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The Evangelical Quarterly

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“ SYRO-MESOPOTAMIAN ETHNOLOGY : AS OUTLINED IN A BIBLICAL DOCUMENT ”¹

I

WE may consider the centre of the ancient world as lying somewhere within what may be called Syro-Mesopotamia—between the Khabur on the East, Aleppo on the West, and Damascus on the South. In other words the land of Aram Naharain. To the north of this there lay the barrier of the Anatolian Mountains; to the west stretched the Great Sea, giving access to trade, but bringing also invaders; and beyond Irak and Chaldea, to the east, lay the upland mass of Irania, at which contemplation and thought ceased to penetrate; and then southwards, further away than Canaan, Palestine and even Egypt, lay the Red Sea civilizations on the right hand, whilst on the left stretched the desert vastnesses of Arabia. These regions which formed the early Hebrew world are clearly defined and may be called The Northern Mountains; the Eastern Mountains and Irania, the Fertile Crescent, including Palestine and Babylonia; Arabia, Egypt and the Eastern Sudan, and Somaliland. That is to say, we have: the centre—the plains and valleys of the Tigris, Euphrates and Orontes, and the coastal zones of the West and East; around these heartlands, starting from the north and turning clockwise—the Anatolian Mountains of the North; Irania and its mountains, the sea, and then Arabia, then the sea and then Africa, and again sea—the Great Sea, with its islands and coastlands. This, then, was the ancient world of the Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Syrian, and Hebrew for many ages, until eventually Cretans, then Phœnicians, Greeks, Macedonians, and finally Romans enlarged it by a series of gigantic adventures. These regions are not, however, entirely unchanged by the passage of time, and since it is important to remember that racial distributions are to be correlated to a very important extent with environmental conditions we can

¹ This subject has been treated more fully in a paper read recently to the Victoria Institute, and will be published in their forthcoming proceedings.

only appreciate them fully as we become vitally aware of former rather than later geographical conditions. It is no exaggeration to say that the modern geography but forms a skeleton to the environments of old. In the heart of our ancient world we have stories of the Noachian Deluge and the Babylonian Epic, and what is more, repeated evidences of flooding discovered by archaeological work at Kish and at Ur. And this flooding is on an abnormal scale as measured by the modern regimen of these rivers. Parallel stories come from Greece and Persia as well. While through this region the remains of former civilizations, in desert surroundings, witness far more strongly than theoretic discussions to the once greater pluvial conditions in the Mesopotamian and Babylonian plains, and those hill regions to the north and east from whence their rivers flow. We find old lake strands, desiccated springs and former trade routes through what is now impassible country, or roads around former obstacles (such as lakes or rivers) where now none exist. Ruins of ancient civilizations merely illuminate this conception. For example, there are the ruins of Palmyra, now in the Syrian desert, and only now able to support one-tenth of its former population. Yet this Syrian desert, from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates, was once as populous as the rural parts of England. In the arid and irregular range of limestone heights, between the Orontes valley and the Euphrates, there are remains of the walls of former fields, terraces of masonry, roads, and ruined buildings and small towns. Perhaps the most forceful picture is to see these rock-strewn hills of Syria, almost devoid of soil and unable to support any vegetation, and yet all around ample evidence of ruined oil and grape presses, while the names of the places, and the inscriptions, speak of wells and springs where none exist to-day. Much the same sort of thing is true of arid Northern Mesopotamia; there, in ancient times, existed the by no means inconsiderable power of the Mitanni, while throughout the whole of Mesopotamia and Babylonia there is no more eloquent document of the present desolation of the Near East than the contract tablets relating to the sales, mortgaging and letting of fields and gardens where there is nothing at all. To the east of Jordan, in Moab, we read of civilization in what is now desert. There is the case of the King of Moab, Mesha (2 Kings iii. 4, 5) who paid the King of Israel an annual tribute consisting of the wool of a hundred thousand lambs and a hundred thousand rams. In a Nabatæan inscription from

the rock-hewn tombs in a Wādy debouching into the Wādy Mûsa, very near Petra, the capital of ancient Edom, we have similar indications of change, for it talks of the gardens, and the feast-garden, and the wells of water.

Against such a picture as this must march the peoples of antiquity, with their complex urban and agricultural civilizations where now is but steppe or desert. Ancient ethnology has caused us to cease to ascribe to all ancient peoples, but Babylon and Egypt the life of the Arab Sheiks, for we realize how highly developed and complex was the ancient past of Canaanite, Hebrew, Hittite or Syrian. Thus the common, simple, and naive notion, which saw in the Biblical Patriarchs barbarous steppe dwellers (whose only virtue was the creation of monotheism from the monotonous routine and unity of their existence) must be consigned to limbo by all anthropologists who take the trouble to study the question. If they were acquainted with the steppes, these Syro-Mesopotamian Habiru were equally acquainted with the valleys to the north of the Euphrates, and no strangers to urban, and even metropolitan, centres such as Tell Halaf.

