

ARTICLE IV.

GERMAN CRITICS AND THE HEBREW BIBLE.

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AMONG the many things which have been tried by the present War and which have been found wanting is the so-called Higher Criticism of the Bible, which, although none of its main features originated in Germany, is yet associated in the minds of most English-speaking people with that country. Nothing could show more clearly how firm a hold that criticism had taken, not only upon the professional scholars both of this country and of America, but upon the general educated reading public as well, than the fact that textbooks dealing with the Biblical books no longer made any pretense of arguing the case for or against this criticism, as had been the custom a few years earlier, although the argument was always conducted with a strong bias in favor of the critics; but the outstanding results of this criticism were taken for granted, and the reader was merely informed that "all the best scholars" had decided the various literary problems in such-and-such a way. He, as a layman in such matters, was not in a position to form a judgment for himself. He had nothing to do but to accept their opinion just as he would that of his doctor or lawyer. This autocratic method of dealing with literary problems was entirely successful, as autocratic methods are apt to be in other spheres than literature, with the result that, not only were the opinions of the critics given out in the more strictly religious circles as demonstrated

facts, but they became part and parcel of the stock in trade of all sorts and descriptions of journalism from the halfpenny newspaper upwards. It never seems to have occurred to any one that, when these writers spoke of "all the best scholars," they were simply describing themselves; and so they were taken at their own value.

This high-handed manner of treating questions of scholarship naturally did not meet with universal acceptance; but its advocates were in such a majority that any opposition which ventured to raise its head was easily crushed, and the fact that the leading literary journals were on the side of the critics made it difficult for the opposition to find an outlet. Within the last three years, however, men's views on many matters, and their whole outlook upon life, have changed. The implicit reliance upon human reason as the one infallible guide to truth, which was general before the War, has vanished, and there is a greater willingness to accept and study objective facts. In these circumstances it will not be inopportune to review some of the weak spots in theories accepted by many almost as a religious tradition.

There is one fatal defect which lies at the root of the whole Critical position, and it is this: In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the critic, whether in America or in Europe, has been trained in the Classical tradition of ancient Greece and Rome, or in the study of the literature of his own or some other people of Aryan race. Of Eastern peoples and their literatures he has no first-hand knowledge, and so the whole Bible is to him, if not a thing of supernatural origin, at any rate an entirely unique product of the human mind. All those who have accepted the results of Western criticism and have taken part in this propaganda are scholars versed in the European Classics and have received their logical equip-

ment through the study of Euclid and Aristotle, or else their minds have been steeped in the philosophical systems of Kant and Fichte and Hegel. They have been taught to regard everything in the world as forming part of a continuous process of evolution, in which there is no room left for originality, or for the free exercise of the human spirit. Such a doctrine makes impossible that East, in whose history there is no development, and which is at this moment being ruined as a result of the attempt to force Western politics and Western science upon it. If there were nothing else to condemn the modern criticism of the old Hebrew literature, it would be enough that no one who has been brought up, or who has lived long, in the East, is a critic.

The whole of the modern criticism of the Hebrew Bible rests in theory upon the doctrine of evolution, and the doctrine of evolution does not apply to the East. We see a progressive development in the constitutional history of England from the early Saxon days down to the present time, but the Turkey of to-day does not differ from the Abbasid Chalifate of the tenth century, save that then the Turks were overriding the Arabs and to-day the Germans are overriding the Turks. Arabia to-day is no better and no worse than it was a thousand years ago. But for the Medina railway, ten centuries have brought it nothing new save coffee, tobacco, and gunpowder, and all these were importations. In the West institutions grow from less to more, but in the East they burst fully armed from the head of Zeus, and then slowly decay. There is no institution of which this is more true than it is of that institution which, more than any other, divides the East from the West like an impassable gulf — the institution of Religion. To explain the sudden emergence in the world of the ancient Hebrew religion, of Christianity, or

of Islām by any process of evolution is an absolute impossibility. Like language, religion is perfect at its birth. The only development it knows is in a backward direction, a process of deterioration. In this respect it resembles the Arts, of which it is one; and the fatal flaw in the critics' argument is that they treat religion, not as an art, but as a science.

