Historiography and Hebrew Historical Writing

by J. P. Burnyeat

Mr. Burnyeat, who holds the degree of Master of Christian Studies from Regent College, Vancouver, paid special attention in the course of his studies there to the principles informing Old Testament historical writing, and has given us some of his findings in the following article.

THE subject matter of history, according to H. Meyerhoff's introduction in his *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*[1], presents a problem. R. K. Harrison's *Introduction to the Old Testament*[2] says we must look at the ancient Near East and Biblical records from the point of view of their own time. The records of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem, the "Israel" stele of Merneptah, and the Siloam inscription, are of interest and value but such concern and worth are somewhat limited for these records can be seen as mere narrative and a complex of words asserted by an act of the will.

What we have to do at this point, according to Meyerhoff,[3] is to distinguish between history and chronicle. The records examined —the "Israel" stele; Sennacherib at Jerusalem; and the Siloam inscription—would technically be defined as chronicles because of their prevalent attitudes. The stele of Merneptah is a poetic eulogy of a universally victorious Pharaoh.[4] Sennacherib's Jerusalem siege strikes us by its figurative presentation and therefore by its allusive nature. Such presentation and nature are obviously in these forms because though worded as personal narrative the Assyrian account does not have to suggest the king himself was present at Jerusalem. His palace reliefs show him at Lachish[5] from which he sent an embassy to Hezekiah demanding the surrender of Jerusalem (2 Kings 19: 8 ff.). We can accept the coincidences of these accounts without having to make any dogmatic interpretations of details. The Siloam inscription itself is only slightly less poetic, because cutting through the rock to gain water is a really triumphal achievement.

1 H. Meyerhoff, *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (Doubleday Anchor Books, New York, 1959), p. 18.
2 R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1971).
3 H. Meyerhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
4 J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1955), p. 376.
5 D. W. Thomas (ed.), *Documents from Old Testament Times* (Harper & Row, New York, 1958), p. 69.

As we have seen them, by interacting with them, these three events thus meet the definition of "chronicle" rather than of history for chronicle as well as documents seem to precede history[6]. These three accounts can be arranged in a roughly chronological order today and may be said to meet the qualification of limitation to the superficial or external. "Chronicle" is then only past history as well as an act of the will; there is a disconnectedness in the Sennacherib account that qualifies it for our definition here and the Siloam inscription meets the definition because it has its own spiritual attitude. Obviously, in all three records there is a setting down of individual facts. The questions of what, in the ancient Near East and in the Bible, is history are answered by saying that such accounts as we examine here are "chronicles". Where there is disconnectedness there is "dead" history, according to Meyerhoff, and where there is chronological order—as with the Siloam inscription and Sennacherib's account—there is part order, for the Siloam tunnel was dug in preparation and anticipation of a siege[7]. We shall have occasion to refer to this idea of "order" in our conclusion.

The only commentator Harrison mentions in *Introduction to the Old Testament*[8] as being of particular relevence to the discussion of "chronicle" is Spengler. His was the nineteenth-century view—and in it he departed from his fellows, who said that optimistic evolutionary concepts of progress were a valid frame of reference. Spengler emphasized the importance of the cultural contribution each epoch of history made to its successor. In that sense the Siloam inscription and the "Israel" stele present a valid view of history for determinatives should have meaning, and contrasts between them in the same context of "people" should have significance. If we grant Meyerhoff's idea that the methods of history are often dubious and suspect and that emotive meanings and ideological concepts invariably enter the study of history and are subject to change and social climate, the argument for determinatives is a good one but is unfortunately not conclusive. Spengler tended to qualify it by substituting his biological metaphor of society for the dynamics of historical processes.[9]

The true meaning of history is to note the close bond between events, to penetrate into their core, and discuss these in logical order. History is "living chronicle" and contemporaneous with the event and also an act of thought—another and quite different spiritual attitude. Fact, theory, and interpretation should form a closely knit complex in historical narrative. Historians have a duty to ask by what logic is the narrative assembled and what rational factors

6 H. Meyerhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
7 D. W. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
8 R. K. Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 293.
9 H. Meyerhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

determine the judicious selection. They have a further task—to use the tools of "order", "selection" and "interpretation" correctly and with some idea of objectivity. The meaning of history lies in the multiplicity of individual manifestations at different ages and in different cultures: All of them are immediate to God[10].

