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New Trends in Old Testament Criticism

By P. C. CRAIGIE MA BD. A paper originally given at Cranmer Hall, Durham.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER is two-fold. Firstly, it will be necessary to survey the present state of Old Testament scholarship, and in particular to note the state of flux existing in this area of study. Secondly, some indications of new trends will be pointed out, and a few opinions ventured as to the direction these trends might take.

We shall deal separately with 'docu-

mentary analysis', 'form criticism', and the 'traditio-historical' method, or oral tradition. Though the treatment of the subjects will be separate, it should not be thought that these three different approaches to the study of the Old Testament are completely separate disciplines. In many modern treatments, there is a tendency for the various methods to be integrated in varying degrees (e.g. Eissfeldt and Noth), although those who hold to the 'traditio-historical' method tend to stand in opposition to 'documentary analysis' (e.g. Pedersen and Engnell).

DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

Of the three areas to be considered, this will be dealt with in the briefest fashion. This is because the subject has already been submitted to a thorough study by K. A. Kitchen in his lectures to the TSF annual conference, 1965 (*Pentateuchal Criticism and Interpretation*, available in duplicated form from the TSF). Here I will simply give a brief sketch of this approach to the study of the Old Testament, and follow it with one observation.

Essentially, 'documentary analysis' is an attempt to disentangle the sources which were used by the writers or compilers of the Old Testament. The method is perfectly valid, provided that its limitations are appreciated. For instance, the Chronicler plainly draws on material from *Samuel and Kings*. And again the writer of *Joshua* mentions one of his sources by name — the *Book of Jashar* (Joshua 10: 13). Documentary analysis, however, is developed further than this, as may be seen from a literary treatment of the Pentateuch. It is generally held that four main sources went into the making of the Pentateuch (J, E, D and P); this is a position widely held by Old Testament scholars today.

Kitchen's lectures deal thoroughly with the criteria by which these supposed sources are identified. The observation which I wish to add, is that whilst documentary analysis enjoys majority approval in this country, there is an important school of Old Testament study — the so-called Uppsala School — which is in basic disagreement with the tenets of the documentary hypothesis. I will briefly refer to two scholars of this school, for the sake of example.

Firstly, I would draw attention to the four volume work *Israel* (reprinted 1964) by J. Pedersen. His literary position comes out most clearly in the full notes appended to the text. We will look at Genesis 34 for an example of his position. At the time he wrote, it was almost unanimously held by critics using the documentary analysis method that the chapter was compiled from two irreconcilable sources; it was claimed that this was the only way by which to explain the large number of apparent

contradictions in the chapter (this position was substantially held by Dillman, Wellhausen, Kuenen, Gunkel, Driver, etc.). Pedersen, however, contrary to this strong body of opinion, declares this to be a false view based upon a false conception of the Old Israelitic relationship between the individual and the community (*op. cit.*, vol. I-II, p. 521f.). The significance of the point I wish to make is simply one of method. The criteria which gave rise to a documentary analysis of this particular passage could in fact be explained within the sociological background of the event described. Therefore the method is called into question.

Secondly, Engnell in his *Introduction (Gamla Testamentet, 1945)* indicates three points which, he holds, tell against documentary analysis: (i) Archaeological discovery and linguistic research have increased our respect for the reliability of the Old Testament tradition. (ii) Form criticism has shown that different literary forms can come from the same source, and that repetition with variations is part of the narrator's technique. (iii) Advances in the study of religion have shown that the Wellhausen — or documentary — theory is an artificial construction erected on the insecure foundation of the evolutionary hypothesis. (For details of the above points, see G. W. Anderson's article in *Harvard Theological Review* Oct., 1950, Vol. XLIII, from which the substance of this paragraph is taken.)

The point which I wish to make here is not primarily concerned with the validity of the judgment of Pedersen and Engnell. It is simply to point out that documentary analysis can by no means be said to have the validity and authority of being a scientific method. It is essentially hypothetical, and has been very seriously attacked by scholars such as Engnell and Pedersen, not to mention others mentioned by Kitchen in his lectures. Consequently, 'Introductions', 'Theologies of the Old Testament', and 'Histories of Israel', in so far as they are dependent on this method, draw conclusions that are of necessity hypothetical. It is not the purpose of this paper to denounce the method completely, but simply to issue a warning about its hypothetical nature in view of the present position of Old Testament scholarship.

FORM CRITICISM

Form criticism, as a literary discipline, did not originate in the area of Old

¹ Since this article was written, the supply of these duplicated notes has been exhausted. Many of the major points, however, reappear in *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, by K. A. Kitchen (Tyndale Press 192pp., 18s. 6d.), published in December 1966.

