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In the wake of recent archaeological discoveries, Biblical criticism has veered from the extreme radicalism of earlier periods. How this new climate could influence the attitudes of traditional Jewry is discussed in this essay which seeks to familiarize the layman with some of the most striking developments in the field. Rabbi Feldman is Book Editor of TRADITION and Rabbi of Congregation Beth Jacob in Atlanta, Georgia.

CHANGING PATTERNS IN BIBLICAL CRITICISM

Their Implications for the Traditional Jew

There was once a time when the field of Biblical criticism was anathema to any believing Jew. The vestigial remains of this are still evident today. After all, the Torah is not a man-made book, subject to the caprice of literary critics, but rather a record of God's revelation to man. It is to be regarded as a manifestation of God's will for man, and is to be followed as an expression of man's love for God. What point is there, then, in a preoccupation with styles, with special usages of divine names, with literary influences.

The Biblical critic may have laughed at the traditional — and mythical — concern about the number of angels dancing on the head of a pin; the critic was not aware, however, that the traditionalist was laughing at him and his critical concern about the number of documents and strata which could be discovered in, say, one chapter of Genesis.

The two had absolutely no contact with each other. They inhabited two different worlds, and each looked upon the other with scorn.

This lack of communication is responsible for the fact that despite the radical changes which have shaken the world of Biblical scholarship in the last generation — changes which have moved it much closer to the traditional position — traditional Jews still view that world with suspicion. And while it is

Changing Patterns in Biblical Criticism

true that for one who is immersed in the study of God's word Biblical criticism has no relevance, it is also true that those who know and understand Torah have little to fear from Biblical criticism.

It may be helpful to one's faith to deny that it exists. But the paradox is that, as it is constituted today, it may be even more helpful to one's faith to grant Biblical scholarship at least a *de facto* recognition and to become acquainted with the new approaches and methods which have revolutionized its thinking.

Biblical research of a generation ago rested on two major premises, one literary and one philosophical. The literary premise stated that the Bible, primarily the Pentateuch and Joshua, was not one single book, as had been assumed for millenia, but a composite work of various authors who lived between the 9th and 5th centuries B.C.E. The philosophical premise was the evolutionary theory prevalent in the 19th century which posited the thesis that all of history developed from lower to progressively higher stages. From this theory, promulgated chiefly by Hegel, it was but logical to assume that, in similar fashion, the religion of Israel developed gradually from a primitive idolatry to the advanced monotheism of the prophetic period.

It was with these two apparently solid underpinnings that Biblical criticism proceeded systematically to demolish the traditional view of the Bible as the unified work of an Author, or, at least, author.

It did not occur to the scholars of the time that their presuppositions might themselves be demolished a generation later. They claimed that it was self-evident that there is no unity in the Bible. And their methods of textual analysis seemed to demonstrate that in the Pentateuch various authors and strata are visible. Already in the 18th century, Jean Astruc had pointed to different usages of divine names, to differences in style and language, to seeming inconsistencies and contradictions, to repetitions and redundancies. All of this could only mean that the material must have had several authors, and that later editors, or redactors, tried mechanically to fuse together all of these various documents into one whole.

This theory, attractive on its face, was expanded and refined

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

by many scholars. It reached its classical formulation in the works of Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). Under his influence, Biblical criticism was now primarily a search for various sources within the text and a concurrent effort to separate strands and strata, to discover their historical and religious background, and to assign the various strands to their own redactors. Thus was born the Documentary Theory. There was a J. document, based on the use of the Tetragrammaton; an E. document, which used E-lohim as the divine name; a D., or Deuteronomic document; and a P. document, written by priests and containing ritual and cultic legislation. Under Wellhausen's dominance of Biblical criticism, the Torah was no longer Mosaic in authorship; it was a mosaic in design.

Since the basic assumption was that the Bible was really quite unreliable in anything it had to say, changes and emendations were made as a matter of course. A wild guess was considered more reliable than an untrustworthy text.

It was also an age in which the spirit of the day insisted on categorizing everything. Before long, the Documentary Theory became expanded, and scholars were referring with great assurance not only to J, E, D and P, but to new sources such as C, K, S, Pg, P1, P2. A cursory look at some of the older critical texts reads more like algebra than the Bible. The pigeon-holing knew no bounds. Style and content were the major criteria, and since the question of what is style and what is content has no satisfactory answer, the number of new Biblical documents and sources mushroomed. Accounts which remained stubbornly inconsistent were further distributed, then joined together and reconstructed. Soon an "adjective" phase set in: sources began to be described as popular, naive, erudite, reflective, theological, anthropomorphic, interested in chronology, supernatural, culturally superior, nationalistic, ad infinitum.

