

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

ART. IV.—THE BOOK OF GENESIS (*continued*).

I HAVE said most of what requires to be said in the present connection about the Table of Nations in Gen. x.¹ Let me again, however, emphasize the fact that there is no necessity whatever to date this chapter as referring to a period about 2500 B.C. or (LXX. 3066). We cannot date it at all. As to eponymous ancestors being non-existent, it is, to say the least of it, suspicious that nations so widely differing from one another as the ancient Greeks and Hebrews should have both invented the same notion. There must surely have been something to warrant the idea. Such individuals could scarcely have been the invention of minds and temperaments so varied. If these eponymous ancestors are real, then it may be possible to account for the Hamitic origin of Canaan, and the peoples and towns that are represented as springing from him. It is possible that in them there is a mixture of Hamitic and Semitic blood; and it should be remembered in this connection that the Old Testament knows nothing of the name Phœnicia or of Phœnicians. It is arguable that the Bible account points to a Hamitic aboriginal tribe gradually absorbed by a Semitic immigration.² There is much still to be cleared up before we can accurately say what is meant, for instance, by such names as "the Amorite," "the Hittite," and "the Gîrgashite." At any rate, we may remember that the Philistines were certainly not, neither does the Old Testament make them, Semitic. We meet with another undesigned coincidence with our view of the very early times to which this chapter goes back in Dr. Driver's note on the name Elam (p. 128). Elam in Gen x. 22 is made Semitic in origin. "Racially," says Dr. Driver, "the Elamites were entirely distinct from the Semites." That condemns the Bible narrative of being unhistorical. But if we look a little further on in the note we find these words: "It is true inscriptions recently discovered seem to have shown that *in very early times* [the italics are mine] Elam was peopled by Semites . . . and that the non-Semitic Elamites spoken of above only acquired mastery over it at a period approaching 2300 B.C."

¹ It is interesting, by the way, to notice as an undesigned coincidence between natural science and the history of Genesis that Noah's cultivation of the vine took place not far removed from the region to which it has been traced in its uncultivated state (Driver, p. 108).

² It is noticeable that in another connection (p. 180) Dr. Driver draws attention to the fact that Sir R. F. Burton remarked upon the Egyptian physiognomy of some of the Bedouin clans of Sinai observable at the present day.

So, then, the Bible is right after all. But what says the commentator? "The fact is not one which the writer of the verse is very likely to have known" (p. 128). The mode of treatment implied here stands surely self-condemned.

We turn now to the narrative concerning

THE TOWER OF BABEL.

One of the first things we are told is that "the incident which it describes is placed shortly after the Flood" (p. 133). Now, to begin with, in Gen. xi. 1-9 there is not a single chronological note of any sort. Moreover, in his note on Gen. x. 25, Dr. Driver tells us that it is most likely that the division of the earth connected with the name of Peleg (*loc. cit.*) is the dispersion of this passage. Now, Peleg was the fourth in descent from Shem. If the allusion is right, the narrator can hardly have intended to place the dispersion *shortly* after the Flood. A further inconsistency appears in the notes. He does not allow, as some of his fellow-critics would wish to assert, that there is anything polytheistic about the Divine name Elohim with its plural form. But when Yahweh in the narrative before us is represented as saying, "Let us go down" (Gen. xi. 7), he says that "the conception of Deity is . . . perhaps imperfectly disengaged from polytheism" (p. 134). If I may venture to conjecture, it seems that the reason—perhaps an unconscious one—for the different treatment of the two passages is this: the latter passage comes from an earlier source (J) than the former one (from P). What, therefore, might be possible from a critic's point of view in the earlier document (J) is scarcely possible in the later (P).

One more curious feature of the whole story is that there is nothing in it apparently of Babylonian origin. Just when we should expect it most, if we believe, as some do, that the Biblical narrative is based upon Babylonian myths, our authorities on that subject desert us, and will not provide us with anything to fall back upon even in the remotest way connected with it. It would not affect us at all if tablets giving an account similar to that of the Bible were discovered; but it must be a difficulty to others that they cannot bring any to bear upon this narrative.

The rest of the Book of Genesis need not detain us very long. It is scarcely necessary—at any rate for readers of the CHURCHMAN—to discuss the question whether the names Abraham, Isaac, etc., represent tribes rather than individuals, and whether their marriages and offspring represent tribal movements. No proof of such views can be found in the

narrative, which rather, in the case of all the prominent individuals mentioned in it, gives us a living, natural picture of persons of distinct individuality and character.

