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THE PRESENT POSITION OF OLD TESTAMENT CRITICISM.[1]

DURING recent years there has appeared in Old Testament criticism a change of attitude which may yet produce large results. To speak broadly, men are not merely questioning some of the results arrived at, but revising certain of the canons set up, by the school which passes under the name of Wellhausen. That school, which has been so long dominant that it has passed into the accepted position, is now being subjected to keen criticism. And the criticism is no longer confined to insistence on the dangerous tendencies of the hypothesis or on the disturbing character of its results; it has taken for its arms the weapons used by the school in its days of unquestioned triumph—the weapons of scientific accuracy and loyalty to facts.

It would, however, be unwise to conclude that the hypothesis is exploded and that it is possible to return to the earlier positions with the placid confidence that such a return is supported by modern scholarship. The theory in its broad lines was too firmly based on, and is still too securely supported by, the evidence of facts to be lightly brushed aside. And some who write unguardedly on the subject would be wise, if they noted two things.

One is that some of the strongest assailants of the school do so in the interests of a view which conflicts more radically than that of Wellhausen with what used to be the traditional position. Eerdmans in Holland, e.g., represents a reconstruction which ought to warn any who claim his support, timere Danaos dona ferentes.

The other thing it is wise to remember is that the majority of those who at present question the theory quietly accept

[1] Inaugural Lecture at New College, Edinburgh.

its well-assured results. There is, e.g., no serious effort to go back to the position that Deuteronomy in its present form is Mosaic in the sense of dating from the age of the Exodus. Now that, as was recognised long ago in the Robertson Smith controversy, is the crux of the position, for to put Deuteronomy late is to recognise that the law, in the form in which we have the law, comes after instead of before the writing prophets. That broad change in the whole method of approach to the study of the Old Testament is not seriously questioned in the many criticisms which are being urged to-day.

The Wellhausen theory had two sides. It was a criticism and, as such, it rejected the traditional view on the ground that that view was not true to the facts of history. But it was more than a criticism, and its dramatic and signal triumph was due to its being so much more. In the light of the facts which had been previously ignored and of its reading of these facts, it offered its own view of the course of Hebrew history and the development of Hebrew religion.

But behind the reconstruction and governing all the interpretation of the facts were certain opinions as to the methods of divine revelation and as to evolution. These views deeply and subtly influenced the theory, and helped towards its success. For the underlying presuppositions were common property of that time: and, because they were common, a theory which implicitly accepted them commended itself much more readily to men's minds. As time has gone on, these underlying opinions have worked themselves out, as such opinions sooner or later do, with a curiously remorseless logic, and have carried later men on to positions which were not previously clear.

Now the new criticism is being urged along both lines. Every fresh theory begins by grasping clearly certain facts which have not found adequate recognition or which are

in contradiction to the accepted view. Finding room for these, in its own reconstruction, it has its rightful place. But then there accumulates the evidence of other facts which it in turn has ignored. New light is thrown on old questions. New factors in the history or religion that is dealt with emerge. New emphasis is laid on old factors which have held a place, but not an adequate place. For a time the theory was able to keep front against these, to explain, sometimes to explain away, objections urged against its validity. But gradually the facts have increased, their force is felt more and more, as men free themselves from the power of prejudice, and it is becoming clearer that the theory must be widened to meet the new position.

The most important has been the light which has come from excavation in the East. The results have not yet been carefully sifted, nor even collected into accessible form. Few things are more needed at present than the patient work of some student who would gather the results of excavation in Palestine, e.g., during the past few years. The time of course has not yet come for bringing these matters into their final shape, for the excavations are still proceeding. But even a collection of the material to serve a temporary purpose would be greatly useful. It is only possible to select here one such find. If that seems, as it must, a slim basis on which to build very much, it must be recognised that its isolated character is not in the reality of things but in the exigencies of an opening lecture. Its evidence is really supported by much more with which time will not suffer me to deal. The law, then, of Hammurapi, an early king of Babylonia, has been discovered on a stele which dates long before any of the written documents in the Old Testament. The law has given an interesting light into a civilisation which has passed away, for the code

is so general in its scope that it offers a glimpse of a very direct kind into the life of a community which, be it remembered, belonged to the same stock as the Hebrews. But, besides this, no sooner was the code examined than it was found to agree in many respects with the first code which we possess in the Old Testament, the so-called book of the covenant in Exodus. The similarity, not merely in the regulations, but even in the language, is very great: yet the differences which exist are sufficient to make it clear that the Hebrew was not borrowed directly from the Babylonian. Both codes seem rather to have had a common origin and to have made their way into the two kindred communities.

