

## ***The Study of Man: Archaeology and the Bible's Historical Truth***

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**Immanuel Lewy** From issue: **May 1954**

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*Not long ago the Higher Criticism seemed to have deprived us of any grounds for belief in the historical authenticity of the Bible. In recent years, however, various archaeological discoveries have confirmed certain elements of the Biblical story and thus seem to open the way to a new and more scientific acceptance of the historical accuracy of the whole. Immanuel Lewy considers here to what an extent such a conclusion is justified.*

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As historical religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each finds the source and witness of its validity in what it holds to be a divine revelation, handed down to succeeding generations in certain sacred documents, or Scriptures. Religious leaders may interpret these sacred documents literally or liberally, but cannot deny their cardinal significance. The historicity of the Biblical records, or at least those portions embodying the fundamental revelations, are of crucial relevance to the survival of those religions which are founded, wholly or in part, on the Hebrew Bible.

Human curiosity is no respecter of sacred documents. Man wants to know the truth about everything. Since the Renaissance, scholars have increasingly subjected the Holy Scriptures to critical scrutiny. The first moderate and tentative critics were succeeded by radical critics tending to call more and more of the Biblical record into question. The most important periods for the formation of Israel's religion and laws—the epoch of the patriarchs, of Moses, of the judges, and of the early monarchy—were dismissed as being substantially legendary. The Biblical order of events was turned upside down: the Mosaic law, far from initiating Israel's religious development and calling forth the prophets as its champions, was but the conclusion of that development—the real beginners of the Jewish religion were the literary prophets.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were turned into mythological figures, the Moses stories into local legends; Joshua and Samuel were reduced to insignificant stature; Solomon became a worshipper of the sun god. Israel's sojourn in Egypt was denied, or at least reduced to an incident involving only a few dozen people. Some ritual laws perhaps went back to the so-called Mosaic period, but “whether Moses himself adhered to them is uncertain” (Gressman, *Moses*, 1913). The text of Deuteronomy had not only been found in the Temple in 621 B.C.E., it had also been composed by the priest Hilkiah; the Priestly Code was concocted by Ezra or in the generations following him. In short, all the great documents of Israel's past were concluded to be either pious frauds, or the self-seeking inventions of scheming priests.

But the Biblical research that began its criticism by destroying mythological and legendary beliefs ended up by

constructing new legends. Biblical passages were used as the basis for a far-reaching theory; but in order to confirm this theory all antagonistic texts had to be marked down as "later interpolations." If you go on in this way with little restraint, you may finally sweep away the entire documented history of a people.

The method which these radical critics employed was one of textual analysis, or distinguishing the different sources in a composite document. Now there was nothing inherently wrong about this method; often, indeed, it had the most successful results. But this very success led to extravagances and absurdities; the Higher Critics overreached themselves by trying to explain anything and everything by the one method of textual analysis. As in the history of Darwinism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, initial success tempted the devotees of the new method to believe they at last possessed the Key to All the Truth.

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Not surprisingly, the pendulum has now begun to swing back. Modern Biblical research reflects an increasingly conservative tendency. The Higher Criticism, which once enjoyed such unchallenged preeminence, is falling more and more into disregard. Now archaeology is all the fashion.

What is archaeology? It is the scientific study of the *material* remains of the past. The archaeologist digs out of the ground all that litter of the past which, read aright, has so much to tell us: architectural treasures such as temples, palaces, tombs, streets, and houses; pottery, utensils, works of art; written records, scraps of papyrus, clay tablets, stone inscriptions, seals, contracts, law books.

After so much speculation and theorizing by the Higher Critics, there was a natural wish to go back to the *concrete and tangible witnesses* of the past. The tomb of Tutankhamen, the Hammurabi Code stone, the one thousand lines of the Babylonian epic of creation, the correspondence recorded on the tablets of Tell-el-Amarna, the fine jewelry in the stone tombs of Ur, the wisdom philosophy of the Egyptian sages Ptahhotep and Amenemope, the Ugaritic library documents of Ras Shamra, and many other discoveries of the last decades, have proved even to the most skeptical that history is not merely a matter of disputed guesswork, but a science solidly based on incontrovertible material facts. The highly abstract Higher Criticism of the Bible threatened to undermine all our traditional beliefs about our ancestors and spiritual origins; the pick and shovel work of Biblical archaeologists is today reestablishing them on scientific foundations.