Testament studies. It had been used for almost a century before its application to the Bible, particularly in the field of German folk-literature; its principal exponent in this area being Grimm. This type of criticism works on the principle that 'folk memory' operates in small units, often no longer than a couplet of poetry. These units were thought to grow out of a specific situation (*Sitz im Leben*) such as a funeral, wedding, or victory.

The method was first applied to the Old Testament by Gunkel in extensive studies of Genesis and the Psalms. In principle, the method had its values, but it was applied with such rigour by Gunkel that in many places he well-nigh re-wrote the Psalms to fit in with the method. Subsequent works were more balanced, however, and a useful classification of Psalms according to types was worked out (*Royal Psalms, Individual Laments, etc.*). The method has also been used outside the Psalms; for instance, G. von Rad has subjected Deuteronomy and the 'Holiness Code' (Lev. 17-27) to a thorough form critical study (*Studies in Deuteronomy*, 1953). Likewise, his two volumes *Theology of the Old Testament* incorporate many of the results of form critical work. A work of a rather different nature, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (1962), by Brevard Childs, also employs form critical analysis in its treatment of its theme. These are just a few examples of the many works dependent to some extent on the form critical method.

This paper is not concerned with a full explanation of the workings of form criticism. It is rather the validity of the method that is under consideration here. The point at issue is whether or not we must agree with W. F. Albright when he writes — 'The student of the Ancient Near East finds that the methods of Gunkel are not only applicable, but are the only ones that can be applied' (*From Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd edition, 1957, p. 77).

A few questions need to be asked about such methods before they can be accepted so completely. First of all, on what grounds is the form critical method taken from the field of German folk lore (and an Indo-European language) and applied to Biblical material (and a Semitic language)? This is not to deny that the method may apply to both language groups, but simply a plea for a thorough authentication of its validity as a method within the area of Near Eastern Languages. Can form criti-

cism be applied in as radical a way to the literature of a language contemporary with the Biblical language, and of the same language group? The evidence is not yet forthcoming in any convincing manner.

Again, when the form critical units of study are little more than groups of a few words (as with Childs and von Rad, *op. cit.*), by what criteria can it be established that they *are* form critical units? The word group may be no more than idiom, but whereas idiom is simply a vehicle of meaning in a language, a form critical unit carries with it the overtones of having a 'sitz im leben' which may be established by careful study. There comes a point, also, when any author must use certain word patterns in order to convey a specific meaning; whenever this meaning is to be conveyed, that particular word pattern must be employed. But it seems that these word patterns will be called form critical units within the study of a particular theme, and on this basis a 'sitz im leben' will be found for them. Thus Brevard Childs subjects the phrase 'God remembers' to a form critical study (*op. cit.* p. 34). Even if it be granted that the method has a certain validity, it seems quite possible that the words could be used in a perfectly ordinary way without there being any kind of formalised overtones. On what grounds, then, can it be established that a phrase such as this is actually a form critical unit? Any such deduction would seem to be entirely subjective, unless all the implications of the method have already been thoroughly established.

Before summarising this section on form criticism, a few warnings will be given from scholars who are cautious concerning the value of this method.

Firstly, in a very valuable article by D. N. Freedman (*Interpretation*, 1963 Vol. XVII p. 308f.) the following two caveats are given concerning form criticism: (i) The terminology of form criticism (e.g., 'legend', 'myth') implies more of a value judgment than a strict description; in other words, form critical classifications tend to be 'loaded' words. (ii) Form criticism is a circular method. The 'sitz im leben' is reconstructed on the basis of the material, which is said to reflect a certain type of setting: then the reconstructed setting is used to interpret or re-interpret the contents or related material. The method is both circular and subjective.

A second caution applies to the realm

of historical writing concerning Israel. It is made by John Bright in his book, *Early Israel in Recent History Writing*, (1956). He writes: 'Form criticism . . . can never of itself pass verdict on the historicity of tradition' (p. 123). The main reference is to Martin Noth's work which depends considerably on form critical results.

There is a final warning which concerns von Rad's *Theology of the Old Testament*, another work which leans heavily on the form critical method. James Barr has a very acute review of this book in the *Expository Times*, Feb. 1962, and makes the following point: 'The next important point about von Rad's *Theology* is its close connection with a particular direction in critical study, namely that associated with that of Alt and Noth as well as the author himself. It is in fact one of the attractions of this book that its critical and theological study run closely together. But this can mean difficulties also. How much of the theological presentation of this book will be acceptable to those like John Bright who have seen the critical and historical problems of the Hexateuch in a different light?'

To summarise this section on form criticism, the point of significance again is that it cannot be said to command the authority of being scientific. It has its values, and particularly so in the study of the Psalms, but its validity as a method to be applied to the whole Bible needs careful scrutiny.

