

THE PATRIARCHS AND MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

THE FIRST VICTIMS of Pentateuchal criticism were the Patriarchs. There was nothing surprising in this. It was a period in which all ancient legend was being 'debunked'. The modern archaeologist had hardly begun his work, and Priam of Troy and Arthur of Britain were classed with Abraham as pure products of human fantasy. Even where a more rational spirit ruled, all such stories were looked on as the personalizing of vague memories of tribal history and movement.

Then, too, owing to ignorance about the accuracy and value of true oral tradition — for a recent vindication of it see Nielsen, *Oral Tradition* (Studies in Biblical Theology) — the alleged inability to write in the time of Moses and later was felt to be an uncrossable barrier in the way of accepting the truth of the Patriarchal narratives. Anyone wishing to see how strong the critical argument was, *once we accept the postulates they built on*, cannot do better than read Driver's comments in his *The Book of Genesis* (Westminster Commentaries), pp. xliii-lxi, 143. He was actually a moderate, for he was prepared to grant, 'The substance of the narrative is, no doubt, historical; though the characters and experiences seem to be idealized. . . . The outline of these narratives, we may confidently hold, was supplied by tradition; but in the details something at any rate will be due to the historical imagination of the narrators.' Especially on the continent, the average scholar, unless he had been influenced by Kittel, would have regarded this as an unworthy compromise with traditionalism.

The increasing discoveries of archaeology at first made little impact where the Patriarchs were concerned. There were two reasons for this. The first was that apart from the Tell-el-Amarna tablets very few of the discoveries before 1914 had much bearing on Syria and Palestine. One of the few to take the evidence from Mesopotamia seriously was Sayce in his *Patriarchal Palestine*. Far more important was the influence of the documentary hypothesis itself, which exercised, and indeed exercises, an almost hypnotic effect on those that held it. Those who have not yielded to it do not always realize how irresistible is its logic, once one is inside its charmed circle. The dating of J about 850 BC was not arbitrary, and it is quite typical that though certain continental circles have been willing to push it back to about 1000 BC, they have felt it impossible to do more.

Hence the establishment of the antiquity of writing not merely in Mesopotamia and Egypt but also in Canaan had little effect on the average scholar. As late as 1937 H. Wheeler Robinson, after reciting the evidence for the early date of writing, could say, 'There is no reason, at any rate, to doubt that there were Hebrews able to write by the time that there was likely to be any demand for writing. So far as anything we can call literature is concerned, this would not be before the settled conditions of David's time gave men leisure and inclination to write' (*The Old Testament: Its Making and Meaning*, p. 23). This is a most skilful way of dodging the evidence.

It is probable that from the archaeological standpoint the first real shaking of scholarly complacency with regard to the Patriarchs came with Woolley's publications on his excavations at Ur culminating with his *Abraham: recent discoveries and Hebrew records* (1936). It made them realize that it was not so easy to write off the early Hebrews as illiterate semi-nomads with no historic sense or memory, as current theory demanded.

Far more important, though much less known, was A. Alt's monograph *Der Gott der Väter* (1929). Unfortunately this has never been translated into English, possibly because its conclusions were not calculated to appeal wholeheartedly either to the liberal or conservative. On the basis of Nabatean inscriptions he deduced that expressions like the God of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac (Gn. xxxi. 53), the Mighty One of Jacob (Gn. xlix. 24) implied the historic existence of individuals, not tribes, of these names. Later discoveries in Mesopotamia of the time of Abraham and earlier seem to justify his conclusions.

It was, however, the excavations at Mari from 1933 and above all at Nuzi that caused many scholars seriously to reconsider their position. Stress had earlier been laid on certain similarities between customs mentioned in Genesis and apparently unknown at a later date under the judges and the monarchy, and the Code of Hammurabi. The strength of the argument was met by pointing out that it was an argument from silence. These later discoveries

established clearly that Genesis reflects accurately customs existing in a limited area and at a particular time, a fact that can be explained only by accepting the essential accuracy of the background to the stories of the Patriarchs.

A summary of the facts and the relevant literature will be found in chapter 8 of Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord*, entitled 'Recent Discovery and the Patriarchal Age'. His general conclusions would probably be accepted by the average moderate scholar. Of the earlier extreme views he says, 'To-day there are few who would defend these positions.' But of the conservative position he adds, 'Sometimes there is a disposition to err on the other side, and to claim that the new sources of knowledge have proved the accuracy of the Old Testament narratives. This is far from being the case, and it can serve no good purpose to make exaggerated and unprovable claims. All that can be said is that in many respects the stories fit into the background of the age.'

How little the new knowledge can mean for many will be seen at once, if we refer to M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (the references are to the second English edition, 1960). He can say (footnote, p. 122), 'Earlier interpretations of the figures of the patriarchs, both as personifications of tribes for which there is no real evidence, and the even less tenable mythological interpretation of them as originally deities, and the quite arbitrary interpretation of them as fairy-tale figures, have thereby been exploded once and for all, so that there is now no need to discuss these interpretations.' In spite of that, less than seven pages in a book of over 450 pages of text is given to them. Virtually the only importance given them is indicated on p. 123, 'One of the special and evidently original elements in the Old Testament tradition of the patriarchs was the promise of descendants and the promise of the land of Palestine; the esteem in which the patriarchs were held as the recipients of this promise remained great precisely because this promise had ultimately been fulfilled.'