Like starving men, scholars and scientists have seized ravenously on every scrap of material containing the name of a person, a place, or a people mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. They have discovered independent records of Ur, Uruk, and Sumer, all mentioned in Genesis; in Egyptian and Mesopotamian documents they even read the names of some of the kings of Israel and Judah. The very name of the people of Israel they found recorded in a victory stele of the Egyptian king Merenptah; this event occurred about 1229 B.C.E., just the time at which some scholars believe Moses led Israel out of its bondage in Egypt. In the stele Merenptah boasts of having destroyed Israel and all its seed: "The people of Israel is desolate, it has no offspring [or seed]. Palestine has become a widow for [because of] Egypt." This would indicate that Israel was a people living in Western Palestine and a dangerous enemy of the Egyptians. In the Bible we also read of a military encounter between the Israelites who had escaped from Egypt, and the Egyptian cavalry: "And Miriam sang unto them: 'Sing to Yahweh, for He is highly exalted. The horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea.'" Here Israel is victorious and Egypt the defeated. This incident may have occurred at another time or place. What the stele says, of course, is no confirmation of the Biblical story; but on the other hand it does not contradict it. In any case it confirms the fact that in the days of King Merenptah Israel and Egypt clashed. The Mosaic age, as we are told about it in the Pentateuch, cannot be entirely legendary or mythological.

The discoveries of the Sumerian-Babylonian, Egyptian, Syrian-Ugaritic, and Palestinian civilizations of the pre-

Mosaic period have markedly changed our historical ideas about this time, and have even influenced the scholarly appraisal of the patriarchal age. The migration of Abraham's ancestors from Ur in southern Mesopotamia to Haran northwards, the migration of the clan of Abraham from Haran through Palestine to the Negev, and the patriarch's sojourn in Egypt during a famine—all these things fit with our picture of the society of this time. There is therefore no reason to assume that this tradition is unhistoric in its substance. Professor Albright writes: "Aside from a few die-hards among older scholars, there is scarcely a single Biblical historian who has not been impressed by the rapid accumulation of data supporting the substantial historicity of patriarchal tradition" (*The Jews*, Vol. I, p. 3).

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What does "substantial historicity" mean? Albright himself explains it as follows: "This does not, of course, mean that oral tradition, even based on poetic epics (as Cassuto has most recently seen), can be treated by the historian as though it were based directly on written records. In many ways the orally transmitted record is superior, but it is peculiarly exposed to the phenomena of refraction and selection of elements suited for epic narrative, regardless of their chronological order. It is, accordingly, uncertain to what extent we can adopt the traditional order of events or the precise motivation attributed to them. Nor can we accept every picturesque detail as it stands in our present narrative."

What Professor Albright is saying is that the personal, local, and tribal names of the patriarchal stories are not a late invention, but date from old traditions. The Hebrew migrations, first from Ur to Haran, then through Palestine to the Negev and temporarily to Egypt, must have really taken place.

There may also be other authentic features in the patriarchal stories. In Genesis we read that a slave was expected to be the heir of the childless Abraham, and that a childless wife was expected to provide her husband with a handmaid who would bear him children, as Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham, and Rachel gave Bilhah to Jacob. Parallels for these social customs can now be found in customs and laws recorded on tablets at Nuzu in Assyria dating from the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C.E. These customs belong to the pre-Mosaic period and do not fit at all into the post-Mosaic tradition. The tablets were written by Hurrian scribes in the Babylonian language, with an occasional intrusion of Hurrian words. The Hurrians were the Biblical Horites who migrated to Edom in the early part of the 2nd millennium when the Hebrews migrated from Haran to the Negev. There is an archaeological note in the Bible itself which tells us that the Edomites destroyed the Horites and succeeded to their place, just as the Israelites destroyed and succeeded the Canaanites (Deut. 2:12). In Genesis 14:6, where a war of the patriarchal age is described, the Horites are still correctly referred to as the inhabitants of the mountain of Seir, which later made part of the land of the Edomites.

