

Study of Oral Transmission

1. Statements as to alleged accuracy of oral transmission, with precise references.

Albright, W. F., New Horizons in Biblical Research (London:Oxford) 1966

p.8 The second distinction to be drawn is between the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and the rest of the book. The first eleven chapters are neither history nor theology; they are not poetry, but neither are they prose. They are in a special category of their own, which originally must have been poetic in form, and certainly had from the beginning an irreducible religious content which was never lost. These traditions were handed down from time immemorial, and gradually deepened their spiritual character as they took their final (and present) form. If we recognize the essentially religious character of the first chapter of Genesis, we can safely say that this chapter will not be easily antiquated. The extraordinary thing is that it is more evolutionary in some respects than anything published before the early nineteenth century in Europe, as far as I know.

p.9 The rest of Genesis contains traditions of historical character, though still of course going back to oral tradition. The significance of the latter is that oral material takes on certain fixed forms designed to ensure the preservation of features which might otherwise drop out. There were also aids to memory which were interspersed through oral compositions to draw attention to the meaningful content of words and names, and to associate a given tradition with the correct persons and places; such mnemonic aids are called aetiological.

The finds at Nuzi illuminate some of the obscurities in the customary law of Genesis.¹ Before the Nuzi tablets were published, scholars were quite unable to explain why the mysterious Eliezer of Damascus appeared as the heir of Abraham before the birth of Isaac. We now know that since, according to old Patriarchal practice, property was inalienable, a legal fiction was set up whereby, if a person had to mortgage his property because of bad harvests or rash gambling, the creditor was adopted by the debtor, whose property he inherited. We may conjecture that this Eliezer was a rich Damascene merchant who, like Damascene merchants ever since, lent money to the surrounding peasants and nomads, by whom he had himself adopted.²

p.10 Another odd story tells of Rachel's stealing her father's household gods, his 'teraphim', and sitting on them so that Laban's search proved useless. In the Nuzi texts, when there is doubt about an inheritance, for instance if there is no valid will, prima facie evidence for right of inheritance is possession of the family gods. The Genesis passage itself offers no explanation of the incident: it has simply been handed down by one editor after another, none knowing what it meant, but all loath to cut it out in case it might have some real significance. These are just two examples of the many mysteries in Genesis that are being solved by the discoveries at Nuzi and elsewhere.

Today, therefore, nearly all Biblical scholars are coming to recognize that the stories of Genesis go back to very ancient oral traditions. These oral traditions dramatize. They omit historical details that the modern historian would like to have. But they preserve details of literary and religious significance, so that their value for pedagogical purposes is very much greater than it would have been if they had just described wars, movements of tribes, genealogies and so on.