THE TRADITIO-HISTORICAL METHOD AND ORAL TRADITION

This relatively new method of study is contained for the most part in the works of the Scandinavian scholars of the 'Uppsala School'. It is used mainly in the study of the prophets, although it has also been applied to other types of Old Testament literature. The contention is that the prophetic material underwent a considerable period of oral transmission before being reduced to written form. Thus Nyberg (*Studien zum Hoseabuche* 1935), one of the first scholars to call attention to this method, concludes that we can never be sure of getting back to the *ipsissima verba* of the prophets; we must content ourselves with the tradition about what they said. The method was given fuller treatment by the Norwegian scholar, H. Birkeland, who supported his general contentions by reference to the *Qu'ran* in Islam, which is known and quoted by heart.

Engnell widened the scope of the method to apply it to the whole field of Old Testament literature.

The weakness of this method is in its failure to establish (a) that oral tradition existed *alone* without a parallel written form from the earliest stage, and (b) that there is a good Near Eastern parallel in contemporary literature of the same language group. The parallels normally adduced are either not contemporary (*i.e.*, Arabic literature, approximately 1,500 years later), or are of a different language group or culture (*i.e.* Nordic or Hellenistic).

Even if it be allowed that a parallel is admissible between the prophetic writings and the *Qu'ran*, the case cannot be said to be proved. For though there is no doubt that surahs of the *Qu'ran* were remembered from the time that Mohammed first spoke them, the majority of scholars are in agreement that they also had some kind of written form from at least within a year or two of the prophet's death, (H. Gibb *Mohammedanism*, 1949, p. 49; cf. R. Bell *The Qu'ran* 1937-39, and van der Ploeg in *Revue Biblique*, 1947, pp. 5-41).

This has been a very cursory and inadequate treatment of the method. The point to be established is, however, as before; namely that this method cannot be ranked as a fully scientific and authentic method of Old Testament study, because it is to a large extent based upon false presuppositions.

We shall now try to reconstruct a framework in which the study of the Old Testament may be carried on. The scope will be rather limited; it is simply an attempt to define the controlling principles which must guide such study, and it will, we hope, indicate some of the new trends in Old Testament study and in the neighbouring disciplines.

LANGUAGE

It is a lamentable fact that there is at the moment no full-scale modern treatment of the Hebrew language. There are the traditional grammars, of course, which are good in their own way but have one severe limitation; namely, that they are an imposition of a classical (and therefore Indo-European) grammatical system upon a Semitic language. A simple example of this is their treatment of Hebrew verbs in terms of 'perfect' and 'imperfect'. These terms carry the implications of time and sequence as in a classical language, whereas the Hebrew verbal forms tend to be primarily con-

cerned with *aspect*; the time sequence is determined rather by context than by verbal form. I am not entering a plea here for the destruction of all old Hebrew grammars, for in that their task is descriptive, they are good. But their terminology and analysis can be misleading. Thus, when it comes to dealing with a specific piece of text, because of the European grammatical background of the scholar, there is a danger of tackling the textual problem in a non-Semitic way. What is needed is a thoroughly linguistic treatment of Biblical Hebrew, which deals descriptively with the language in scientific terms, without the overtones and categories of another language group. So far as I know, there is only one small work of this nature in existence as yet, (*Hebraische Grammatik*, Beer and Meyer, 2 Vols., 1952-55), but I think it may be an indication of future work in this area. There are articles coming out now dealing with specific problems, and an excellent *Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (Ed. S. Moscati, 1964), has been published. With more works of this nature becoming available, we will soon have a first class tool for dealing with the actual language of the Old Testament, and be able to bring to it the relative information from contemporary and cognate Near Eastern languages.

Closely allied to this study of languages is the comparative treatment of Semitic literature. An examination of literary forms, syntactical structures, the use of idiom and repetition, and many other points will increasingly throw light on the Biblical material. In particular, the Ugaritic literature is of great value here, for it is very nearly contemporary, and with Hebrew it is usually classified as North West Semitic (Moscati, *op. cit.*, p. 9). For instance, C. H. Gordon, a leading American scholar in this field, writes: 'Whenever a large body of new data is brought to bear on an old subject, re-evaluation is inevitable' (*Hebrew and Semitic Studies*, ed. D. W. Thomas and W. D. McHardy, 1963, p. 77f.). He is stressing that the literary discoveries of Nuzu and Ugarit demand that the Patriarchal narratives be subjected to a re-examination. It is a case of the external control necessitating the re-examination of the validity of the old method of study.

A short note should be added at this stage on the influence of James Barr's recent works (*The Semantics of Biblical Language*, *Biblical Words for Time*, and

Old and New in Interpretation). Barr asks some radical questions about method in the study of the Old Testament. He deals with the validity of building theological concepts on words, principles of hermeneutics, and other topics. The point which I wish to make here is that he has shown the necessity of subjecting our methods of study to linguistic disciplines, which in his case means mainly semantics. This concern to ask basic questions concerning method is of prime importance, even if in other respects Barr's earlier work may seem a little unconstructive (cf. D. Ritschl's review of *Biblical Words for Time in Interpretation*, vol. XVIII 1964).