II

The only Hebrew document purporting to give an ethnological survey of a complete character is that contained in Genesis x. and its parallel accounts. Within this chapter of moderate length there is clearly portrayed what were considered the vital ethnic relations as they concerned the ancients. It is evident, from this account, and from monumental evidence in Egypt, Babylonia and Khattiland that there was a lively appreciation of ethnological conceptions among the civilized peoples of a far antiquity. And this appreciation was not entirely observational in character, finding its highest development in a merely tabulatory form ; but it was speculative as well, as in the case under consideration where the believed degree of relationship between certain ethnic groups is indicated. Consequently, it is starting very late in human history to attribute the beginnings of anthropological philosophy to the Greeks. Their speculations certainly made an enormous contribution, but they were not the first, and for that matter, not necessarily the best founded in their conceptions. In comparison the Greek approach to the study of men tended to be highly speculative,

anticipating, as a result of that attitude of mind, many conceptions now accepted by evolution ; their predecessors were on the whole more factual, concentrating more upon what could be observed, and as a consequence classifying very accurately the complex groups of people with which they had contact. Yet this did not exclude profound, if simple, conceptions of the genesis of mankind.

The presentation provided by Genesis x. is that of an ethnologically-constructed mind seeking to express the intermingled matrix of racial, religious, cultural and environmental differences under a few concise ethnic terms. To do this the genealogical method is employed : and there are few superior vehicles for expressing relationships, whether they be genetic, or of neighbourhood, or but of culture, or, as is more likely in ethnology, an intimate blend of all. The linking of sons together as the offspring of the father implies within the very sonship some vital relationship to each other and to the parent stock. Men all the world over have found the convenience of such a system, and where oral tradition is concerned it is perhaps the only system calculated to afford accurate repetition.

The narrative unrolls itself in three great sections—the sons of Japhet—Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech and Tiraz ; the sons of Ham—Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan ; and the sons of Shem—Elam, Ashur, Arpachshad, Lud and Aram. This is the main structure of a survey which was intended to analyse the relative congenity of many peoples known to the ancients.

This account purports to be ancient and that can only be tested by the validity of its contents. Critical scholarship would indicate that verses 8-19, 21, 25-30 belong to J, which is considered to be old, containing manifestly ancient narratives, such as that of Nimrod ; and the other verses to P, which would be relegated to later times. However, in a case of this sort, it should be remembered, that the date of its construction and the accuracy of its story is not entirely limited by theoretical strictures of *textual* analysis, based upon the use of particular forms of speech, words, or dialect. But it can only be judged by the reliability of the account which it seeks to convey. Prof. J. L. Myres has adopted a similar position in his analysis of Greek Folk Memory (in an excellent chapter—the 6th—of *Who Were the Greeks?*). What he says is equally applicable to this case : “ If the result is

coherent, it must be so for one of two reasons, either amazing ingenuity among the sixth century chroniclers 'must be postulated', in which event we have still to ask how they knew on what historical assumption to proceed, or a living, accurate folk-memory of ancient times. And if the result coheres also with sources of information quite beyond the knowledge of those chroniclers, the conclusion seems unavoidable that Greek folk-memory was historically trustworthy; that it enables us to explore aspects of Greek antiquity for which we have not yet other evidence, and, in particular, to select the right localities wherein to look for such evidence as Schliemann selected Troy and Mycenæ, and Sir Arthur Evans selected Cnossus" (J. L. Myres, *Who Were the Greeks?* California, 1930, p. 307). If the Biblical story is accurate for the ethnology of the second millennia B.C. or earlier, then it is reliable, whenever it, or its chief elements, were written down.

III

There are many points which lead to the placing of the narrative in its true place in racial history. First of all it is manifestly old—no such date as 500 B.C. will serve, but rather some date between 1000 and 2000 B.C., or perhaps even earlier. Its own claim supports such an early dating for the principal facts of the story. Again, its nomenclature, as will appear, is definitely ancient. For example, it implies that Javan inhabited Asia Minor and the Greek coastlands in very early times. Yet there is no trace of these old-Ionians (but for the survival of the name in one of the Greek states) during the historical times of Greece and Israel. Further, "Ionian" to the Greek world had a very limited extension as compared with its meaning in these passages and in the usage of the Hebrews, Persians, and Assyrians, where the original meaning was retained. Prof. Myres, naturally following the usual view which has been held up till now purely upon "critical" grounds, states that the document belongs to the seventh century B.C., and implies that the name Javan is only introduced to the Hebrews (and presumably other Eastern peoples) at this time by the spread of Ionian settlers eastwards along the coasts of southern Asia Minor. Yet he admits that there is no reason to believe that they had any such hold on these districts to justify the ascribing of them to the "Children of Javan". This admission seems to

destroy completely the whole theory, if that is not already destroyed by the established use of the name by the Assyrians a century earlier.

