

THE BIBLE AND THE LAST HALF-CENTURY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

THE intellectual atmosphere has markedly altered since the turn of the century and with it the general theological outlook. In that revolution of thought a notable part has been played by the New Knowledge, as it is often called. It is a commonplace that knowledge has increased phenomenally during the past two centuries, and the advance has hardly slackened at all in our own century despite the two world wars by which it has been vexed. The mid-century where we stand to-day seems to summon the world to take stock of its mounting riches of the mind, and to order and mould those resources that they may become a valuable instrument and not a source of hindrance and danger. That task, immense and daunting as it undoubtedly is, cannot be declined or put off.

The New Knowledge forces itself on the popular as well as on the academic mind chiefly as Science, which, in its more modern and restricted meaning, may now be said to occupy the forefront in general study, education, and national life. Astronomy has pushed back the frontiers of the Universe to a distance which is numbing to the very imagination, and fresh advances are heralded, for example, in the Sky Survey at the Palomar Observatory in California, which may issue in yet more overwhelming revelations. What the telescope, the spectroscope, and the camera have done for the immensities, the microscope and other more subtle contrivances have accomplished for the infinitesimals. The ultimate constituents of matter, in particular the structure and activities of the atom, claim a tense and painful interest everywhere. Physics in its widest sense has transformed our conception of the material world and impelled us to a strange new kind of thinking. And, we need scarcely remind ourselves, the manipulation of atomic power to war purposes chills our hearts more than its potentially peaceful uses can cheer them. Then, Biology and Psychology, operating on the higher levels of life and mind respectively, promise to enrich our ideas of the world, once the adolescent stage of those sciences has passed. And History—so far as it is a science—has been gathering way, its character and function becoming plainer, and is almost ready, as it seems, to yield up its last secret. But it is another science that invites our attention now: archaeology, within strict limits of space and time and for a definite design.

What has the archaeology of the Middle East during the last fifty years or so to say on the Old Testament? Its witness may be sufficiently sampled by taking a number of the major typical finds and assessing as best we can their significance, great or small, for Scripture, as the Word of God for men.

I. THE AMARNA TABLETS

The Tell el-Amarna tablets were unearthed in Upper Egypt in 1887, and after an interlude of hesitation Bible scholarship was swept with wave after wave of excitement. Surprise followed surprise in later years, as fresh finds came to light and continued to tell the same tale more clearly. It was the tale of the unexpectedly high antiquity of writing, which was realized to have an undeniable significance for Bible studies.

The Amarna inscribed tablets, 350 or more in number, proved to be the Court records of two successive Emperors of Egypt, and most of the correspondence had come from vassals in Palestine, which has been rather barren in archaeological products. Equally strange was the fact that the language used in the Letters was Akkadian, the tongue of Assyria and Babylonia, and the script, cuneiform. The period of the dispatches was from about 1410 to 1360 B.C., or roughly the time of the Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan, according to the "early" dating mostly in favour at present. There are many questions raised by the Letters, to which the intensive study of a full half-century has failed to supply answers. But one lesson came out clearly in the discovery and was destined to be strongly underscored by other similar discoveries. It was the antiquity of writing in the general area where Israel and their ancestors had lived and in the particular districts connected with the Exodus and the succeeding movements of that people.

The idea prevailing among Old Testament scholars towards the close of the nineteenth century that writing was unknown among the Hebrews till about the ninth century B.C. ruled out any question of writing by Moses whether in the twelfth or the fourteenth century B.C. The Amarna find, however, proved writing to be in common use in the fourteenth century, and the date of writing was steadily pushed back by successive finds to ever earlier ages. The native Egyptian system of writing in hieroglyphic was at least as early as the third millennium, and in Babylonia writing was similarly shown to have been practised

between 2000 and 3000 B.C., and it may be even earlier. At a like early period Syria and Palestine had their own medium of communication of the same semi-pictorial kind. But well before what we may fairly call Bible times, a momentous advance took place in the method of writing. The Egyptian and Babylonian systems were at the best clumsy and rather ambiguous, and there arose a natural desire for a script that could be readily learned and used by the common man as well as the professional scribe. Success came in the invention of the Phoenician or Old Hebrew alphabet, which is the ancestor of our Western alphabets, and is still spreading its conquests further. The date of its rise is usually put in the thirteenth century B.C., though some authorities would assign it to about 1800 B.C. Another attempt at an alphabet is seen in the rudimentary writing of workmen, perhaps slaves, at Serabit el Khadem, in Sinai, which is now dated about 1500 B.C. The Phoenician and the Serabit alphabets may both have sprung from a more primitive source, taking shape, perhaps, as early as 2000 B.C. It is, therefore, evident that long anterior to Moses men were writing: a convenient medium was available for God to communicate his mind to men in a special way, if and when He chose so to do. This argument involving the possibility or even the probability of Moses producing the Pentateuch may not amount to much in itself, but its value in opening the way to the other and main arguments for the authenticity of the Pentateuch, for example, the literary, the historical and the theological arguments, is considerable.