But what is of more significance is that we find the patriarchs represented in certain matters as following similar prescriptions to those which appear in the Code of Hammurapi but which do not appear in the Book of the Covenant. Thus Abraham, in his attitude towards Sarah's claim as to Ishmael, is acting along the line of what we now know was laid down to define the rights of the principal wife in that earliest of all codes.

The discovery raises a great many interesting questions, as to the historical background in the patriarchal narratives, as to the early relations between the Hebrews and Babylonia: but in particular it urges one matter of fundamental importance.

We have been told that the Hebrews, even so late as the period when they conquered Palestine, came, not only as aliens to Palestine, but strangers to the settled life which was practised in Palestine. The influence, therefore, of the new land and of all for which it stood on the new settlers had to be set very high, when the Hebrews were thought of as entering the country with nothing more to guide them than the broken and uncertain customs which suffice for

nomads. They must have learned all the arts of civilisation, husbandry, law, from their Canaanite neighbours, since they had nothing out of their own past which could guide them in such wholly changed circumstances. Along with that, they must have been peculiarly exposed to the influence of Canaanite religion, since their God, a God of the desert, could not help them to settle in their new homes.

Because of this, every part of the Hebrew law which implied a settled habitation, and the practices which arise from a settled habitation, had to be put later than the period of the transference of the people to Canaan. Hence the theory proceeded to date the documents of the history. Phenomena in the legislation, statements in the history, because they implied a settled population, could not be accepted as belonging to the period to which Scripture assigned them: for the Hebrews were mere nomads when they reached Palestine without the needs which such law was framed to meet, and without the capacity even to understand it.

All that position must be reconsidered. There must be room in history for such figures as the patriarchs, since they show so singular an agreement with the customs of the period to which they have been assigned. The Hebrews must also be recognised as not, up till the date of the conquest, mere desert tribes, without sanctuary or legislation or civilisation. Instead they were men who settled wherever it was practicable, who had their faces turned from the desert and to the settled land. And that implies how they went into Palestine with a past behind them which brought a positive contribution to the life of the new country into which they came. They entered Canaan with institutions and traditions which were peculiarly their own and which brought it about that, while they borrowed much and learned much, they moulded everything which they

thus took over. If such is the case, it becomes impossible to relegate at once to a date after the conquest any code which implies settled habits of agricultural life, or any festival which has for its background the practice of agriculture.

The Wellhausen hypothesis thrust all law, civil and ceremonial, much too late, because it posited for the beginning of Israel's settled life in Canaan a community which had no knowledge of or need for law. But we have come to see that the men came to their land with a national character already formed and a national life already shaped.

The result is double. On the one hand, it becomes impossible to suppose that it is enough to say that here the Hebrew borrowed from the Canaanite and there he was influenced by the Babylonian, here he took his law from Canaan and there he accepted his cosmogony from Babylonia. That attitude towards the most self-consistent and most enduring national life the world has ever seen was always more than a little unsatisfactory. It was enormously difficult to understand how a faith and a national character, which were a patchwork from all the faiths of the East, could have outlived all those from which it borrowed and created the most self-sufficing and enduring of all the religious types. But it was difficult to find any firm ground until it was at least possible to suppose that the Hebrew faith began with something which was distinctively its own. We see that now, and with it we can see how, though it borrowed and, until it shut itself within the walls of the later law, was open to all influences from without, it took nothing which was not in fundamental agreement with its intimate principles and which it could not mould into conformity with its own temper.

