian world, the catastrophe of the Deluge, the formation and gradual dispersion of the primitive races of mankind. With the history of Abraham and his reputed descendants opens the record of Israel's own eventful career.

Israel's
mission and
history.

Corresponding to the unique character and vocation of

O. H.

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Israel is the special peculiarity of the Book in which the greater part of its history is related. The Old Testament forms a library of national literature, containing a large amount of material which is not all of equal value or importance for the purposes of a modern historian. The historical books were gradually compiled by a series of writers who regarded the rise and progress of the Hebrew race almost exclusively from a religious point of view. It was not their aim to give a full and complete account of past events; nor did they attempt to harmonize strictly the various documents which they employed in the construction of their narrative. Their object was simply to trace the chequered career of a divinely chosen and divinely guided people; to describe with such knowledge as they could command, its origin, its special vocation, its early migrations, its separation from other nations, its varied fortunes and achievements, its oft-repeated failures to rise to the height of its ideal calling, its sins and the chastisements which they provoked. We may in fact describe the Old Testament history most correctly as the record of God's providential dealings with the people of His choice: in other words, as a 'Sacred History,' which, while it provides the historian with valuable material for his purpose, needs to be interpreted, supplemented, and in some cases corrected by evidence derived from other sources.

This brings us to the question, What original authorities do we possess for the history of the Hebrew people? The Old Testament itself of course is of primary importance. According to the arrangement of the Jewish Canon it consists of three portions, which were gradually arranged in their present shape, and were successively ranked as 'canonical Scripture' some time between the beginning of the fifth and the close of the third century, B.C. The Law (*Torah*) comprises the five books of the Pentateuch. This

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**Sources of
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division of the Old Testament, sometimes called 'The book of the Law,' carries back the history of the Hebrews to its remote origins and brings it down to the close of the wanderings in the wilderness of Paran. The Pentateuch also contains various codes of legislation, which evidently belong to widely different periods or stages in the development of the nation. A large proportion of this legal matter is arranged in the form of an historical narrative, describing in detail the special circumstances under which the various enactments were supposed to have been originally framed.

The Prophets (*Nebi'im*) form the most important source from which our knowledge of Israel's history is derived. The name 'former prophets' was in fact applied by the Jews to four *historical* books: those of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The title 'latter prophets' includes the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets (these last forming in the Jewish Canon a single book). The prophetic literature contains a considerable amount of actual history, but it is chiefly important in so far as it bears undesigned testimony to the moral and religious condition of the Hebrews during the particular epochs when the various prophets lived, taught, and wrote. These writings lay bare those currents of national thought and feeling which issued in the public actions, measures, or lines of policy adopted by Israel's kings or statesmen. They throw a vivid light upon the dangers, external or internal, which threatened Israel's welfare at different periods between the eighth and the third centuries, B.C.

The Writings (Heb. *Kethubhim*, Gk. *Hagiographa*), which form the third and last section of the Old Testament Canon, were probably collected at a comparatively late stage in Jewish history. For the most part they describe or illustrate the religious condition of the Jews, and their habits of thought and life, at a time subsequent to the return from Babylon (536 B.C.). They throw

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but little light on earlier periods of Hebrew history. Only a few of the books can be described as historical works (e.g. Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, which were originally combined in a single book). Others, such as Esther and Ruth, seem to be historical only in form, and may be regarded as 'studies' of certain incidents or epochs of Jewish history, written from a religious point of view and intended to convey a particular moral. None of these books however, considering their peculiar character and the date of their composition, can be safely employed as independent or complete sources of information.

Such, briefly described, is the nature and scope of the historical documents contained in the Old Testament. But the evidence derived from this source does not stand alone. During the nineteenth century the research of many scholars in various fields of investigation has accumulated a mass of information which has shed a vivid light upon the course of Israel's history, and upon the gradual growth of its religious customs and ideas. It is indeed a remarkable fact that Israel itself supplies practically little or nothing that supplements or elucidates the biblical narratives,—no inscriptions, no tombs, no monuments¹. But in Assyria, Babylon, Phoenicia, Egypt and elsewhere, tablets, monuments and hieroglyphic inscriptions have been discovered which illustrate to a remarkable extent the primitive beliefs of the Semitic race, the incidents of Hebrew history, the relations of Israel to the neighbouring peoples, and other similar matters. It is not too much to say that recent discoveries have in a great measure revolutionized the study of the Old Testament. They have in many ways vindicated both the honesty and the accuracy of the Hebrew

¹ The inscription found in the tunnel of Siloam throws some light on the topography of Jerusalem, but otherwise is of little historical interest. For a description see Sayce, *Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments*, ch. iv.