It is often supposed that the more recent criticism of the Old Testament especially, of which the outstanding exponent is the veteran Julius Wellhausen of Göttingen, must stand on quite a different level from that of Ferdinand Baur or of David Strauss, seeing that it has been so universally accepted in this country and in America, as well as upon the Continent of Europe, whereas the criticism of the Tübingen school did not take much hold outside of Germany itself. But the reasons for this difference are not far to seek. When "Leben Jesu" and "Paulus" appeared (before the middle of the nineteenth century), German was almost as little known in this country as Russian is to-day; but when Wellhausen's "Geschichte Israels" was published (1878), the German language and German literature had, largely owing to the labors of Thomas Carlyle, become almost as familiar as Latin and Greek. More than one German historian owes his enhanced reputation to his English translator. Dean Stanley's "Jewish Church" and Professor Dickson's translation have kept alive the fame of Heinrich Ewald and Theodor Mommsen when their originals have ceased to be regarded as authoritative. Wellhausen, also, was fortunate in the sponsors who introduced him to his English public. Moreover, when he appeared, theological thought in this country had been set free from the fetters of dogma, and, above all, there was a general weariness of the old and a craving for something new. But, that the success and apparent permanence

of the Wellhausen school is due, not to any special merit in it over its predecessors, but solely to the fact that it supplied a popular demand of the time, is clear from the further fact that both Strauss and Baur have been reintroduced with success to the English reader by a well-known popular novelist.

The truth is that the whole of the recent criticism of the ancient Hebrew literature is founded on an entire misconception as to what the aims and methods of the Semitic writer were. To take only one point: There is no such thing in Hebrew, or perhaps in any purely Semitic literature, as a prose style. To distinguish one prose writer from another by his style, as modern commentators profess to be able to do, is impossible, for the simple reason that each successive writer borrowed, not merely his facts, but also his phraseology, from his predecessor. Not that we are to suppose, as all the critics seem to do, that an author sat down, like an up-to-date pressman, with his sources laid out before him, and copied out extracts now from one source and now from another. Nearly the whole of education in the East consists, and has for ages consisted, in learning by heart the works, both in prose and verse, of the great writers and authorities of the past; and when an author wishes to describe an event or state a proposition, he does so, without thinking, in the very words which have been familiar to him from his school-days, and which the extraordinary power of memory of a semi-literary people has enabled him to retain almost *verbatim*. We can distinguish by marks of style alone a passage taken from Gibbon or Macaulay or Carlyle, but even the present-day English or German historians, who are absorbed in the task of examining authorities and getting at the facts, cannot be distinguished in the same way; and in the case of the Hebrew and Arab prose writers, whose whole concern

was to hand on the tradition exactly as they had received it from those who were before them, it is quite impossible to distinguish one from another by any criteria of style.

Moreover, not only is there no prose style in ancient Hebrew by which one author can be distinguished from another, but the language common to all is very far from being a classical or even grammatical one. Hence most of the latest commentaries upon these writers are filled with corrections of what they did write, and conjectural emendations indicating what they ought to have written. But this takes for granted that these Old-world men of letters always did write what they should have written, or, what is a rather different thing, what the latter-day commentator thinks that they should have written. The language of the Old Testament, as of the New, was a vernacular dialect, and the books composed in it exhibit almost every defect and blemish which a literary composition can; and to judge them by the polished writers of Greece and Rome, as the European critic does, is wholly to misjudge and misunderstand them. The work of even a good Arab historian or prose writer will be found to be full of what in an European author would be condemned,—omissions, repetitions, tautology, inconsequences, and inconsistencies. But these are not serious faults in an Arab or Hebrew writer; for they only reflect the unschooled mind of the people. They are the natural features of a primitive and rudimentary stage of literary composition.

By far the best specimen of this unformed and undeveloped prose is to be found in the Korān, the first prose work composed in the Arabic language. The Korān is filled with anachronisms, discrepancies, and self-contradictions compared with which those of the Hebrew Bible are hardly worthy of remark. Yet when these phenomena occur in a

Hebrew work, they are regarded as indubitably proving that that work was composed, not by one, but by many authors, whose dates were centuries apart, and whose writings were taken to pieces by later scribes and the parts fitted together in a kind of mosaic, and then given out to the world as the original composition of some national saint or hero of a by-gone age. Precisely the same line of argument is applicable, only with tenfold force, to the Korān; and yet we know that the Korān was composed within the space of twenty-three years by a single hand. There could be no more decisive proof of how far the critics have gone astray in their analysis of the Hebrew sacred books.¹

But even granting that it is possible to distinguish different hands (as in some cases it undoubtedly is) at work in the composition of some of the Biblical books, it would not by any means follow, as the critics imagine, that these various hands necessarily belonged to different dates. Difference of vocabulary in the case of the Semitic languages points, not to difference of date, but to difference of locality. The vocabulary of the Arabic of Morocco differs considerably from that of Syria, but the words used in Morocco to-day are in the main identical with those used a thousand years ago, and the case with Syria is the same. To such an extent is this true that, even when the language has changed, much of the vocabulary remains the same. The Arabic of Syria contains a considerable number of loan-words from Syriac, which were in use there before the Muhammadan conquest in the seventh century; and the same is true of Egypt. Even supposing, therefore, that it is possible at this distance of time to analyze the Hebrew documents so as to distinguish

¹ This argument was worked out with special reference to the Books of Samuel by the present writer in *The Contemporary Review* for March, 1907.

the various hands, this would not point to a difference of date, but merely to a different place of composition.