Ashkenaz, obviously, is thought of as belonging to the same great stock as the tribes of "Ion", and Sir William Ramsay (*Asiatic Elements in Greek Civilization*. London. 1927, p. 2) points out that Ashkenaz is an eponymous hero of Asia Minor, and therefore must typify the general mass of the people. Jeremiah (li. 27) uses the same expression for a part of Asia Minor in the triplet: Ararat, Minni and Ashkenaz. Which serves to make clear the Hebrew location of this people in the Anatolian group of nations along with Ion. This ethnic unit would appear to be an old one, and its occurrence here seems to be no mere lingering on of a mere archaism. For if it were we should expect to find it interlarded with a matrix of later ethnological facts. In this there are, for instance, no Achæans or Dorians blended with Javan, and no Phrygians with Ashkenaz, such as Homer (who wrote, according to Ramsay, about 820 B.C., or, according to Sayce, about 1000 B.C.) evolved when he produced Askanios as an ally of Priam and Troy, and enemy of the Achæans.

The conception is clearly of three great groups, each distinct, but yet having such a unity that a common origin is postulated. In the first place there is a northern group of peoples, who are located in the Anatolian mountains, and Armenia, and beyond to the isles and coastlands of the west. These are "Gomer, and Magog, and Madai, and Javan, and Tubal, and Meshech, and Tiras," and their subdivisions, all of which can be identified. Then there follows a second great racial and cultural group, which comprehends all the native stocks of Babylonia, Chaldea, Palestine, Egypt, and the Red Sea coasts, Libya and inner Arabia. Indeed, the heartlands of the then known world. Palestine receives most intimate treatment, whether at the hands of a later editor is hard to aver or deny, although, in the former case, the omission of the Hebrews altogether, in the enumeration, is a significant difficulty. We read: "And Canaan begat Zidon his first-born, and Heth; and the Jebusite, and the Amorite, and the Girgashite; and the Hivite, and the Arkite, and the Sinite; and the Arvadite, and the Zemarite, and the Hamathite; and afterwards were the families of the Canaanite spread abroad, and the border of the Canaanite was from Zidon as thou goest towards Gerar, unto Gaza; and

Gomorrah and Admah and Zeboiim, unto Lasha" (Gen. x. 15-19). This concentration upon the cities of Palestine, and the equal intimacy with the ancient cities of Mesopotamia and Babylonia, locates the final collation in Syro-Mesopotamia.

The third group of nations are much less easily defined, both in this account and in history. Its distribution, while greatly influenced by geography, does not fall into any of the broad classifications, such as the Northern Mountain block of Japhet peoples, or the plains, riverside and desert dwelling Hamites. On the contrary, it lies between the two, and, in the west, is settled along the foothill zones south of the Taurus and north of the Syria steppes. From thence it was spread eastwards over northernmost Assyria, into the Iranian plateau. A closer study than present space allows would make this abundantly clear; but even at a glance this is partially apparent from the use of such names as Elam and Ashur for peoples in this third group. These are the people of Shem—a term used by the ancients in all innocence of the great confusion which theological notions, coupled with immature ethnology, were to create by its so-called "Semitic Race", which has very little real connection with the Biblical peoples of "Shem".

IV

Thus a tripartite division of the known peoples is the basic conception. A plainly distinguished block of mountain and sea states, non-Semitic in culture, Anatolian in affinities, presumable proto-Alpino-Armenoid in race, and possibly with strong Hittite linguistic features. There is also an as clearly marked-off block of southern states located in north-eastern Africa, Arabia, and the "Fertile Crescent". Semitic in culture in the east, Hamitic in the west, in race probably all dark, slenderly-built whites approximating to Sergi's Eurafrican stock, and what is called "Semite" in the East and "Hamite" in Northern Africa; both of which are probably but different divisions of the southern white-brown race. From their location we are told that there was a third division lying between these Eurafrican and Alpino-Armenoids—a relatively smaller group which maintained itself only along the piedmont to the north of the "Fertile Crescent", but was more strongly represented to the east in Irania, and which approximated to Iranian types; so that, it is probable that in the Shem group we are dealing with early proto-Aryans and

possibly with a proto-Nordic racial strain. This assumption certainly seems to be justified from some of the detailed evidence which may be adduced from the study of the peoples of this region, such as the Mitanni, a people of the western piedmont, who have undeniable traces of Aryan antecedents.

There are, of course, a number of difficulties in the way of a full appreciation of every point of detail, some of which are perhaps due to the faultiness of our own present knowledge of ancient ethnology. Such an example is the conspicuous absence of the Hittites from mention along with Ashkenaz, Ion and the Anatolians generally, and the appending of them to the list of Canaanitish peoples. The explanation may be, that the date of the account refers to a period when the true northern Hittites were suffering Nemesis, and their name was still retained by Semiticized Canaanite Hittites, early offshoots, long equated by blood, custom and environment to the other Palestinian and Syrian peoples.

It will be seen that ancient Hebrew ethnology was bound to be limited within the confines of those geographical regions which have been outlined; and that this ancient account does indeed limit itself to those regions. It is therefore within the mould of the physical environment of the "Fertile Crescent", and the piedmont to the north of it, Arabia, Egypt and Libya, the "isles of the sea", and the Anatolian and Iranian mountain systems that the peoples of Hebrew antiquity developed; and from this any knowledge of the intimate unity of mankind was conceived, or emphasized. The peoples outside of those habitats were scarcely known, and are not included in this description. As all the peoples of these regions were white, the story becomes an ethnographic survey of an important section of the "Caucasian" stock at an early period of history.

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