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historians; but at the same time they have enabled us to understand and fairly appreciate the necessary limitations under which they worked. We now perceive that the inspiration which we justly attribute to the Old Testament writers did not protect them from occasional errors and inaccuracies, nor did it hinder them from freely using their own judgment in the selection and arrangement of their materials. But although their manner of writing history was in general the same as that of other oriental historians, a careful and reverent study of their work makes it evident that they were in a true sense 'inspired': they were endowed with a God-given insight which led them to read history in the light of the divine purpose, and guided them to discern the true moral significance of the events which they recorded.

The historical books close with an account of the work of Nehemiah (c. 430 B.C.). For information respecting the subsequent period we have to depend iii. Later authorities. for the most part on extra-canonical authorities.

The writings of Josephus and a few allusions in classical literature help us to some extent: but it must be admitted that comparatively little is recorded of Jewish history during the period of nearly 300 years between the death of Nehemiah and the age of the Maccabees. The first and second books of Maccabees are fairly trustworthy for the period which they cover, and there are various apocryphal and pseudepigraphic writings¹ which contain information bearing upon the history, and the characteristic beliefs, of post-exilic Judaism. Speaking broadly, however, the age of Hebrew history of which we are most easily enabled to form an accurate idea, is the eighth century, B.C., the period, that is, during which Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah fulfilled their ministry in Israel and Judah. The writings of these great prophets help us to estimate the real importance of the events summarily recorded in the

¹ e.g. some portions of the *Sibylline Oracles*, the *Fourth Book of Esdras*, the *Psalms of Solomon*, the *Book of Enoch*, etc.

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historical books; they are amply illustrated by the evidence of contemporary monuments, and they enable us to understand the inner condition of the Hebrew people during what was perhaps the most critical epoch of its entire history.

The early chapters of the book of Genesis are concerned with ages even more remote. They contain extracts selected from the ancient folk-lore of the Semitic race, relating to the creation of the world, and the origin of the various races of mankind. The aim and purport of these simple narratives is clearly religious. Indeed the first eleven chapters of Genesis may be regarded as a kind of preface to the Old Testament, teaching in a poetic form those fundamental truths of religion and human nature which the Hebrew writers believed to lie behind the history of their own race, and to explain its peculiar calling and promised destiny.

The history opens with two accounts of the Creation of the world, the first (contained in Gen. i. 1—ii. 4 *a*) apparently belonging to a document which forms the groundwork not merely of Genesis, but of the first six books of the Old Testament (the 'Hexateuch'). Owing to certain internal characteristics, this document is generally known as the 'Priestly writing' or 'Priests' Code,' and from its preference for the name '*Elohim* (God) rather than *Jahveh* (LORD), its author is sometimes called the Elohist. The document is generally regarded as being of much later origin than the other Pentateuchal sources. There are two points worthy of special notice in connection with this narrative. First, it is not primarily intended to convey instruction upon points of physical science, but rather to inculcate certain religious lessons. It is quite beside the mark to enquire curiously into the relation of the biblical cosmogony to the ascertained facts of modern science. The important point is that Israel's sacred book begins with a *religious* account of the origins

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both of the universe and of mankind,—an account which is designed to render the whole subsequent story credible and intelligible. For the history of Israel, it must be remembered, is a history of redemption: the underlying interest of the whole Old Testament is the fact that it points from the first to the accomplishment of a divine purpose of salvation¹. That Almighty God, the God who specially revealed Himself to the Jewish people, called the universe into being; that He existed before it and is distinct from it; that all created nature depends immediately upon His sustaining power at each stage of its upward development; that all things which owe their existence to Him are essentially *good*; finally, that there is an ‘ascent of life’ in nature—i.e. a certain fixed order and gradation in the appearance of different forms of life—these primary truths are conveyed in the form of a simple and singularly impressive narrative of the cosmogony which was originally common to perhaps the greater part of the Semitic race.

The second point calling for remark is that the Hebrew account of creation is apparently adapted from an ancient legend, which, in the form of an epic poem, had been current in Babylonia from a very remote period². The legend was in all probability cherished among the Hebrew clans and transmitted to posterity. A careful comparison of the Assyro-Babylonian story of creation with the narrative of Gen. chh. i. and ii. reveals certain striking points of similarity between the two

(ii) Its
Babylonian
origin.

¹ Cp. John iv. 22 ‘salvation is of the Jews.’

² Portions of this remarkable poem, inscribed on mutilated tablets of clay which were excavated at Kouyunjik, were discovered and deciphered by the eminent Assyriologist, George Smith. A popular account of them is given by Prof. Sayce, *Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments*, and by Prof. Ryle, *The Early Narratives of Genesis*. See also the essay by Dr Driver on ‘Hebrew Authority’ in *Authority and Archaeology, sacred and profane*, pp. 9 foll.