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It would be rash to conclude from the presence in the Bible of a number of archaic elements dating back to the patriarchal age that they must derive from written records of the pre-Mosaic period, prosaic or poetic. Nomadic peoples—the Bedouins of our day are an example—keep no written records. The Hebrew tradition itself makes no mention of any written records before the Mosaic age. All these archaic elements must therefore have been transmitted orally for many generations. This would explain the contradictory traditions that we now find in the written records.

In Genesis there are recorded two different versions of the expulsion of Abraham's Egyptian concubine, Hagar. In Genesis 16 we read that Hagar was driven out of Abraham's family because Sarah felt it as a personal insult

when Hagar conceived a child. Her son Ishmael was born in the desert and became the father of a desert tribe. In Genesis 21 we read that Hagar was expelled at a time when Ishmael was already a boy, an ill-mannered boy who it was feared would infect Sarah's son Isaac by his bad example. Both versions cannot be true. Here, manifestly, we have two versions of an older narrative, or the correction of a primitive story by a more sophisticated hand.

There must have been some enmity between the two Hebrew clans, both of which lived in the Negev. The clan of Ishmael was older and cruder, the clan of Isaac younger and less barbaric. The Biblical story may reflect a feeling of moral superiority on the part of the clan of Isaac, which is described as semi-nomadic, whereas the predatory Ishmaelites are described as entirely nomadic.

Professor Albright is surely right when he says that we cannot accept every picturesque detail as it stands in the Biblical narrative today, and that the traditional order of events and attribution of motives is uncertain. But despite his own caution, he concludes his appraisal of the patriarchal age by saying that "as a whole the picture in Genesis is historical, and there is no reason to doubt the general accuracy of the biographic details and the sketches of personality which make the patriarchs come alive with a vividness unknown to a single extra-Biblical character in the whole vast literature of the ancient Near East." So unqualified a statement can only serve the turn of Fundamentalists who inveigh against any and all critical research into the Bible.

It is of course no proof at all of the accuracy of the Bible's biographical details that the patriarchs come alive with a vividness unparalleled in ancient Near Eastern literature. This may simply prove the literary skill of the great Hebrew writers. Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare also wrote with unsurpassed vividness. When an archaeologist praises the Book of Genesis in this way, he is speaking not as an archaeologist but as a literary critic. Beauty and truth need not, and often do not, go hand in hand.

Indeed, there are distinct variations in the literary quality of the Bible, as there are variations in its historicity. Even the most conservative archaeologist would not deny that the Pentateuch was not written by one and the same author, or even by several authors at the same time. Take the story of the Creation (Gen. 1) and the story of the creation of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden (2:4-3:24). In the first story plants and animals are created and then man, male and female. In the second story, first man is created, then plants and animals, and finally woman is shaped out of Adam's rib. The literary style, the conceptions of God and man, and the manner of representation are entirely different in the two stories. The first is analytic-descriptive and employs stereotyped formulas; man is Godlike and God manlike. The second is picturesque, dramatic, original in style and language. God is not a ruler issuing forth his commands, but a working creator who shapes a lump of clay and breathes life into its nostrils with his own breath. God's name in the first chapter is only Elohim, never Yahweh. In the second chapter, God is called Yahweh Elohim.

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No archaeological find can set aside these disparities in the Bible's account of Creation. A new Creation text may be found, different from both Biblical stories or similar to one of them. We have found a Babylonian story of Creation and of the Flood. It has some features in common with the Hebrew texts. But these similarities pale before the stark contrast between the sober, humane, spiritualized monotheistic outlook of the Hebrew masters, and the crude, violent, erotic polytheistic phantasmagoria of the Mesopotamian mythology. In comparison with this crude world, the Hebrew religious world seems a unity. But when we look at the Bible more closely we see that accuracy and vividness were neither striven for nor achieved by all the Biblical writers in the same way or to the same degree. The pedantic priestly author of the first chapter of Genesis is much more interested in a careful presentation of facts than in beauty; the prophetic author of the second story is more interested in spiritual profundity and dramatic picturesqueness than in accuracy.