The other result, which is closely allied with what has already been said, is that new weight must be given to the

traditions of Israel itself. Such an attitude is, of course, in agreement, singular agreement, with what is taking place in other fields where similar inquiries are prosecuted: we know how the Greek stories are being treated in a new spirit. And so we are coming to listen in a new temper of humility to what Israel has to say about the origin of its own faith and life. We may need, we do need, to examine into the history of these traditions and to test them by every test, literary and historical, which we can bring to bear. But, finally, the ultimate thing we know about this faith is what the Hebrews themselves said about it. It is no longer legitimate, in the light of analogies brought from every quarter, from the practices of Australian aborigines and habits of Syrian worshippers, to reconstruct the course of development in a religion which in itself and in its outcome is so different from anything that is seen outside. The faith, in its influence both on the people and on the world is so different from all the rest that it becomes us as scientific students to hear first what it has to say about its own origin and its own development. And hence it is no exaggeration to say that the old phrase Moses and the Prophets is coming back again, though with very different views as to what is meant both by Moses and by the prophets.

I have said that the Wellhausen theory was framed under the influence of certain dominant conceptions as to the origin and growth of religion which were then current. In part it owed its success to the simple fact, that it thus fell in with the Zeitgeist. Evolution was in the air, and the theory seemed to apply evolution to the development of the Hebrew religion. But evolution with laws borrowed from the physical order is apt to blunder badly when it is applied to religion at all, and especially to blunder when it is applied to the Hebrew religion which gives so large

a space to prophecy. For the prophets claimed and exercised the right to stand out from the natural course of development, and they did so in the name of a God with whom they claimed to hold a direct and immediate communion. They believed in One who controlled the order of the world, and in that faith they themselves sought to control the course of human development in their own nation.

But the theory submitted the prophets to a scheme of evolution which had not been patient enough to learn the laws of development of religion from religion itself. As a result, certain elements in their teaching were ignored, other elements were ruled out.

Thus all the prophets claimed the power to foresee the future, and unquestionably they received a certain part of their influence among the people through their claim to foresee the future. The belief formed a part of their theology and sprang from deep elements in their faith. God, they said, had a purpose, and, when He willed and as He willed, He could and did make it known. God, they said, had the control of the future, as He had the control of all things in His own power, and, because He was the Master, He could say what He meant to do. The Hebrew prophet naturally believed that God did reveal what He was about to do.

But the theory could find no room in its view of how religion develops for such a factor, and so, sometimes with an uneasy conscience, that factor in the Hebrew faith was ignored. When the prophets foretold what was to come, they were merely exercising a shrewder political insight into the conditions of the time than was granted to ordinary men. They saw how, in the divided world of the East, a world-power like Assyria must arise and prove itself invincible. Winckler could even suggest that they were the

emissaries of Assyria to weaken the hands of the little powers of the West and to sow division among their councils.

And, when the prophets declared, as they do with one voice, that they said these things in virtue of a deeper knowledge of God and His will, their testimony was ignored. They were either deceiving themselves or saying things which they really did not quite mean.

Again, there were passages in the prophets in which these spoke of the day of the Lord as implying an intervention direct and immediate to set up a new order in the world which was under their God's power. These also were inconvenient to the theory. On the one side they offended, because they implied that God had a relation to the world. Now the theory taught that Israel learned to believe in the world and in a God who ruled the world, from seeing a world-empire. Israel at first could only conceive of a God who had a relation to itself. All such sayings which implied a relation between God and a world must be late. But the passages also offended because men had formed the prophets in their own likeness. Believing themselves in a long slow process, at the end of which God should bring in His new order, they believed that the prophets must have held the same thing. That God should intervene directly meant a break in the chain of evolution: and the prophets must have believed, as their interpreters believed, that there were no breaks in the chain.

Hence the passages which implied a different view were watered down or explained away. Sometimes they were violently cut out and relegated to the time of the exile. The exile became a great heap into which anything could be flung: but no effort was made to show how a people, whose chief business must have been to make their living in the new conditions of Babylonia, could have flung up the motley conceptions for which they were made responsible.

