

[The Presbyterian, July 5, 1928]

“What Remains of the Old Testament?”- A Book Review

By Rev. David S. Clark, D.D.

PROF. GUNKEL begins with a quotation from Nietzsche, whom he is fond of quoting, implying agreeably to Gunkel that the Old Testament no longer holds the place in our faith that once it did. At the inception of the Christian church, the Old Testament was accepted as a work of God, divine and infallible. As to this view, he remarks: “Bible science since the eighteenth century first challenged that view, then attacked it, and finally shook it to its foundations, if it has not completely destroyed it.”

Many traditions have been proved erroneous. Passages in Isaiah are not from the hand of that prophet. Daniel does not belong to the Exile. Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes were not written by Solomon. It is questionable if one single psalm is Davidic, and that the first five books are the work of Moses was a mistake of tradition. “The positions are nowadays regarded as common ground for all workers in the sphere of Old Testament science, and accepted even by conservative scholars.” This is the bland assumption of the critic. It belongs to his disease. Evidently he has never heard of Prof. R. D. Wilson, Harold Wiener, Dr. Sanda of Prague, or even of his own countrymen, Max Loehr, Edouard Koenig, Wilhelm Moeller, Reich, Dahse, Erdmans, Troelstra, Noldeke, et al.

To him the Bible is full of mistakes, puerilities, and acquiescences in immoralities – plant life before heavenly bodies – the stories of Ballam, Jonah and Elisha – and “How could Cain marry a wife and build a city when there were no human beings in the world?” “Jacob by his deception obtains the divine blessing, and no words of disapproval. “Yaveh is the God of Israel and of no other people.” “That the Old Testament is a safe guide to true religion and morality cannot any longer be maintained.” Such is Gunkel. Why not quote: “Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?” “Thou shalt not kill, steal, commit adultery, bear false witness.” “Ye shall be holy, for I am holy.” “Love ye therefore the stranger, for ye were strangers.” Gunkel's estimate differs *toto coelo* from that of Jesus Christ: “the Scriptures cannot be broken.” We prefer the estimate of Christ.

What is left of the Old Testament? A little poetry, a little imagery, a little story and song, retribution for good and evil, Jehovah's sovereignty in history, great religious emotion, a galaxy

of great characters, growing conception of God and human duty and worship, and hope of a better day. Yes, some few things remain salvaged from the wreck and rubbish.

The conception of God attributed to the Old Testament is characteristic of this class of writers. "The God of Israel, who revealed himself to Moses at Sinai, was originally a volcanic Deity. It is in keeping with this idea of Deity that War was conceived by the people to be a special revelation of God; and with what terrible realism was Yaweh pictured as the God of War. Dreadful were the deeds done for this dread God. Ancient Israel sacrificed to its God in the wild fury of war entire cities with all their inhabitants as an awful whole-offering." This type of writer always assumes that the early conception of God was tribal and local, and that the order of development was from polytheism to monotheism. Accordingly, the writer asserts: "It was only at the end of its history that Israel attained to monotheism." The purpose is to force all things into the molds of evolution. The idea is very much overworked. The best authorities take the opposite view. The first chapter of Genesis is undeniably monotheistic. The first commandment reads: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Moses declared: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." That there was progress in knowledge and character through periods of Israel's history, none needs to deny; but the position of the writer and his class is extreme and partisan, and leaves out of account the evident deterioration of conception and life.

His attitude toward the Scriptures is exhibited in the following: "And now one word to gather together all the various points which have been raised in the foregoing pages. We have shown that it is only when we have made up our minds to surrender unreservedly the ancient doctrine of Inspiration that the Old Testament reveals its true greatness" (greater and better because untrue and immoral). "We have brought it down from heaven to earth, and now it rises majestically before our eyes from earth to heaven. We have also seen that it contains much that appears to us far from admirable, many things that would be dangerous and destructive to our religion and morality, if they were carried over unintelligently into our time; and scientific honor demands that we do not, like a bad advocate, lay emphasis only on one side, but that, like a just judge, we frankly set forth both sides." Yet, after all, the author's pretensions, his representations are extremely one-sided and biased. He assumes that whatever is recorded is approved; which is no more true in Scripture than in any history. It is safe to say that the perusal of the Scriptures has invariably led men to avoid the sins so unsparingly recorded therein. "These things were written for our admonition," said a greater than Professor Gunkel.