It is a pleasure to find that the book with which we are most concerned points out the distinction between the Jewish rite of circumcision and that institution among other nations, and also allows us to believe in an overthrow of the cities of the Plain in the days of Abraham, placing their sites under the shallow waters at the southern extremity of the Dead Sea. But it is also interesting to see what can be read into the narrative when it is thought desirable. In Gen. xiv. 10 we are told that "the petroleum oozed out from holes in the ground, which proved fatal to the retreating army" (!) This is an exposition of "the vale of Siddim was full of slime-pits" (marg., bitumen pits).

Certain passages, however, call for more or less of notice. We take, first, that one which stands in a marked way by itself, Gen. xiv., which is considered to have been derived from a special source (SS, according to Dr. Driver). At one time this was supposed to be one of the most ancient documents embodied in the Pentateuch. Now it is attributed to the same period as P—the age of Ezekiel and the exile. Some day, perhaps, with another swing of the pendulum of critical opinion, it may again be relegated to an earlier age.

That the names of the four Kings of the East mentioned in it are more than possible ones for the period referred to in this chapter seems to be established beyond any reasonable doubt. Professor Sayce's chronology makes the reign of Hammurabi—with whom Amraphel is identified by many—extend from 2376 to 2333 B.C. According to the Bible narrative in the Hebrew text, the call of Abraham must have taken place—we use Dr. Driver's figures (p. xxviii)—in 2136 B.C. This makes Hammurabi's date too early for him to be a contemporary of Abraham by about 200 years. But we must remember that after all the Babylonian chronology is no more absolutely certain than the Biblical. In fact, dates so late as "*circa* 2200 (King), 2130-2087 (Hommel)," have been given for Hammurabi's reign. The names of two, and it may be of three, if Chedorlaomer is rightly identified, of the Kings of the East mentioned in this narrative occur as contemporaries on the inscriptions. This all tells in favour of the narrative being historical, though it does not prove the historicity of its actual details.

Of Melchizedek nothing is known outside the narrative of this chapter; but because the name may mean "My King is Zedek, *i.e.*, Righteousness," and because a deity named "Sydyce" is ascribed to the Phœnicians by Philo Byblius

(ap Eus. P.E., 35*a*), it is not therefore necessary to put these two things together and make him an idolater, and to say, as some would, that the title "God Most High" was that of an ancient Canaanite deity. The name of the priest-king and of his God imply, at any rate, a supereminent deity.

With regard to the question of the duplication or even triplication of a narrative, which is all traced back to one original story, and one only, it would appear to be a very prosaic way of dealing with such narratives. Considering the circumstances of the times to which the stories refer, it seems certainly far from being improbable that such difficulties as are recorded to have occurred (xii. 10-20, xx., xxvi. 6-11) might very well have presented themselves more than once, and that the temptation to avoid them by a similar ruse may have occurred not only to more than one patriarch, but also to the same patriarch more than once. Abraham is not the only person in the world's history who has uttered the same untruth or the same half-truth more than once.¹ Each narrative, it will be observed, has its own peculiar features. The two that are attributed to the same source (J) differ materially, as do also the two that are attributed to the same locality, Gerar. Abimelech and Phicol may have been official names, and therefore had done duty for more than one individual, and the repetition of the name Beersheba in Gen. xxvi. 33 may simply mean that by the fact of the name Shibah being given to the well, the desirability of still attaching the name of Beersheba to the place was established. So also is it with other supposed duplications of one historical event.

In the history of Joseph and his captivity great stress is laid upon the variations in details between the two sources. It is acknowledged that the two versions in the existing narrative "are harmonized (though imperfectly)." Patient treatment of the difficulties will enable us to say that the two versions are harmonious rather than harmonized. For instance, to take one point, it is said (p. 332) that Joseph is drawn up by Midianites [from the pit] without his brothers' knowledge." The only brother who was necessarily not a witness to this was Reuben; the rest may, so far as the existing narrative is concerned, well have been witnesses of the transaction.

¹ How often nowadays, in the world of politics as well as in the world of religion, are half-truths made to do duty for whole ones!

(To be continued.)