At first the work was confined to removing some of the verses which closed a prophetic book. It was said that a later age, preferring that a prophet should not end with woe, had patched his prophecy with a happier conclusion. But little by little it came to be seen that the conception was not confined to a few verses at the close of a book. It was woven into the prophets: it cropped out in unexpected places: it was here and there and there again. So there came to be common a violent and often painfully arbitrary treatment of the text of the prophets. They were cut to pieces and assigned to many dates. I think it is no exaggeration to say that the result has been to cast very strong suspicion, in calmer minds, on the worth of the whole critical movement.

But now it has come to be seen that an eschatological scheme lies fundamentally embedded in the prophetic way of thinking. It has also come in part to be seen why. We all know how common and how early is the birth of cosmogonies, how native it seems to be to the religious mind to conceive the world as one, born out of the will of God, or at least brought to order by the power of God. To such a cosmogony Hebrew faith brings its strong sense of the divine purpose, of how God has an end. The inevitable outcome of that union, the union of cosmogony with teleology, is eschatology. Conceive the world as one, as owing, if not its being, at least its ordered form, to a purpose in God's mind: and you cannot but go on sooner or later to recognise that it must have an end, and that the end must correspond with the purpose which brought it into being. Conceive God as the God, not only of almighty power, but of good will to men and to Israel: and you see how natural it is for men who are in communion with His mind and His will to believe they see what He is about to do in order to bring in His end. The foretelling which the prophets

claim to exercise is no necromancy: it is the knowledge of the character of that day of the Lord which shall wind up the long course of human things and which shall usher in the Kingdom. And then the prophets are not there to guess as to what, in the weakness of the little kingdoms of the West, Assyria will do. They are there to tell what, in a nation and in a world which has forgotten His purpose, Jahweh must do. They speak from Him and they prophesy as to what is His will.

That means how the prophets are being recognised, not merely as social reformers or good politicians, but primarily as what they claimed to be, teachers of religion. Their polemic against certain practices which existed in Israel was carried on primarily in the interests of religion. In their eschatology they were working out the question as to the relation of God to the world. They believed in the divine personality with a simple directness which catches the breath at times: they believed themselves in direct communion with a God who was personal. Coming from that with the Lord's burden they saw every question in a way which it is wholesome to recognise.

Perhaps one may say that the trend of modern work on the Old Testament is to put the age of the Hebrew thought and civilisation much earlier and so to leave room for a longer growth. It is also to emphasise the distinctive character of Israel's religion. Israel brings something very significant and very much its own. Through the later work of the Wellhausen school of criticism the distinctive character of the Hebrew religion seemed to be in danger of disappearing altogether. The Hebrews appeared so late in the field of history and of thought, and were so insignificant when they did appear, that their religion became a series of borrowings from one side and from another. And, when Smend spoke once about "der kleine Gott von Jerusalem,"

he was summing up the impression which was apt to be left on the mind by the whole movement.

That, I think, is changed or is on the point of being changed. We are seeing the Hebrew faith as a much greater thing and, above all, with its own definite character and its own word to say, its own contribution to make. And even when it borrows, as it frequently does, when it is influenced, as it is in its great and creative period, by the surroundings in which it is placed, it borrows to set its own stamp on everything which it has borrowed. It may take the brass of its neighbours : but it gives them back gold.

Again, it may be necessary to emphasise how all this does not mean, what some one has said, that the Wellhausen theory is so thoroughly exploded that there is nothing left to do except to cart away the fragments to the rubbish-heap. The scheme in its broad features still holds the field, and even many of its detailed results are proved. But what happens to every theory has happened to this one : it must modify itself and remain supple enough to make room for the new facts and the new light on old facts which are being thrust upon our notice.

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THE FORMS OF HEBREW POETRY.

VI. THE BEARING OF CERTAIN METRICAL THEORIES ON CRITICISM AND INTERPRETATION.

HITHERTO throughout this series of articles I have confined my attention to the forms of parallelistic poetry. I have endeavoured to keep, as they should be kept, distinct, the two forms, parallelism and rhythm, while pointing out the intimate connexion that often exists between them. Yet that connexion is not so intimate but that either form *may*