The times were Hegelian, and it was *de rigueur* for all disciplines to create theses and antitheses. And so Biblical scholars created their own Hegelian system. Prophet was set up in distinction to priest, moral law was said to be different from cultic law, there was a pre-exilic and post-exilic Judaism, and Judaism itself was a synthesis of the pre-prophetic faith and the prophetic

Changing Patterns in Biblical Criticism

reaction. It was all very neat, precise, and orderly. It was, after all, a neat, precise, and orderly age.

Clearly, then, this entire critical view of the Bible was in reality a reflection of the temper of the times. Contemporary philosophy and science were dominated by the hypotheses of gradual development and growth in history — the concept of evolution. In history and philosophy Hegel dominated the horizon, just as Darwin was later to dominate the natural sciences. Hegel's philosophy of history was one of constant, never-ending change. He promulgated the theory of "becoming" instead of "being": nothing was static, all was dynamic, and the process of history was a proper waltz with its own predictable rhythm and beat. The cry of Hegel was one of progress. Civilization had advanced from the primitive stage, and as it moved westward it advanced to a higher stage until it reached its pinnacle in Hegel's German culture. Human history, he pointed out, had its infancy in Asia, reached its childhood in Greece, adolescence in Rome, and its full maturity — or synthesis — in western Europe. To Hegel, the more a culture is removed from Germany in time and geography, the more infantile it is. Thus, the Chinese language even sounds like baby-talk and is written with pictorial characters; the Hindu character is childish and dream-like, without vigor. It follows, of course, that since Persia, Assyria, and Egypt, are geographically closer to Europe, they are slightly more advanced.

Though this concept of gradual evolution sounds somewhat naive to modern ears, it was the major philosophical motif of the age, and Biblical criticism, as did other disciplines, found itself operating under its assumptions. Israel's Bible and her history were entirely reconstructed to fit into this mold. Everything was neatly rearranged in logical progression. The major thrust of Biblical criticism, under Wellhausen's leadership, became an attempt to show how Israel's history had developed from lower to higher forms. Development was now no longer a theory but a fact; the only issue remaining was to discover the nature of that development.

This had profound implications. For since evolution had now graduated from theory to law, it was, for example, inconceiv-

able that the Patriarchs could have lived in the sophisticated type of civilization ascribed to them in Genesis, with its monotheistic belief, its settled way of life, and its advanced state of culture and economy. It follows, therefore, that Israel's history must have begun not with the Patriarchs but with the Exodus from Egypt a millennium later. It had to be thus, since human development invariably proceeds from the lower to the higher. Therefore — and here the philosophical base of Biblical criticism forced the literary hand of its practitioners — the Patriarchal narratives were untrustworthy, and were really nothing more than anachronistic “back-projections” reflecting the concepts and ideas of authors who lived at a much later age — between the 9th and 5th centuries B.C.E. — who were reflecting the conditions of their own times rather than those of which they purported to tell.

Still working within the evolutionary framework, Wellhausen and his school tried to show that the religion grew more complex as the Israelites adopted the cultic practices of their Canaanite neighbors. The prophets transformed the simple idolatrous and monolatrous religion of early Israel into the advanced concept of strict monotheism. They, and not their forebears — not even Moses — created monotheism.

The premises, if tendentious, were neat and crisp. The order was logical. The reconstruction of Israel's history was appealing. Freed of the restraints of the older traditional views, the new approach had scope and breadth. It brought Biblical criticism, long an outcast in the scholarly world, closer to the respectable scientific circles of contemporary times.

But the beautiful edifice, unknown to its designers, was deteriorating as it was being built. The first tell-tale sign came in 1887 when the Tel El Amarna letters were discovered. This was a rich collection of cuneiform tablets containing correspondence between diplomats in Egypt and those in Babylonia, Assyria, and Palestine. It revealed a well developed culture in the ancient Near East which had hardly been expected as early as the 14th century B.C.E.

This had shattering implications for the theories then in vogue. It meant, for one thing, that real credence had to be

Changing Patterns in Biblical Criticism

given the Patriarchal narratives, and that they could not be considered the product of a writer who lived much later. It portrayed a world quite advanced in intellect, commerce, trade, and diplomacy — one that could hardly be termed primitive. It suggested that ancient Israel was deeply involved in the history and culture of the ancient Orient. And it showed that Israel's history began long before the times of Moses.