It is common knowledge that the result of the critical analysis of the Hebrew historical books was to disintegrate four separate hands in their composition, which were named J and E, D and P. It was believed that after the lapse of between two and three thousand years it was possible for human ingenuity to assign one half of a verse to one of these sources and the other half to another. At last the analysis was carried so far that it became impossible any longer to maintain that such persons as J and E and D and P ever existed. The public was then informed that the documents indicated by these symbols were written, not by men, but by *schools*. Nothing could show better how completely those interested in these matters had surrendered their liberty of thought to the authority of the critics, than the fact that this proposition was accepted.

There is one unpleasant feature of the recent criticism of the Hebrew books for which it may fairly be said that we have to thank scholars of German nationality, and that is a tendency to degrade the Hebrew literature as far as that can be done. Thus we are told that perhaps the most genuinely historical chapters in the older books are those at the close of the Books of Samuel, which describe the scandals which took place at David's court. The prophets become little better than writers of political broadsides. In nearly every brochure we are told that the Book of Psalms was "the hymn-book of the second temple," there being no personal religion before the Exile. There are in the Old Testament a number of passages which are capable of a twofold interpretation, and it seems to be always the baser interpretation which we are asked to adopt. When Amos told the high

priest, "I am no prophet nor the son of a prophet" (vii. 14), he did not mean that he would have liked to be one. He meant that an honest herdsman like himself was a better man than any prophet! And so, whenever we meet a noble or disinterested sentiment, it is brought down to earth by some mean interpretation. The advanced German scholar sees in the ancient Hebrew literature only the reflection of the political and moral ideas of his own time and country, and his interpretation is always tinged with his own motives, be it anti-Semitism or socialism or commercialism or professional jealousy. In his hands there has ceased to be a Hebrew literature. Instead, we have an immense quantity of detached fragments, hardly any of which are of any moral or spiritual value.

And yet the critic is never tired of bewailing the low ethical and religious tone of the Hebrew writers: In the god depicted by the source J "cleverness and cunning predominate over truthfulness." "In ethical features the god of P is relatively wanting."¹ "In the Book of Esther there is no trace of religious excitation and hope. . . . National aloofness and national fanaticism, hatred against the foreigners in whose midst they dwell, characterize it."² Commenting upon the familiar Twenty-third Psalm, a leading critic declares: "Disagreeable as we feel it to be, that the eternal contentions of Judaism cast their shadow upon this poem and introduce a hateful feature, yet Ps. xxiii. has in general deserved the preference which, since ancient times, readers have fostered for this idyll of the holy people."³ One can-

¹ *Handkommentar zum A. T.: Ex. Lev. Num.*, by Professor Baentsch of Jena (1903), pp. xx, xlv.

² *Handkommentar zum A. T.: Esr. Neh. Est.*, by Professor Siegfried of Jena (1901), p. 141.

³ *Kurzer Hand-Kommentar zum A. T.: Die Psalmen*, by Professor Duhm of Basel (1899).

not resist adding one further quotation from a different point of view. Referring to the part played by Haman in the Book of Esther, one critic, so long ago as 1888, wrote: "The Hamanism of Berlin knew no more of the Cross than Haman did, or, rather, they had the desire to crucify."¹

The history of Israel as "reconstructed" by the critics was practically the old Bible history turned upside down. Instead of the Faith being purest at the source, as all religions are, we were bidden to think of the primitive Jehovah as a mere tribal god, the thought of His universality being unknown even to the early prophets. The people of Israel never were in Egypt at all, and the familiar story of the conquest of Canaan under Joshua is contradicted by the account given in the Book of Judges, according to which each tribe took possession of its own territory for itself. On all such points the reconstructed history goes right in the teeth of the known course of every other religious system, and it is not a little remarkable how the traditional history of Israel seems to be followed point by point in the course which was carved out for itself centuries later by Islām.²

If the above argument is valid, it would show that the theory upon which the history and literature of ancient Israel have been taught to old and young during the last twenty or thirty years is erroneous. There are many more general considerations which will readily occur to every lover of literature for its own sake. It is safe to affirm that the more one reads of the stories of other countries and the more one studies their books, the more will he be inclined to accept the story of Israel as told by her own writers and poets.

¹ Commentary on Esther, by Dr. Paulus Cassel, Berlin (translated by A. Bernstein, 1888), p. xvi.

² This matter was discussed by the writer in *The Expositor*, 1904.