Ultimately, however, though the manner of expression may vary, the attitude of modern scholars in general is very much the same. Unless, like Noth, you virtually begin the history of Israel with the gathering called by Joshua at Shechem (Jos. xxiv), Moses is the starting-point for both the history and the religion of Israel. This is particularly seen in the modern tendency to claim that Genesis is the story of Hebrew beginnings as seen in the light of the Exodus.

So far as history is concerned this matters little. The very anonymity of the historical background of Genesis xii-1, with the exception of Genesis xiv, shows clearly enough that we are not expected to be concerned with the Patriarchs as historical figures in the normal sense. The date of Abraham and of the descent into Egypt are ultimately matters of minimal importance, and we shall probably not be any the poorer, if no definite answer is ever found. It is hardly too much to say that from the historical standpoint the chief importance of the new discoveries is that they create a presumption in favour of the accuracy of the Exodus story, where outside evidence is much scantier. We are not impugning, even by implication, the entirely historical character of the Patriarchs, but are stressing that their story has been so recorded as to underline the spiritual element, and hence it is unlikely ever to be verified historically from archaeological finds.

It is quite other when we turn to their religious significance. Wellhausen's dictum was that the Patriarchal narratives could give us no knowledge about the times of the Patriarchs but only about the later age in which they were written down. As we have seen this has been jettisoned by most scholars so far as historical knowledge is concerned, but to a great extent they would agree with it on the religious side.

The eight references to Abraham in the index of Rowley, *The Faith of Israel* (1956) show that, while he illustrates certain points made, there would have been no real difference in the presentation of Old Testament faith by the author, if Abraham had never been mentioned in the Bible. He plays a somewhat larger role in Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (1958), but it is clear that the Patriarchs are to him people who have received their main characteristics from the story-teller, be he J, E or P.

Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (5th German edition, 1957) says clearly (p. 18), 'But the clefts and jumps within the tradition and the unique expression of the stories of the Patriarchs in each of the writers of the

Pentateuch show clearly that the general conception of the picture of the Patriarchal period has been formed by the conception of God formed through the Mosaic covenant.' The same concept is given us by Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (1959). He tells us (p. 161), '... we find it difficult to realize that for the OT writers the Exodus-Sinai event was really the first and primal event for them to record.' Then on p. 164 he makes it clear, saying, 'The book of Genesis, therefore, contains for us what we could with justification call the "afterthoughts" of J, E and P, or of the oral traditions lying behind them, once those writers have first of all interpreted the Exodus.'

In B. W. Anderson, *Rediscovering the Bible* (1951, English edition 1960), we find the statement (p. 53), 'In a sense this is profoundly true. God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was preceded by his providential guidance of their ancestors in the past. This claim, however, was made *in retrospect*, just as one who is called into Christian service looks back from the standpoint of faith and sees that in his earlier years God was guiding and preparing him for his vocation.' Therefore the prevailing interpretation of the book of Genesis, including the 'call' of Abraham, is that it is probably a projection backward of the meaning discerned in later events of Israel's history, especially the Exodus.

While von Rad in his *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (1957) sees in the two points already mentioned in connection with Noth the chief importance of the Patriarchal narratives, he does in pp. 169-177 recognize the theological distinctiveness of these chapters when compared with the later stories. What is more, he stresses that it is just the Sinai revelation that makes this difference. Another modern work that makes a more positive contribution than is normally the case is Bright, *A History of Israel* (1959, English edition 1960). He recognizes that the Patriarchs are a necessary stage in the religious history of Israel.

Perhaps one of the more potent reasons why the higher criticism in its formative years appealed to so many thoughtful Christians was its objection to the idea of the complete revelation of God being given in one act at Sinai. As so often it was a reaction not against the teaching of the Bible but against the manner in which it had been interpreted by so much Christian orthodoxy. Hebrews i. 1 should be warning enough to us not to follow the orthodox Jewish fallacy in thinking that the complete Old Testament revelation is to be found at Sinai. Not only is there a clear increase in revelation as we pass from Moses to the prophets, by which the earlier revelation is interpreted, but we shall understand the Patriarchs properly only when we grasp that they stand before the revelation of Sinai. We so often in our devotional exposition of Genesis xii-1 make them essentially Christians before Christ and Moses! The modern scholar tends to make the same mistake by interpreting the stories as though they were represented in them as sharers of the revelation of Sinai before it had been given.

The line of thought developed by Alt has allowed us to recognize how essentially simple their religion was, at least in the measure it has been described for us. Fundamentally its chief feature from our point of view was faith in God, just the side stressed in the New Testament. It may indeed be true that they were of importance to their descendants just because of the promise of descendants and land, but it was making these promises the centre of their lives that makes them the heroes of faith that they were. Bright says well, 'The patriarchal migration was, in a time-conditioned but nonetheless real sense, an act of faith. . . . But whereas the Sinaitic covenant was based upon an already accomplished act of grace and issued in stringent stipulations, the patriarchal covenant rested only on the divine promise and demanded of the worshipper only his trust (e.g., ch. 15: 6)' (pp. 91f.).

While we may agree then with modern scholarship in its stress that the beginnings of Israel's religion are at the Exodus and Sinai and welcome the fact that it has found its way back from the eighth-century prophets to Moses (though this is not true of all), we must hold fast to the fact that without the Patriarchs there would have been no revelation at Sinai. The lesson of personal trust in a God of whom they knew but little had to be learnt before He could reveal Himself more fully both in acts in the Exodus and in words at Sinai, in a way that all Israelites could understand.

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