All of this should have called for a new look at the methods of studying the history of Israel. A radical revision of Wellhausen was now in order. But Wellhausen himself failed to understand the significance of the new evidence, and ignored it completely. His conclusions remained unchanged. Nor were the other adherents of his school more receptive to the discoveries. Together with their master, they continued to build their theories as if nothing had happened, totally oblivious to the fact that the very foundations were crumbling beneath them.

But it was not an isolated discovery which signalled the fact that changes were coming. The times themselves were beginning to change. Science and philosophy were progressing away from the apparent certainties and assured results of an earlier day. They became much more tentative, and a slow reaction began to manifest itself against the concept of a neatly progressing development in human history. In a word, the temper of the times changed, and with it, Biblical criticism.

Over twenty years ago, Albright anticipated the reaction of our day against the older system:

The evolution of historical patterns is highly complex and variable; it may move in any direction . . . Wellhausen's Hegelian method was utterly unsuited to become the master key with which scholars might enter the sanctuary of Israelite religion and acquire a satisfying understanding of it.¹

Albright then proceeded to annihilate the very methods of the older school, referring to the evolutionary interpretation of history as "a bed of Procrustes," for if a phenomenon seemed too advanced it was assigned later; if too primitive, it was pushed back earlier. And only those facts which fitted the preconceived hypothesis were used, while the others were ignored or discarded.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

Albright continued the attack:

In dealing with historical evolution there are many seductive errors of method into which historians have been beguiled by insufficient facts or by inadequate perspective. For example, the sequence of evolution is sometimes reversed [or it] . . . may be telescoped into an impossibly brief period, as has been done by the Wellhausen school in reconstructing the development of the religion of Israel. Evolution is not always homogeneous in human history — in fact the reverse is probably more common, as in the development of Egyptian civilization.²

Under Albright's trumpeting charge, the last vestiges of Wellhausen's suppositions went up in smoke. While much of Wellhausen's account of Israel's history and religion survives today, it is a fossil preserved mostly among amateurs in Biblical scholarship. One modern scholar has pointed out quite astutely that it is particularly current among those who would claim the label of religious or secular "liberal," and that "it is at least a justified suspicion that a scholarly piety toward the past, rather than historical evidence, is the main foundation for their position."³

This reaction against Wellhausen was made complete by the evidence of the maturing science of archaeology, which now began to provide a new non-literary basis for Biblical study, and to throw light on aspects of ancient culture heretofore unknown. Unlike textual analysis, archaeology's focus is not on theory, but on matters concrete and material: ancient tombs and temples; houses and pottery and utensils; clay tablets and seals, bits of papyrus, stone inscriptions, contracts, works of art. History need no longer be a scissors and paste hodgepodge, but a disciplined science based on objective and material facts.

The Patriarchal period in Genesis was one of the first beneficiaries of the archaeologist's pick and shovel. Biblical historians had long doubted the historicity of these Genesis narratives. We have already noted that the Patriarchal stories had been viewed as just that — merely stories. The characters were looked upon as eponymous ancestors of writers who actually lived much later, and the traditions reflected in the narratives were said to be the actual conditions of the 10th century. To assert that such an advanced state of civilization was possible

Changing Patterns in Biblical Criticism

in the times of Abraham was not only unscientific in its non-evolutionary presuppositions; it was patently absurd.

Enter archaeology. The discovery of the Amarna letters and their implications have already been mentioned. Such discoveries began to pick up momentum. Time and again the excavations revealed evidence which clearly authenticated the Genesis narratives. Discoveries at Nuzu and Mari, dating from the Northwest Mesopotamia of the 2nd millenium — the geographical and chronological place of the Patriarchs — again revealed that period as quite sophisticated, with a flourishing literature and science, with a stable government, enlightened agricultural techniques, and a prospering economy.

The Nuzu site has had an important effect on our understanding of the Bible. Excavated in 1925-31, it has unveiled thousands of cuneiform texts which give us new insights into the social mores of the age. For example, Rachel's taking of her father's *teraphim* in Genesis 31:19,30, has long puzzled many scholars. But the Nuzu texts supply interesting background. Property, we learn, could pass to a son-in-law in certain circumstances, but in order to give it the proper sanction the father had to give the house gods — *teraphim* — to his daughter's husband. Or in the troublesome passages where the wife of a Patriarch is referred to as his sister (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:2-6; 26:1-11), Nuzu shows that marriage was considered most sacred when the wife had the legal status of sister, and that the words wife and sister were used interchangeably in certain circumstances. Hence, by referring to their wives as sisters, Abraham and Isaac were actually protecting and praising their wives.

