

The Accuracy of Genesis

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Someone has aptly compared the Bible to an anvil against which the hammer blows of unbelief are constantly beating. But although the hammers crack and break frequently, and must be replaced, the anvil stands. It cannot be shattered.

Through the centuries many attacks have been levelled against the Word of God. Sometimes it would almost seem as if these attacks would destroy the Scriptures. Yet in His good providence, God has seen to it that His Word abides; while the attacks which are made upon it soon die away and are almost forgotten, except by theologians and church historians—repositories of the broken hammers.

WELLHAUSEN'S ATTACK

University students today can hardly realize the strength of an attack which was made against the Scriptures toward the close of the last century. It was an all-out frontal attack which struck heavy blows against both the New Testament and the Old, and assaulted Christian doctrine and belief. But like sea waves breaking against a firm rock, this attack has broken and is now being scattered like the spray.

In this article we shall particularly note the nature of this attack as it had to do with the book of Genesis.

Toward the close of the last century there lived truly gifted and brilliant German scholar by the name of Julius Wellhausen. In his writings Wellhausen made no pretence of being an evangelical Christian; in fact, his major academic interest was not even the Bible, but rather the field of Arabic studies. In this field he was a master.

Like many others of his day, Wellhausen was under the influence of Darwinian evolution and Hegelian philosophy, and it was in this philosophical context that he approached the study of the Old Testament.

Wellhausen's assaults upon the book of Genesis were extremely severe. He was particularly insistent that the background of the patriarchal narratives did not represent an accurate picture. He considered this background, as it is presented to us in Genesis, not to be an accurate reflection of the times of the patriarchs, but rather of the period in which it was written down, several hundred years later. Consequently, if one wanted to learn something about the background of the patriarchs and their times he could not learn it from the book of Genesis, for Genesis simply was not an historically accurate book.

This position of Wellhausen was presented in an attractive manner and was buttressed with many arguments. The climate of opinion of the day was also favorable to it, and the majority of serious Biblical scholars accepted his view.

What was the believer in Jesus Christ and His infallible word to do? Wellhausen said that the book of Genesis was not historical. Jesus Christ said, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John

8:58). Which of the two was correct, Julius Wellhausen or Jesus Christ? Many did not hesitate to say that Wellhausen was correct. But those who believed the Scriptures sought to show (and in a most convinc-

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ing manner) that Wellhausen was wrong and that Jesus Christ was right. At the same time, because of the apparent strength of his arguments, Wellhausen caused many to doubt. Doubtless the faith of many was weakened.

THE DISCOVERIES AT NUZI

It cannot be denied that constant criticism of the Bible, such as that in which Wellhausen engaged, takes its toll. Even for the sincere Christian, it is often very difficult not to be influenced by such criticism, particularly when one does not have ready at hand the answers. In this instance, a strong argument against Wellhausen has appeared in the realm of archaeology. Of course all along there have been strong arguments against Wellhausen, the strongest being that Jesus Christ asserted the historicity of Abraham; so that there have always been convincing reasons for believing the testimony of the Bible. In a most remarkable manner, however, archaeology has now shown how utterly unfounded were the criticisms which Wellhausen made of Genesis.

In 1925 excavations were carried on at a place in Mesopotamia known today by its Turkish name of Yorgan Tepa. In ancient times, however, this place bore the name of Nuzi (pronounced *Newsy*), and proved to be a center of the ancient Hurrians, mentioned in Genesis 14:6 as the Horites. Incidentally this mention of the Horites was long regarded as an inaccuracy. Now, however, at Nuzi, a settlement of these people has been discovered.

What is of particular interest for our purpose is the fact that great numbers of clay tablets were unearthed at Nuzi, which proved to be business documents. They are now known as contract tablets, for they contain the records of ancient business contracts. One might be tempted to think that such tablets would prove to be uninteresting reading, somewhat similar to reading a number of grocery bills. Such, however, is not the case. These contract tablets from ancient Nuzi have thrown a tremendous amount of light upon the background of the book of Genesis. Indeed, these humble ancient business documents may ultimately sound the death knell to Wellhausenism.

