

The Bible in Modern Scholarship, edited by J. Philip Hyatt (Abingdon Press: Nashville) 1957

Moshe Greenberg Response to Roland de Vaux's "Method in the Study of Early Hebrew History."

p. 38 One of the potent solvents of confidence in the historicity of Israel's early traditions is the etiologial approach to them. It cannot be denied that etiology is a prime motive of the tradition; the popular historiography of every people is etiologial through and through; it seeks to preserve those memories of the past that make the present meaningful. To conclude from this that popular historiography is a collection of ad hoc invented etiologies of contemporary institutions and values is both a non-sequitur and a tax on credulity. The traditions of a migrant nation with a strongly developed historical sense will of course attach to places, persons, and tribes, since events necessarily occur to persons and tribes at given places. But to suppose that places - sanctuaries, stoneheaps, ruins, towns, for example - can generate peculiar, non-pattered stories such as are found in the conquest traditions is another tax on credulity.

p. 42 But a study of their literary styles and habits, especially with an eye to the differences between our expectations and their performance, would put solid ground under the feet of the man who would speak confidently about what many and may not be expected in a piece of ancient near Eastern literature. In his comparative study of Egyptian literature, T. Eric Peet displayed irritation at the awkwardness of Egyptian narrations. "This incident," he writes of a passage in the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, "is an excrescence. It has no relation to the rest of the story and it holds up the action. It is probably an allusion to some myth . . . and the mythologist has here got the better of the story-teller, to the disadvantage of the story." Or again of the style of Sinuhe: "At one point the whole action is held up while he delivers a metrical panegyric on the present king of Egypt . . . When the moment of [his] recall comes, a long, bombastic and extravagant court document is blatantly inserted, and no attempt is made to weave it into the texture of the narrative. It is even brutally labelled Copy of the decree which was brought to the humble servant concerning his return to Egypt, and we are not even spared a copy of Sinuhe's acknowledgement of this decree, couched in terms of only less stilted. After these interludes, which, be it