The early practice of writing bears directly on History and thus indirectly on the Bible. History is the medium through which the Special Revelation, recorded in Scripture, is communicated. The Bible History would then need to be good History, and good History must rest on good primary documents or information. And it is agreed that in order to rank as reliable, those sources require to be close to the events related. Now, the regnant school of Old Testament scholars to-day date the chief literary documents behind the Pentateuch not earlier than the ninth century, and even the earliest of them is thought of as being built up through a long process of accretions from oral—and written—material. On that showing the likelihood of sound History as a channel of Revelation in the earlier books of the Bible needs must be slight. Besides, the theory itself, which goes back to Graf and Wellhausen, has been making heavy weather in recent years, and the modest tone of its

adherents to-day is in strong contrast with that which was familiar at the opening of the century. A radical change, one may surmise, will come about when certain evolutionary types of thought relax their hold on the contemporary mind. And signs are not wanting that the case has been made out for reconsidering the position and giving a fair hearing to the true traditional view.

II. THE HAMMURABI INSCRIPTION

The Amarna Letters have been considered here only in their bearing on the Narratives of the Pentateuch. The other main contents of these books are the legal provisions, and their counterpart was discovered by archaeology in 1901 in the shape of an ancient law-code. A first-rate sensation was caused when upwards of 300 laws were found inscribed on a slab of stone by Hammurabi, a great ruler of Babylon about 1700 B.C., according to the most recent dating. At the opening of the century most scholars leaned decidedly to the view that legislation as full and detailed as the Pentateuch shows was impossible as early as the time of Moses. It was therefore startling for the experts of the day to be confronted with outward features and a similar background in a Code several centuries older. And the remainder of the half-century has underscored the lesson by disclosing other evidence no less startling. The Babylonian body of laws has itself turned out to depend on a much older Code. And out of the shadows of the Near East have emerged under the magic wand of our science peoples that previously were little more than names—the Amorites, the Hittites, and the Hurrians (probably the Horites of the Bible)—and their claim to a place in History consists not least in their having like collections of laws of greater antiquity. Clearly those discoveries favour the possibility of the Mosaic system emerging at the period when it purports to have come into existence, and clear the ground further for adducing the cardinal considerations in support of the traditional view.

III. THE RAS SHAMRA LIBRARY

In 1929 excavations begun at Ras Esh-Shamra have added immensely to the knowledge of the region between the Tigris and the Nile, with which the Israelites were most directly associated. Ras Shamra near the Syrian coast, opposite Cyprus, was soon proved to be the city of the district of Ugarit, already

known by name from Egyptian inscriptions, the Amarna letters and Hittite documents. Ugarit flourished greatly in the fifteenth century B.C. It was stricken by an earthquake in the fourteenth century, and was finally overwhelmed in the confusion of attacks in the twelfth century by the mysterious "Peoples of the Sea". The importance of the digging at the site lies chiefly in the uncovering of a library with hundreds of inscribed clay tablets. The language of most of the tablets is very like Hebrew, and the script is an alphabet formed from cuneiform characters. So far as it can be assigned the date is around 1400 B.C. Much welcome light has been thrown on Bible Hebrew and kindred tongues, on the history of Syria, and most markedly on the Ugaritic religion.

A number of the names and references in the tablets are found in our Hebrew Bibles. El, the general Semitic name for God, occurs at times in what some think to be an almost monotheistic sense. However, other gods are found, among them various Baals (as we might expect), besides Dagon and Ashtoreth. It is interesting to find "Leviathan" described as "swift" and "crooked", just as in Isa. xxvii. 1. The "seething of a kid in its mother's milk" was a form of magic intended to promote fertility and of long standing in Ugarit. Does this item of information supply the long-sought explanation of Exodus xxiii. 19? The religion of Ugarit as given in the texts was largely concerned with the fertility of the soil, and showed many of the grosser features associated with that type of heathen worship. Was that the kind of religion which the Israelites found in Canaan, against which they were constantly warned? All that we can say at the present stage of the investigation is: "Probably." Whether or not the new knowledge from Ras Shamra—and the site has still much material to be recovered and interpreted—will define more clearly the problem facing Israel time alone will tell. But what we can say already is that the spade has made a notable contribution to the background of a period which is roughly coincident with the settlement and early history of Israel in Palestine.