NUZI AND GENESIS

As a result of the excavations it is now possible to know quite a bit about some practices of the Hurrians. For one thing, a citizen of Nuzi could not sell land. If, therefore, one wished to purchase land he could not simply go to a realtor, as we do, and buy the desired property. Instead, as a result of this restriction, there was a legal fiction by means of which it was possible to get around the difficulty. In brief, the way it worked was this. If I wish to obtain your land, I cannot buy it; I can, however, have myself adopted as your son. If I am thus adopted, I shall become the heir, and the land will be willed to me. In return for this, I can give a gift to you.

This practice was followed in Nuzi, and many of the contract tablets are simply labeled, "Tablets of Adoption." A man who desired to obtain a piece of land would present himself for

adoption by those who owned the land. They would legally adopt him as their son and heir, and would deed the land to him. This was called the *zittu* (inheritance share). In return for this act, the one who was adopted would give a *qishtu* (gift) to those who had adopted him. By means of such a device it would be possible for a man of wealth to acquire a considerable amount of property; and indeed, one man, Tehiptilla by name, had evidently been adopted by quite a number of people.

In the light of this practice of adoption we may understand certain passages in the Bible. Genesis 15:2, 3 has long been a difficult section of Scripture to understand. As we learn from the Nuzi tablets, it was the custom for a couple who were without children to adopt someone who in return for being made the heir would take care of them in their old age and see to it that they were given a decent burial. Eliezer of Damascus had evidently been adopted by Abraham to be his steward, to manage his affairs and possibly to give him burial. According to the practices of Nuzi if an heir should later be born, the adopted son would have to give way to the heir. In the light of this provision we may understand the language of the Lord, "This [i.e., Eliezer] shall not inherit thee, but he that shall come out of thy loins shall inherit thee." Abraham was simply

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acting in accord with the customs of the time.

THE EPISODE OF HAGAR

Not only the Nuzi texts, but also the now famous Code of Hammurabi sheds light upon the type of thing that Abraham did in taking Hagar to be his concubine. It was the custom, apparently, when the legal wife was barren, for such a wife to provide her husband with a concubine in order that a seed might be raised up. We may translate as follows one of the Nuzi texts: "If Gilimninu does not bear children Gilimninu shall obtain a woman of Lullu-land as a wife for Shennima." In this text Shennima is the husband and Gilimninu the wife. If the wife is barren it is then her duty to provide for the husband a concubine. This concubine is to be taken from the land of Lullu, whence the most desirable slaves were obtained. One immediately notes parallels between this text and Genesis. In providing Abraham with a concubine Sarah was simply acting in accordance with the customs of the time. The same is true of the action of Rachel (Genesis 30:3) when she provided Jacob with a concubine, Bilhah.

As might be expected, such a practice was not likely to bring about happiness, and we read that Sarah wished to drive Hagar out. In this, however, she was going contrary to practice. The text which we have above translated goes on to say, "Gilimninu shall not send the offspring away." Despite the fact that Sarah was violating custom, the Lord spoke to Abraham, "Let it not be evil in thine eyes, because of the land and thy handmaid. In all that Sarah saith to thee hearken unto her voice, for in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Genesis 21:11, 12).

Although Sarah and Abraham acted in accord with the practices of their time, we must remember that what they did was not morally right. There are practices which are perfectly legal, yet at the same time are not right. Abraham would not have gotten himself in trouble with the law by what he did, but despite that fact what he did was wrong. At this point the Bible does not explicitly condemn his action, but there is no warrant for the conclusion that

the Bible approves it. The very manner in which the Scriptural narrative is told makes it clear that the actions of Sarah and Abraham, and also Hagar, were wrong. It was an action which brought in its wake unpleasant consequences and upon which the blessing of the Lord could not rest.

JACOB AND LABAN

In the light of the texts from Nuzi we may now understand much in the account of Jacob and Laban that formerly was obscure. One of the tablets may be translated as follows: "The adoption tablet of Nashwi the son of Puhishenni. As long as Nashwi is alive, Wullu shall give to him food and clothing. When Nashwi dies, then Wullu shall become the heir. If Nashwi begets a son, he shall divide equally with Wullu but only Nashwi's son shall take Nashwi's gods. If there be no son of Nashwi, then Wullu shall take the gods of Nashwi. And Nashwi has given his daughter Nuhuya as wife to Wullu. And if Wullu takes another wife he forfeits the land and buildings of Nashwi. Whoever breaks the contract shall pay one mina of silver and one mina of gold."