In the literary history of the Scriptures, he thinks that short compositions are evidence of early date, and long ones proof of late date. Facts will not bear out the assumption as a

reference to Job, an early writing, will show. However, there has been much manipulation of acts in the interest of critical theories, even in regard to Job.

Narrative portions of the Old Testament are distributed into myths, folk-tales, popular sage (hero story or myth), longer romances, religious legend, and historical narrative. The terminology explains the assertion that "much of the Old Testament which was a matter of faith once, has ceased to hold that position in our minds."

The last chapter is entitled "Jacob." "The view that the patriarchs were really and literally historic persons has not been universally surrendered, but is not now held with the same sure confidence as before. There can be no doubt whatever that the narratives that deal with the patriarchs are legends and not true history."

The Wellhausen school held that the lives of the patriarchs were veiled stories of the events in the life of nations. Jacob is called Israel, Esau is Edom, Laban is called the Aramaean, the covenant between Jacob and Laban is understood to be a treaty between Israel and Aram. The supplanting of Esau by Jacob is meant to represent the retrogression of Edom before the expanding and growing Israel. When twelve sons are ascribed to Jacob that really means only that the people of Israel were made up of twelve tribes. Gunkel concedes the Wellhausen position only in part; and questions if the *whole* patriarchal history can be thus explained. Steuernagel carries out this view in the narrative of Jacob. Thus Jacob's contest with the "demon" at Peniel means the victorious fight of the tribe of Jacob with the inhabitant of the Peniel district. Joseph's many-colored coat is the superior dress of Joseph's rich descendants, which excited the envy of the poorer tribes of Israel.

Even Gunkel regards this as too exaggerated and rationalistic. His view is that these patriarchal narratives are partly folk-tales, probably based on some unverifiable events, partly ethnological parables, partly myth, and partly hero-stories. And that these layers of composition can be distinguished. Thus he goes below the record as it stands, below the J and E elements of the records, to the substrata at the very basis of the composition, and attempts the separation of the materials on which the narrative is founded. Part of the material is ethnological, but only a part, and this not the most original part.

Figures, like Jacob, were originally the heroes of primitive narratives, i.e., folk-tales, and these figures were subsequently raised to the dignity of national ancestors. Accordingly, the oldest narratives were folk-tales, and later were combined with historical reminiscences. The patriarchal stories contain an abundance of mythical material, and ancestral figures are to be

understood in this way. We therefore have the following order: (1) Folk-tales with heroes largely or wholly mythical; (2) Historical reminiscences; (3) Heroes raised to national ancestors; (4) the stories used to explain national or tribal events. The Jacob stories are: (1) About Jacob and Esau; (2) About Jacob and Laban; (3) About theophanies and holy places; (4) About the children of Jacob. According to Gunkel, these stories were originally independent. Each narrative was current separately, entirely unconnected with the others. Because Jacob is pictured: (1) With Esau and Laban as a skillful shepherd; (2) At Peniel as a strong, fearless foe-man; (3) Subsequently as an aged father. Therefore is it "*proved*" that each story existed by itself as a separate entity."

Passing by further intricacies of method we have the following results in regard to some of the narratives:

There is a legend about Reuben (Gen 35). It tells us that Reuben had illicit relations with Jacob's concubine Bilha, and received his father's curse. The narrative originated thus: The *tribe* Reuben, at first strong, later fell into complete decay. The tribal decline is explained by the declaration that Reuben had been cursed by the national ancestor. The curse is explained by the story of unfilial seduction. "The historical element is the tradition of (tribal) Reuben's fall; the actual content of the narrative is derived from the storehouse of poetical invention."

In the case of Joseph, the folk-tale of fictitious story serves to give a name to the tribe of Joseph which, in conformity to the narrative, was the youngest and best of all the tribes. We gather from the discussion that Joseph is not to be regarded as an historical character, but the hero of a fiction.

Another series of stories concerns theophanies and holy places. Some events are recorded as happening at certain points of Jacob's travels, e.g., wrestling with an angel at Peniel. This is declared to be a local tradition attached to the Jacob story at the time it was reduced to writing, but originally had no reference to Jacob. The reasons given for this assumption are forced and irrelevant.