IV. BOGHAZ-KEUI: GREAT HITTITE CAPITAL

One of the most remarkable triumphs of Archaeology is the knowledge which it has been able to accumulate about the Hittites. Hittitology already ranks as an important sub-division of the Science, and the story is not all told yet.

Till quite recently the only source of information for the Hittites was the Bible, and its evidence was apt to be treated with scant respect by the dominant school of learning till the eve of our own century. The facts which have been brought to light have but a slight bearing on Scripture but they do make a telling bid for our interest on the score of their language.

The references to the Hittites in the Bible fall into two classes. The Hittites occur in Palestine for the most part as individuals or small groups. In the second class of references we hear of an extensive region lying to the north of Palestine, sometimes called the "Land of the Hittites", and the people clearly take their place beside the leading powers of the Middle East during the period of the Israelite kingdom. The latter representation has been amazingly confirmed by Archaeology. But the former, so far from receiving illumination, has become even more mysterious. Archaeology often settles one issue only to raise another.

Spasmodic finds in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seemed to point to a great people flourishing in the Syrian area in ancient times then unknown to History. That people turned out to be the Hittites. It was in 1906 that excavations at Boghaz-keui, in Eastern Asia Minor, revealed the capital of the Hittite Empire and the greatness of its power and culture. Clay tablets in large numbers, written in more than half-a-dozen languages, as well as inscribed monuments, have shown that the Hittites could look Assyria and Egypt in the face, and that they played a major historical rôle in the Middle East for a good thousand years. At the peak of their prosperity, from about 1400 till 1200 B.C., the Hittites fell before the "Peoples of the Sea" about the latter date, only a number of small, weak kingdoms like Arpad and Hamath (see Isa. xxxvi. 19) lingering on to perpetuate the name of Hittite for a few more centuries.

The recovered story of the long forgotten Hittite Empire stresses once again the wrong and danger of setting aside Old Testament statements that are given out as facts, even when few and incidental, as in this case. It is true that the Palestinian Hittites still abide our question. Nothing can be said of their identity or origin on archaeological grounds. But there are several theories which do justice to all the facts known at present, and which of the possibilities, if any, is preferable may be shown by the emergence of new knowledge. Is it entirely

fanciful if we view the slight Hittite contact with Israel and the slight record of the encounter in the Bible as indicative and prophetic of the future of Israel as the evangelist and teacher of all nations and kindreds and tongues? In any case, the special interest, and probably significance, of the Hittites, already hinted at, lie in this, that almost certainly the Hittite language belongs to our own great Indo-European family of languages.

V. THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

During the last few years we have witnessed an unexpected stirring of the archaeological waters in the recovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The facts that have come to light and the reason for the mild sensation caused seem to justify a brief *résumé* of the situation.

In 1947 some Bedouin found in a cave at 'Ain Feshka near the northern end of the Dead Sea, a number of Manuscripts in the form of Rolls, mostly in Hebrew. Besides, there was retrieved a mass of fragments, ranging from tiny bits to about the third of a Roll. The Jewish and American scholars in Jerusalem, who were the first to examine the find, pronounced the principal documents, from palaeographical data, to belong to about the second century B.C. After a time—too long as it turned out—the cave was located and examined by British and French experts, and roughly the same date was fixed on strictly archaeological grounds. The application of the new radio-carbon method seems to give confirmation. Most specialists in that highly technical field have accepted that dating, though others in the front rank—duly or unduly mindful of hoaxes perpetrated on experts in this domain in the past—continue to doubt. The gripping surprise is that the new manuscripts, which contain a good deal of the Old Testament, are much older than the oldest known Hebrew manuscripts—a thousand years older if the date favoured at present is correct. It is the Textual Critics whom a very old "Text" like this startles and amazes. They have suspected that a good many changes had crept into the text of the Old Testament, which had to be copied by hand century after century, often amid unsettled and disastrous conditions in Jewish history. But the new documents seem to show the familiar Massoretic text of our Hebrew Bibles, wherever the inspection of a considerable section has been possible. The total find is now reckoned to consist of seven