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accounts which conclusively prove their interdependence. In each case the drama of creation is represented as taking place in seven acts or stages; the same word in a slightly different form is used to denote the primaeval chaos, and speaking generally the same order is observed in describing the successive epochs of the Creation. But the points of contrast are not less remarkable. The Babylonian legend contains certain mythological elements which are clearly derived from a rude and primitive polytheism. It represents the Creation as the outcome of a conflict between two orders of deities, whereas the Hebrew narrative is in every respect consistent with the teachings of a strict monotheism. While the main outlines of the original story are retained, the fantastic creation-myth of the Semites is recast, and entirely purged of all those puerile and immoral details that might be inconsistent with the doctrines of a pure and spiritual faith. Speaking generally "where the Assyrian or Babylonian poet saw the action of deified forces of nature, the Hebrew writer sees only the will of the supreme God¹." Indeed the very keynote of the Old Testament is contained in the master-thought which inspires the narrative,—that of the omnipotence and perfect goodness of the God whom Israel had learned to worship. And it is noticeable that the spiritual view of nature which pervades the story became habitual to devout Israelites. It reappears in such passages as Job xxxviii. and in many of the Psalms (especially perhaps Pss. civ., cxlvii., cxlviii.).

In Gen. ii. 4 *b*—25 we find a second account of the Creation evidently derived from a different source and introduced, so far as we can judge, with a widely different motive and purpose. The author of this passage holds chiefly in view the origin of *man*; he describes his first dwelling-place and his relation to other orders of created being. Internal evidence shows that the

Second
narrative of
Creation.

¹ Sayce, *The Higher Criticism and the Monuments*, p. 71.

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narrative belongs to a document which has been skilfully interwoven with the 'Priestly' writing, and is sometimes described as 'Prophetical', inasmuch as it seems to embody those ethical and religious ideas of which the prophets of Israel were the great exponents. The most striking point of contrast between the 'Priestly' and 'Prophetical' narratives of creation is a variation in the divine name. In Gen. i. 1—ii. 4 *a* the title of God is 'Elohim'; in Gen. ii. 4 *b* foll., the characteristic name is *Jahveh* 'Elohim'¹. Scholars have noted other differences between the two accounts, clearly pointing to two distinct traditions: e.g. the absence in the second narrative of any reference to successive 'days' of creation, and the appearance of man on the earth while it is yet unclothed with verdure. Not to dwell further on details, however, it may suffice to remark that the compilers of Genesis have here placed in juxtaposition two divergent accounts of the cosmogony, and the whole passage (Gen. i. 1—ii. 25) supplies the first example of those 'double narratives' of the same event which so frequently recur in the history, and which modern critical analysis of the Hebrew text has enabled us to distinguish. It is noticeable that the compilers make little or no attempt to harmonize conflicting statements. They are only anxious to preserve each tradition, so far as possible, in its integrity. They doubtless regard each as conveying some elements of sacred teaching, which it is important to preserve².

It is doubtful how far the 'Prophetical' account of man's earliest abode is connected with kindred Babylonian legends. A distinguished modern scholar has maintained that the site of Paradise can be recognized in a certain district of Mesopotamia,

¹ The usual symbol employed to denote the 'Prophetical' writer is 'J'; the 'Priestly' writer is generally referred to as 'P.'

² On the way in which the Hebrew writers employ the ordinary methods of Oriental historians see Kirkpatrick, *The Divine Library of the O.T.* p. 14. Cp. Sanday, *The Oracles of God*, pp. 27, 28.

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but the identification of the spot is only a matter of interest in so far as it strengthens the presumption that the Babylonian epic of Creation also included a description of the Temptation and Fall of man, which the Hebrews inherited from the race to which they belonged and eventually incorporated, in some purified form, among their sacred writings.

The interest of the passage, Gen. ii. 4 *b*—iii., 24 lies chiefly in its teaching as regards man's nature and destiny, the entrance of sin into the world and its culmination in a divinely-inflicted judgment.

Story of the Fall. Its purpose. The story of the Fall (iii. 1—24) is an attempt to solve a problem which from the earliest ages has perplexed and baffled human thought—the problem of *evil*, its origin and meaning. The account in Genesis is perhaps intended to teach the true character and consequences rather than the origin of sin. Certain great spiritual truths lie on the surface of the narrative: that man, while akin to the lower orders of creation in bodily structure, is yet capable of dominion over them in virtue of his spiritual endowments; that his original state as a being made 'in the image of God' though rudimentary, was yet good and fair; that his upward development was marred and perverted by the subtle intrusion of sin; that the process of man's recovery involves painful antagonism to evil. Thus the narrative, in spite of its poetical and childlike form, gives expression to moral facts which certainly find their verification in human experience. It prepares the way for the idea and promise of Redemption which runs like a golden thread through the history of the Chosen People, and which culminates in the conception of a coming Messiah. The verse Gen. iii. 15 is from this point of view sometimes called the *Protevangelium*, inasmuch as it contains the germ of all subsequent Messianic prediction:

I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.