ARCHAEOLOGY

The second major control after language must be archaeology, with the closely related studies of epigraphy and orthography. Archaeology establishes outside of the Biblical evidence the historical context and milieu of the Near East in which the Biblical events took place. It establishes a rule or control by which an indication may be gained of the authenticity of the material which is the expression of Israel's faith. But more specifically, it is a control over the method which we apply to the Biblical material. Epigraphic and orthographic discoveries are of great value in dealing with problems of textual transmission, and the dating and interpretation of certain passages. To a certain extent these controls remove the subjectivity of some of the methods indicated earlier in the paper.

One example will be given of the possible way in which this control might act. The following is a quotation from an article describing some of the results of the archaeological findings at Mari. 'The Israelites of the period of the Monarchy, who first committed the Pentateuchal traditions to writing, had quite different customs and institutions and could not possibly have invented such facts. When taken together they justify only one conclusion, that they had been given in their oral tradition a quite amazingly faithful picture of the milieu in which their forefathers had lived and moved in the early and mid-second millennium BC' (*Transactions*, Vol. XVIII, an article by J. C. L. Gibson of Glasgow University Oriental Society). The kind of question I want to ask after reading material of this kind is: 'How far is it still feasible to assert that the Pentateuch was first committed

to writing at such a late date?' Regardless of the answer to this particular question, the point to be established is that the outside control demands that the old method be called in question.

In conclusion, and very briefly, a method of study within these controls is suggested. Firstly, there should be a straightforward grammatical and historical exegesis of the text, so far as this is possible. This has often been coloured by pre-supposition and methodological consideration in the past. Then there may be room for cautious application of other methods previously criticized. But there must be extreme caution here, for a method will

determine to a large extent the scope, nature, and even content of the conclusion arrived at. The commitment of the scholar must always be to the text, to the observable and discoverable data, and not to a hypothetical method which is necessarily expendable. The indications are that in the coming decades, there will be a fresh and very healthy approach to the study of the Old Testament. (For some useful suggestions concerning method and hermeneutics in the approach to writing an Old Testament commentary, see B. Childs' article in *Interpretation*, Vol. XVIII, 1963 p. 110f.)

Dead Prey or Living Oracles?

By THE REV. J. A. MOTYER, MA, BD.

A study of some of the issues raised by G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, volume II* (Oliver and Boyd, 470pp., 45s.); *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Oliver and Boyd, 340pp., 47s. 6d.); by W. Beyerlin in *Origin and History of the Oldest Sinaitic Traditions* (Blackwell, 191pp., 37s. 6d.); by O. Eissfeldt in *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 861pp., 70s.); by A. S. Kapelrud in *Israel from the Earliest Times to the Birth of Christ* (Blackwell, 152pp., 15s.); by W. F. Albright in *History, Archaeology, and Christian Humanism* (McGraw-Hill, 342pp., 56s.); by J. Wood in *Job and the Human Situation* (Bles, 158pp., 15s.); by Murray Newman in *The People of the Covenant: Israel from Moses to the Monarchy* (Carey Kingsgate, 207pp., 25s.), and by M. Noth in *The Old Testament World* (A. and C. Black, 404pp., 48s.).

IT WAS Adam Smith who, in his book *'The Preaching of the Old Testament'*, coined the striking phrase that the patriarchs were to be approached 'not as our dead prey, but as our masters and brothers'. The application of the idea is wider than its original setting, and it undoubtedly offers possibilities as a useful classification of publications on the Old Testament.

CONTRAST

Take the following contrast: Eissfeldt, dealing with the Servant Songs, treads both painstakingly and painfully along the well-trodden path of previous studies, branches out to a personal assessment of the situation, concludes without argument or proof that Isaiah 40-45 consists of 50 poetical pieces, notes that in many passages, outside the standard list of Servant Songs, Israel is the Servant and is addressed as the singular 'thou', plumps for a general identification of Servant and nation — full stop. Von Rad, on the other hand (*Old Testament Theology*), taking brief note of earlier and other opinion, dwells exegetically on the rooted differences between the Servant and the nation, examines literary categories so as to show that an individual Servant is required — and a predicted or future one at that — sparkles forth into a brilliant 'type and anti-type' study of Moses and the Servant, closes 'the uneasy gap which makes itself felt between the Servant Songs and the rest of the message of Deutero-Isaiah', and finally issues out into New Testament application.

This contrast is not explained by saying that one is writing *Theology* and the other *Introduction*. Each surveys, assesses, and concludes. Rather, the question for the man writing *Introduction* is, *Introduction* to what? A heap of literary bones surviving from the Ancient Near East? Or an integrated,