scrolls, and are owned by two institutions in Jerusalem, each having besides a bundle of fragments. Still another collection of scraps, apparently recovered from the cave by the official excavators, is being examined in London. Of the seven main scrolls, one is written in Aramaic. Those who have examined the cave compute the original deposit of Scrolls to have been as high as two hundred in number. Only guesses are possible on the time when early plunderings of the cave collection took place. Dates in Roman days, in the third century, and in the Arab age, in the eighth century, have been put forward. We specially deplore, however, the raiding of the cave by unknown and unskilled persons between the autumn of 1947, at the finding of the documents, and January 1948, when the official scientific inspection was carried out. Was the mass of papers the library of a religious sect? If so, why did they put them in that out-of-the-way, desolate spot? Such inevitable questions remain unanswered so far. If the major documents are from the second century before Christ—and some of the fragments are likely to be much earlier—they coincide with the time when Hebrew was still commonly written and read, and probably spoken, and that consideration may conceivably have profound implications. But the story of the last fifty years of archaeology counsels the curbing of undue speculations, while we await the full publication and the thorough examination of the material. Meantime, the recoil of recent decades from the Conjectural Emendation of the Old Testament, which was inclined to run riot in the nineteenth century, and the enhanced confidence reposed in the traditional Text are certainly not discouraged by the class of new evidence of which this Palestinian find is a notable specimen.

The Dead Sea—as well as most of the other—finds have added to our knowledge of Hebrew and cognate tongues, and the accumulated wealth of new material has become embarrassing at points and it is heartening to look forward to the promised early appearance or completion of thoroughly up-to-date dictionaries and grammars. The more direct witness of the new manuscripts can hardly fail to reassure earnest students of scripture, whose faith in the "text" has been unnecessarily and even wantonly shaken. Many academic writers have dealt most indiscreetly with the differing readings in manuscripts and "versions" (or early translations), and speak of the "corruption" of the "Text" in such a way as to breed in unlearned

readers of the Bible grave doubts of its reliability. And popularizers have gone to still more extravagant and dangerous lengths. Thoroughly to be deprecated are all such wild and baseless statements. The actual position is different. For a considerable time the representative figures of the more advanced and the more traditional schools have been virtually at one in affirming the accuracy and trustworthiness of the "Text" of our ordinary Hebrew Bibles. The former body doubtless would go to greater lengths in thinking that changes were desirable in the "Text" than the latter group could approve. But proofs are easily adduced to show that on purely objective grounds there is no reason to doubt that in the form in which the Hebrew books have come down to us we have substantially the actual words of the authors and the authentic message of scripture. That there are great and serious differences between the two Schools of thought mentioned none would deny, but it is in fields other than the Textual that the differences arise.

The "Dead Sea" Isaiah. For the student of the Old Testament Text the gem of the Dead Sea treasures is the Book of Isaiah. There are two separate Scrolls of the Book in the collection, the first far from intact, the other a complete and very fine copy, which has already been published *in facsimile*. The latter Isaiah document is in a good state of preservation, shows a fine distinctive hand, and, despite its great age, can easily be read. Only one of the small gaps involving a few letters presents any difficulty in restoring the text. The scribe does not seem to have attained the highest skill in his art. Dr. Trever tells us that in seven columns of the scroll he counted 49 mistakes,—which were afterwards corrected. Quite recently Professor G. R. Driver in an intensive study, detects every type of slip into which ancient copyists were liable to fall, and raises some interesting questions about the relation of the scribe's work and the date of the document. The scroll differs from the Accepted Text in many points of spelling and grammar, and it supplies us with a number of new variants, some of which seem to solve long-standing problems.

This short and severely selective review of a narrow strip of Bible Archaeology over the last half-century would seem to be worth-while for its promise perhaps more than its actual achievement. The story stresses time and again the demand for skilled, honest, and patient work in amassing the data of this science, and for calm and solid judgment in applying the established

results to the Bible. Those researches of the past fifty years have given us a better perspective, making plainer, for example, what archaeology really teaches and what the Bible really claims in the territory where the two studies are brought into relation. And archaeology has certainly done something to resolve debated questions in the Old Testament field, to set in relief the speciality and uniqueness of the religion of Israel on the background of the religions of neighbouring peoples, and consequently to allow the Church to bring the full Christian message (which must always draw on the Old Testament) with fresh relevance and point to bear on the needs of our day. And little objection can be taken to the religious use of our science. A noticeable trend among scientists in recent decades is that they show an interest in the social and political aspects of their discoveries, and the broader outlook has had a stimulating reflex influence on Science itself. True, religion has not been much in the eye of the professional scientist, but on his own principles and practice he cannot take serious exception to the course of those whose interests are primarily religious in making use of science in their proper studies. Archaeology has made a handsome contribution to the New Knowledge, and as all true knowledge is, as it has been put, God's knowledge, Christianity dare not neglect or underrate the new light which our day possesses. The sciences have made discoveries which favour or require a spiritual view of the universe. In particular it can hardly be denied now that the conservative theologian finds strong encouragement in the new knowledge to proclaim and commend his well-tried system with a new confidence, well-persuaded that the Gospel (in its fulness inseparable from that historic body of doctrine) is still the power of God unto salvation.

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