

JOHN BRIGHT EARLY ISRAEL IN RECENT HISTORY WRITING = Studies in Biblical Theology No. 19
SCM PRESS LTD London (1956-1960)

Page 14

There is nothing in any ancient literature to compare with the stories of the patriarchs, the exodus, the wilderness wandering and the conquest as told in the first six books of the Bible. Here we are given the history of Israel's beginnings as that history was preserved in Hebrew tradition, and believed by the Hebrews themselves. But these are certainly not contemporary historical records. Not only did they not reach their present form until centuries after the events described, they are not cast in the form of historical annals and cannot be evaluated as such. They form the Epic of the Hebrew people; they preserve the national traditions of that people.²

² I shall resolutely adhere to the neutral term 'tradition' in referring to these stories. It means simply 'what is handed down', and does not prejudice the question of historical worth. Cf. F. James, Personalities of the Old Testament (New York, Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1939), 4.

Page 15

Evaluation of tradition, and consequent reconstruction of the events, differs with each scholar consulted. As a result, treatments of the patriarchs, for example, vary from a rather full reliance upon the traditions, all the way to an extreme scepticism that denies the patriarchs historical existence and reduces them to mere clan eponyms--or even totem animals, mythical figures, or gods.¹ . . . As for the religion of early Israel, it was on the one hand, the worship of a tribal god, a war god, a storm god, a volcano god-- or what not; on the other hand, it was a full monotheism.

¹ I do not feel it necessary to document this and the following statements in detail. It is common knowledge that all these and others can be found in books produced in the last twenty-five years.