The most common topic in the Nuzu material is adoption. Couples without children would adopt an heir with the understanding that he would relinquish his privileges should a natural child be born later. Thus, in Genesis 15:13, the relationship of Eliezer to Abraham is clarified.

These tablets also shed light on the Jacob-Esau conflict concerning their father's blessing. According to the conditions reflected in these tablets, birthright could be established by the father's decision regardless of when the child was born. Moreover, the blessing of a father was most solemn when it was

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

given on his death-bed.

The Mari site has given us an even deeper insight into this age. Here again all the evidence of history, archaeology, anthropology, comparative religion, and linguistic scholarship substantiates the historicity of the Genesis narratives.

Albright has dated Mari at eighteen centuries B.C.E., approximately the time of the Patriarchs. The tablets contain five thousand letters and give us a thorough picture of the society which Genesis describes. We note that Haran and Nahor were extremely important cities; we come across names like Ja'qob-el, Abamran, Banu-Yamina, Arriwuk. The texts also reveal that there were no real barriers in wandering from city to city, and that Abraham's sojourn would have been quite possible. André Parrot, the major excavator of Mari, has even shown what these ancient Mesopotamians might have looked like. The men wore square, curled beards; the women, earrings, veils, and necklaces. They dressed in woolen tunics of red, black, and white. And that Abraham the iconoclast is not merely a children's tale is suggested by the extensive finds of Mari gods and goddesses, revealing an elaborate and pervasive cult of idolatry.

Nuzu and Mari are but two of the numerous sites which indicate that the Genesis narratives were transmitted accurately from the times in which they occurred. Had they been invented by later authors, they would have reflected later Hebrew customs and laws.

Furthermore, these finds have given the final blow to the old concept of religious growth as a development from the lower to the higher. They show that Israel's ancestors lived in a highly sophisticated society with highly developed notions of law and morality. (The Bible itself recognizes the existence of a universal moral law from primitive times, to which all men are subject. Cain, the Generation of the Flood, Sodom, are all punished for violating this law.)

Archaeology, then, has been of invaluable assistance in understanding the Bible. It has filled in our knowledge of the background of many of the social, historical, and religious currents in Israel's life; it has given us the explanation for specific bothersome words and has thus rescued many terms from the

Changing Patterns in Biblical Criticism

fate of emendation; and, most significantly, it has pushed back the dating of the Biblical books much closer to the traditional claims than could heretofore have been imagined.

For providing us with such positive support of the Bible, archaeology is greatly to be praised. But there is one *caveat*: Archaeology is not the handmaiden of the Bible, and it is not invariably a support to Torah. Its traditional adherents frequently forget that its purpose is not to confirm the Bible, but to illuminate it. For the believing Jew, scholarly and scientific support for Torah is pleasant, but it is not indispensable to his faith. Similarly, apparent contradictions to Torah do not disturb him. He remembers only too well that just forty years ago Torah had been "scientifically" disproved, only to find the disprover itself become the disproved.

It is important not to be misled by the fanatics of archaeology, just as it was important not to be panicked by the Higher Criticism of a generation ago. The radicalism of a Wellhausen has now given way to the neo-traditionalism of an Albright; but uncritical approval of the new conservatism may in the final analysis be as harmful as unqualified fear of the radical.

For one thing, we must bear in mind that archaeology is not simply a factual science, and that its evidence is rarely plain or direct. Its findings are subject to analysis, reasoning, deduction, comparison, evaluation — in brief, to *interpretation* of facts. The discoveries of potsherds or clay tablets deep beneath the earth are not automatic and self-evident "facts" or "truths." As in any other scientific discipline, speculation and intuition play an important role. Certainly archaeology is on much more solid ground than was the criticism of a generation ago. Its practitioners are more cautious, its methods are firmly based on the canons of dispassionate analysis, and it thus is infinitely more reliable. But it is a human discipline and as such it is subject to human error. Belief in the authenticity of the Torah and a Jew's personal commitment to it do not depend on the caprice of critics, whether they be conservative or radical, reliable or not.

In any case, the critical certainty and self-assurance of a generation ago are no longer. Nothing has yet fully replaced it, but there is now a new willingness to study the Bible from within,

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

from its own *Sitz im Leben*, as the form-critics call it, rather than from preconceived standards.

For, in truth, one of the major weaknesses of Biblical criticism has been its tendency to judge the ancient world by modern frames of reference. No attempt was made to understand the temperament and character of the Biblical world. For example, since we have an enthusiasm for writing and we have poor memories, we readily ascribed these characteristics to the ancients. And since we have no reliable oral tradition, we could not conceive of one in the Biblical world. In point of fact, however, writing was to them always secondary, and they put great stress upon the spoken word and upon an oral tradition which was highly reliable.