Although we have no contemporary record of the Abraham of *Genesis* this negative evidence is inconclusive: because of it we should not doubt his real existence. The absolute reality of his social achievements as shown by cuneiform documents of the early to middle second millenium B.C. warns us that any such doubt must be founded on more tangible evidence if it is to be worth anything in the way of consideration. We must have more positive, tangible, reasons for doubt. As Noth has pointed out: "If. . .the figures of the patriarchs lived on among the Israelite tribes as the recipients of divine manifestations and the founders of cults which continued to be practised by their descendants and with which their names remained associated, they were clearly men who had once lived as historical persons. . . [they] might have appeared in the vicinity of Palestine as, in accordance with Old Testament tradition, the first heralds of the later Israel"[11]. Genesis 14 shows Abraham working within a far-flung context of ancient oriental history, though Noth himself finds the story isolated and therefore possibly unauthentic tradition and prefers to think remembrance of Abraham was due to the peculiar evolution of the Pentateuch tradition.[12]

According to K. A. Kitchen three lines of evidence are available to refute Noth's ideas of Genesis 14. In his archaeological surveys in Transjordan Glueck found evidence of a sharp decrease in population density between the nineteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C.[13] and he would link this with the destructive campaign mentioned in Genesis 14. Thus, names of the four Eastern kings Arioch, Tid'al, Chedor-laomer and Amraphel are typically Arriwuk, Tudkhalia, and an Elamite ruler of the Old Babylonian period, while Amraphel is uncertain;[14] thirdly, the system of power alliances (four kings against five) is typical in Mesopotamian politics between 2000 and 1750 B.C. but not before or after this general period.[15]

Personal names of the patriarchs can also be directly compared with identical or similarly formed names in Mesopotamian and Egyptian documents of this time. Abraham may be compared with

10 *Loc cit.*
11 M. Noth, *History of Israel* (A. & C. Black, London,[2] 1960) pp. 122 f.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
13 K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Tyndale Press, London, 1966), p. 43
14 *Ibid.*, pp. 43 f.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Aburahana (in the execration-texts) and with Aba(m)rama in tablets from Dilbat.[16] We also know two things about the Negeb. Abraham and Isaac spent time in this area (Genesis 20: 1 and 24: 62) and seasonal occupation of the area is archaeologically attested for the twenty-first to nineteenth centuries B.C. (Middle Bronze Age I) but not 100 years earlier or 800 years later. As Abraham and Isaac kept flocks and herbs and occasionally grew grain their activities would best fit the Middle Bronze Age I period 2100-1800 B.C., considering their need of assured water supplies, pasture, or fodder for livestock —especially for sojourners.

Patriarchal religion prominently included the concept of "God of the Fathers". The best parallels for this come from the Old Assyrian tablets of the nineteenth century B.C. from Cappadocia.[17] In respect to patriarchal inheritance customs there are close parallels in the Nuzi archives from Mesopotamia around 1500 B.C.[18] These parallels do not necessarily imply a date for the patriarchs as late as 1500 B.C. because Old Babylonian tablets from Ur (nineteenth to eighteenth centuries B.C.) would afford equally good parallels.[19]

The study of historiography and Hebrew writing as historical leads Burrows to conclude that the ancient Egyptians and Assyrians had no idea of history but only that things happen because the gods willed it so. "With the Jews", he said, "the case sɪ different. In their belief, human existence started at the creation and their history had advanced (and was at any time advancing) by a series of ups and downs, toward a point in the future, 'the new heaven and the new earth'. The 'ups' were periods of success, the fruit of obedience to Yahweh's will, the 'downs' were periods of failure, due to disobedience. . ."[20]. It could be said however that this idea of things happening because the gods will it so does not prove the Assyrians and Egyptians were lacking in historical method (the giving of an orderly, selective, interpretative account), for Sennacherib's and Merneptah's annals—and they are well called that—are orderly in their presentation. Only, we see them today as part of the *materials* historians can work with. The Assyrian doctrine of analogy in which there are two realms—the god's and the state's—suggests that where there is a balance of forces and order instead of chaos in the god's realm, the

16 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
17 W. F. Albright, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 163 (1961), pp. 48 f.
18 K. A. Kitchen, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
19 *Loc. cit.*
20 J. P. V. D. Balsdon's review of R. C. Dentan (ed.), *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (Yale University Press, 1955) in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 7 (1956), p. 261, in which Balsdon refers to the contribution of M. Burrows entitled *Ancient Israel*.

same balance would be found in the state. There is no sense that history had a beginning and would have an end: their annals had no lessons to teach.

This idea that there should be something teachable is a recognized one[21]. There is, however, disagreement as to when to begin to look for this feature: when to place the beginning of Israel's history. Noth would start at the conquest of Canaan. He says, "A more difficult question. . . is in what sense the Pentateuch can be called a historical work. . .it is certain that it did not originate and was not planned, at any rate from the outset, as a historical work at all. ..It. . . conveys historical information but. . .was not designed and drafted as a coherent historical narrative. . .It is only when we reach the second and third quarter of the 2nd century B.C. that a detailed historical tradition becomes available once more in the two books of Maccabees which have come down to us in the Hellenstic form of. . .the Greek Septuagint"[22]. Bright would start with the prehistory of a people, so far as it can be known, and following this line of thought says "The. . .proper course lies in a balanced examination of. . .traditions against the background of the world of the day and in the light of that, making such positive statements as the evidence allows"[23].

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21 J. Bright, *History of Israel* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1955), p. 41.
22 M. Noth, *op. cit.*, pp. 43 f.
23 J. Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 69.