Genesis 35:8 relates that Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died and was buried at Bethel. Because this single verse is unconnected with the immediate context it is adduced as proof of the loose character of the narrative, and an indication that it was inserted when the tradition was reduced to writing, "for why should Jacob be carrying his mother's nurse about him wherever he went?" Surely it is more reasonable to suppose that an aged and faithful servant was tenderly

cared for in Jacob's home, and that the verse appears here because it was at this place in the journey that her death occurred. Why make difficulties where there are none?

The Jacob-Esau stories have their peculiar interpretation. The folk-tales tell how the precedence passed from Esau to Jacob. But Jacob is a shepherd and Esau a hunter. The main features of the stories are based on the difference of occupation. That these stories illustrate the national predominance of Israel over Edom is a later addition by redactors. The real purport is that the shepherd outs the hunter. And naturally it is told by shepherds to shepherds with glee and a feeling of superiority. The ethnological color was added at a later age, giving a new meaning to the tales when Esau was identified with Edom, Laban with Aram, and Jacob with Israel. Such tales of contests between members of different calling are frequent in the primitive literature of other nations, which appears to be quite sufficient proof, and the only proof adduced, that this is the right interpretation. It is scarcely evident that the views of Gunkel are preferable to those of Steuernagle and the Wellhausen School. They are all entirely imaginative and void of any sound proof. The Bible as it stands is more intelligible and rational than the fabricated schemes of such dreamers.

Explanations of this type are having their run at the present time. Recently a speaker at the meeting of the American Philosophical Society declared that Adam was a tribe. "The names from Adam to Terah, with their unusually long ages, are perfectly understandable as clans and tribes. The clan of Adam lived 933 years; that of Seth 912 years, and they, instead of being fathers and sons at the ages of 105 and 130, died at those ages." All this is very interesting, but what we long to see is, not assertion, but some evidence on which to base the assertion. If such positions can be sustained by a grammatical reading of the text, we would consider that evidence, but as mere suppositions they lack force.

Methods similar to those of Gunkel, Steuernagle, and Ed. Meyer are now being applied to the New Testament, seeking to dissociate it from miracle stories and speculative theology, which are claimed to be no part of the Christian message. The miracle stories are said to be injected into the past as symbols of church rites and events at a later age. Healing the sick, cleansing lepers, feeding the multitude are easily made symbolical of social betterment due to the Christian spirit and service. Casting out devils was only a reference to the conversion of the Gentiles. Other miracles are but veiled stories of the conversion of the Jews. Jesus, it is said, was not an historical person, but a symbol of moral and spiritual truth. The cross was an implement used in initiation ceremonies to imply consecration to a strenuous or dangerous task. Thus the Gospels become fictitious narratives, written back into a remote age to illustrate some

ecclesiastical form, or give justification to some teaching of a later time. Such historization, as it is called, is but palpable fraud, which scandalizes the character of the early Christianity which it is designed to support. The effort to rid the Gospels of historical trustworthiness is not a new one, and is a sequel to similar efforts on the Old Testament. Wellhausen, Gunkel, *et al.* have their imitators who apply their methods to the imaginary reconstruction of all part of the Scriptures. The one thing wanting is evidence; and an ounce of proof is worth a pound of speculation.

Gunkel thinks that a history of Hebrew literature is as yet impossible. None the less, he attempts a far more impossible task. He endeavors to go behind the record in the Old Testament, behind the supposed J, E and P documents, behind the sources from which they drew, and determine what is mythical and what historical in the oral traditions that preceded any written account. It is needless to compute the chances of failure. The product is purely imaginary, or wholly subjective, to say the most. The works of Reimarus, Paulus, Strauss and Baur on the New Testament are now but lumber in the libraries. The reconstructionists of the history and narratives of the Old Testament can hardly hope to fare any better. The writer who asserts so glibly and gladly that the Old Testament has fallen from its high esteem in the minds of men is not, in our humble judgment, a friend of the Book.

Philadelphia, Pa.

*What Remains of the Old Testament? By Hermann Gunkel, Halle Germany. Translated by A. K. Dallas. Preface and commendations by Prof. James Moffat. The Macmillan Co.; \$1.50.