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Modern Issues in Biblical Studies

History and the Patriarchs

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ONE of the remarkable results of archaeological research during the period between the two Wars was the sudden emergence of the Patriarchal Age of Biblical History as one which could be fitted within an actually discernible period in the history of Western Asia. Or at least so it appeared to a number of scholars, who produced a considerable literature on the subject.¹ To W. F. Albright, furthermore, this discovery was of particular significance over against that literary critical reconstruction of Israel's history associated with the name of Julius Wellhausen.²

During the latter part of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries there were few data from external sources which could be used to test the early Biblical traditions. It was believed possible, however, to use the documentary sources for the reconstruction of Israel's history by assuming that the ideas and ideals contained in them were reflections of the period in which the traditions were put into writing. Concerning the period of the patriarchs little could be said from the traditions themselves, simply because the stories have been adapted for the religious purposes of the later Israelite community. It may be added that the same essential attitude toward the minimal historical value of the patriarchal traditions is continued to-day among the form-critical and traditio-historical scholars who stand in the Wellhausen succession.³

¹ For example, W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* [1st ed., Baltimore, 1940 and fl.], ch. 4. R. de Vaux, 'Les patriarches Hébreux et les découvertes Modernes', in *Revue Biblique*, liii. [1946] 321-348; lv. [1948] 321-347; lvi. [1949] 5-36; H. H. Rowley, 'Recent Discovery and the Patriarchal Age', in *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays* [London, 1952], 271-305; G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* [London, 1957], ch. 3, and the references cited by these sources.

² See Albright, *ib.*; *The Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible* [New York, 1932 fl.], ch. 3; and 'The Ancient Near East and the Religion of Israel', in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, lix. [1940] 85-112.

³ See below; and cf. G. von Rad, *Das Erste Buch Mose* [ATD; Göttingen, 1952], 22-33. Nothing is said

For Albright and for those influenced by his radical empiricism in historical matters it is precisely this negativism which archaeology has now thrust aside. Literary-critical and form-critical work can tell us much about the transmission, refraction and final editing of traditions, information of vital importance for Biblical study. In themselves, however, such internal methodologies can never really assess the historical in the traditional. External sources of information are needed, and these archaeology, it is felt, has provided in sufficient amount to make fresh and positive hypotheses possible.

In other words, the 'literary-critical school' believed it possible to step immediately from the dating of documentary sources into history, not the patriarchal history itself but Israelite history between the ninth and fifth centuries B.C. If this in some measure has been shown to be wrong, are we now to go to the opposite extreme and assert that archaeology has proved the critics wrong and that again we can with confidence step directly from the pages of Genesis into the arena of history, this time in the second millennium B.C.?⁴

Gerhard von Rad has summarized the new perspectives provided by Form-Criticism somewhat as follows in his *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, i. [Munich, 1957, pp. 13-15]: Behind the Hexateuch there exists, not the actual course of events, but simply earlier traditions, each with its own conceptions which must be studied for themselves. Instead of asking what is historical, one must ask

in this brief paper about current Scandinavian work on the Old Testament because, as far as I am aware, their history-of-tradition work has not led them to an interest in history itself. For a vivid example, see E. Nielsen's *Shechem* [Copenhagen, 1955], a very learned work which actually tells us very little about the city's history.

⁴ It has not infrequently been assumed that this is what is being claimed, though the assumption is largely based upon popularizations like that of Werner Keller, *The Bible as History: Archaeology Confirms the Book of Books* [London, 1956].