Modern critics are also fond of over-emphasizing canons of style and vocabulary, of neatly separating different strata and distributing them into definite historic dates and events, and of showing the influences which one civilization may have had upon another. But now it has been shown that styles and documents are not always evolutionary; they are occasionally parallel and are found at times to be decreasing in complexity.

The older critics had also maintained that the prophets stood in sharp contrast to the Law, that they wanted a more "spiritual" and "ethical" faith, and that they opposed the sacrificial cult. But today we find that the Psalms, which are so similar to the prophetic "spirituality," had their origin in the sacrificial cult. Modern scholars are now much more sophisticated about the prophets' apparent hostility to cult and sacrifice: the prophets were opposed only to foreign cults, as in Amos; or to sacrifice as an end in itself, as in Isaiah and Jeremiah; or to ritual without proper devotion, as in Hosea and Micah. And excavations at Ugarit and elsewhere show that ethics in religion is pre-prophetic. The spurious divisions of prophet vs. priest, and moral law vs. cultic law, are the results of applying irrelevant modern categories to the Bible. To the ancient Israelite, however, worship of God — and the rituals and cults it entailed — was deeply involved with ethics; and the ethical-moral life was deeply tinged by ritual and cult. For the divine will is not limited to ritual; it includes man's relations with his fellow man.

Changing Patterns in Biblical Criticism

There is a great deal of overlapping between the ethical and the ritual and it is likely that it never occurred to the ancient Israelite that there is a difference between the two.

There are evident today the first stirrings of an attempt to deepen our understanding of the Bible by means other than textual analysis and archaeology. Gradually, we perceive a cross-fertilization with other scholarly disciplines. For example, a new awareness is now evident of the techniques of ancient poetry and music, their unique rhythms and metaphors, and their special cadences. These can give us a clear perspective of many puzzling aspects of the Bible. Many apparent contradictions and inconsistencies have already disappeared because of the growing sensitivity on the part of Biblical scholars to the work of other intellectual areas. Over and above these welcome signs of change is the increasing realization that textual problems are natural, simply because we do not understand the ancient Hebrew well enough.

A recurrent stumbling block for Biblical scholars has been their own insistence on viewing the Bible as merely an example of ancient literature. Those few who, like Albright, have occasionally taken into account certain divine elements have been labeled as mystics. And yet each of the merely rational approaches has led into a new web of difficulties which has in time left it completely helpless to cope with the Bible as a whole. For obviously the Bible is not a systematic or organic work of literature. It is huge, it is diverse, it contains narratives, poems, songs, legal codes, sagas, and is written in an infinite variety of styles and nuances and subtleties. To attempt to synthesize it all under modern frames of reference is a hopeless task — and it is for this reason that the critics themselves are seeking new methods and principles with which to approach their subject.

It is precisely because of this that the believing Jew need have no fear of modern Biblical research. Indeed he can make a contribution to it. For the history of such research is bringing it inexorably towards some rapprochement with the divine Bible, if for no other reason than that all other avenues have failed. The Jew who is thoroughly at home in his Torah and in the language of criticism can provide the key to many of the Bible's

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

riddles which have baffled scholarship for many years. It would be naive, of course, to expect the critics, for so long committed to a natural view of the Bible, to accept fully a view which is super-rational. But in an age where the merely rational has been clearly inadequate, those with a super-rational point of view need not be afraid to speak. And certainly the traditional view of the authorship of the Bible, until now categorically rejected, offers some way out of the vast maze of problems in which Biblical scholarship finds itself. For once having accepted the reliability of the text, traditional Jewish exegetes are not afraid to probe, to ask, to find apparent contradictions, and to question every jot and tittle of the text. The only assumption — granted, a major one — is that the answers lie within the text. The believing Jew's faith will hardly be disturbed by an exposure to the still shaky science of contemporary Biblical scholarship. On the other hand, Biblical criticism may hopefully lose some of its faith in itself through an acquaintance with the world of Jewish tradition.

Biblical criticism has come a long way since the first stirrings of Jean Astruc, Spinoza, and others of the eighteenth century. Whatever its future direction, it is safe to assume that never again will it arrogate to itself the magisterial role of judge and jury. And who knows, perhaps its newly found sobriety will allow it to adopt some of the techniques and premises of traditional Jewish scholarship. This can only result in a more profound appreciation of the origins and sources of our faith.

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