When Jacob first appears before Laban, Laban agrees to give his daughter to Jacob, and it would seem that Jacob's joining the household of Laban was actually the equivalent of an act of adoption on Laban's part. It is of interest to note that in the tablet the legitimate heir is to receive Nashwi's gods.

We read in the Bible of Rachel taking the Teraphim and sitting upon them in the tent. In Genesis 31:30, 32 the Teraphim are called gods, as is the case also in the Nuzi texts. The possession of these gods, it seems, implied a position of leadership in the household. By this time Laban had sons of his own and hence we may understand his question, "Why hast thou stolen my gods?" (Genesis 31:30). Laban's indignation, in the light of this tablet, apparently was justifiable. On the other hand, Jacob and Rachel were not going to abide by custom. Jacob evidently did not want any secondary position in the household. It would seem that the birth of Laban's sons proved to be a hindrance to Jacob's desires (and Jacob was a man who got what he wanted).

Laban did regard Jacob as his adopted son, for he says, "These daughters are my daughters and these sons are my sons and the flocks are my flocks and whatsoever thou seest is mine" (Genesis 31:43). Hence, it appears that Jacob's plan of running away was in violation of the current customs. If Jacob was to be regarded as an adopted son, all that he had was really Laban's, and in seeking to run away, Jacob was violating custom.

The Lord, therefore, was gracious in his revelation to Laban. "It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt," says Laban, "but the God of your father spake unto me yesternight, saying, Take thou heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad" (Genesis 31:29; cp. also v. 24).

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But Laban also apparently violated custom for his daughters complain to him, "Are we not counted of him strangers [i.e., as foreign women], for he hath sold us and hath quite devoured our money" (Genesis 31:15). According to the Nuzi tablets there is a sharp distinction to be made between the native women (the daughters of the city Arraphka) and foreign women. These latter occupy a lower social position, but the native women must not be subjected to

mistreatment. Apparently Rachel and Leah believed that Laban had treated them as though they were foreign women.

We should note also the importance of the patriarchal blessing in the Genesis narratives. This blessing was considered as binding. One of the Nuzi tablets reads: "My father, Huya, was sick and lying in bed, and my father seized my hand and spoke thus to me: My other older sons have taken wives but thou hast not taken a wife and I give Zuluisttar to thee as a wife." It may be noted that like the patriarchal blessings, this one also is oral; it is made by a dying father to a son and possesses legal validity.

One additional point may be mentioned. Jacob claims, "I did not eat the rams of thy flocks" (Genesis 31:38). In the light of some of the difficulties that are reflected upon the tablets of Nuzi this claim takes on peculiar significance. Apparently the shepherds would frequently slaughter lambs and eat mutton at the owner's expense. Several legal cases in the Nuzi tablets cover this particular matter. Tehiptilla, for example, won at least two cases in law against one of his shepherds who had been slaughtering sheep clandestinely. Jacob, whatever his faults may have been, in this respect at least was guiltless.

CONCLUSION

Similar parallels might be multiplied. They are indeed both interesting and instructive. But what is of utmost importance is the fact that these parallels in the Nuzi tablets demonstrate quite clearly that the patriarchal background which is presented in the book of Genesis is perfectly accurate. Instead of mirroring a late age, as Wellhausen erroneously claimed, Genesis correctly sets forth the background of the very age in which the patriarchs themselves lived.

Most scholars today, whatever their personal theological beliefs may be, are beginning to acknowledge that Genesis does correctly set forth the background of the patriarchs. This of course is to be expected. On the other hand, they tell us that these discoveries do not prove the existence of the patriarchs themselves. And so the assault has shifted and a new hammer has been forged. But we have the New Testament to convince us of their historicity.

As we consider the remarkable support which archaeology has given to our belief that the book of Genesis is accurate, we may well give thanks to God. Such support, of course, is what we should expect archaeology to give, for the book of Genesis is holy, infallible Scripture. May we read it with trusting, believing hearts, ready to hear what it says and to believe in the Redeemer of whom it speaks.