The pedantic priestly author, who is careful never to use the name of Yahweh before the point in his narrative when God reveals it to Moses, painstakingly lists in chapter five of Genesis the ten descendants of Adam through Noah, and in chapter eleven the ten descendants of Noah through Abraham, taking care to report how old the fathers were when they begot their first sons, and how old when they died. Nobody is going to claim any great vividness for this kind of narrative. As for its accuracy, there is no serious scholar who accepts the factuality of the figures given in this Biblical roster of generations wherein Noah is said to have begot his three sons exactly at the age of five hundred, Abraham to have circumcised himself at the age of ninety-nine, and Methusaleh to have died when he was nine hundred and sixty-nine years old.

But it would be rash to assume that all figures given by the priestly writer are necessarily fanciful. The number of 430 years for the time the Israelites dwelt in Egypt might seem to be based on some subjective speculations of this numerologist. It apparently contradicts all other Biblical statements, which tell us that the generation of Moses was the fourth after Jacob, and the generation of Joshua the fifth (Exod. 6:16-20; Josh. 7:1). The northern Elohist says explicitly (Gen. 15:16): "In the fourth generation they shall come back hither, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full." (One of the ways the different Pentateuchal authors can be distinguished is by the names they give to the natives of Palestine; the southern writers call them Canaanites or Hittites, the northern Elohist calls them Amorites.) Now if Moses was the great-great-grandson of Jacob, the sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt must have been much shorter than 430 years. Is the priestly narrator's figure of 430 years an improvisation, then, or has he preserved a good old tradition?

In Genesis 15:13 we read that the descendants of Abraham shall be afflicted by a foreign people for 400 years. And here archaeology may serve as arbiter. The Bible distinguishes two periods in Israel's sojourn in Egypt. At first the Hebrews were treated as friends: one of them even became a high official. But then a new king arose who ignored Joseph, and indeed must have hated him. Now we know that the Hyksos, a substantially West Semitic people, conquered Egypt and ruled it for over a hundred years, and that then a new dynasty arose in Egypt and expelled these hated Asiatics. That was about 1570 B.C.E. In the Bible it is mentioned that the Hebrews did forced labor for the cities of Pithom and Ramses. That may refer to Tanis in the Delta. We know that King Ramses II resided in the Delta at Tanis and was a great builder. He reigned from 1301 to 1234. Since his successor Merenptah in his stele mentioned that he had defeated an Israelitic people in Western Palestine (probably in 1229), we must assume that the Exodus took place during the long reign of Ramses II, let us say about 1290; so sixty years after 1290 Israelitic groups had already occupied some Canaanite territory. If we then assume that the Israelites had first entered Egypt with the Semitic Hyksos, the time of their stay in Egypt would be about 400 or 430 years.

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The archaeological discoveries which thus seem to confirm the figure given by the priestly narrative do not, of course, confirm the accuracy of the whole Biblical record of the Exodus, but only suggest the conformity of this dating with other known dates of Egyptian history. This fact, however, would indicate that the assumption of many Biblical writers that the Mosaic generation was the fourth after Jacob is very far from correct. That error, on the other hand, may perhaps be explained by the Biblical habit of representing clans as persons. In the Bible, the twelve tribes of Israel are sons of a man called Jacob or Israel, as Edom or Esau is the brother of Jacob, and Ishmael and Isaac are the sons of Abraham. Elam and Ashur, names of two ancient nations, are sons of a man called Shem. Sidon, a Phoenician town, is the first-born of Canaan; the lands of Egypt and Abyssinia are the sons of Ham. This kind of mythological geography is widely known among all ancient peoples.

Archaeology has found that many of these personal names of ancestors originally were the names of clans, tribes, localities, or nations. Albright has accordingly tried to interpret the names of Abraham's ancestors—Terah, Nahor, Serug, Reu, etc.—as names of North Syrian and North Mesopotamian localities, so proving that

the names were not late inventions. But here, as in so many other cases, archaeology gives and takes away. With one hand, it confirms Biblical statements; with the other, it proves their unhistoricity. For if the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are those of mythological ancestors and not of historical persons, then many stories of the patriarchal and Mosaic age lose their historic validity. They may indeed partly reflect dim reminiscences of the Hebrews' tribal past, but in their specific detail they are fiction.

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With the Mosaic age as with the patriarchal age, some personal and local names mentioned in the Biblical records have been proved by archaeological evidence to be authentic, some historical details are confirmed by extra-Biblical sources. We have mentioned Pithom and Ramses. Another case is the name of Moses: it is Egyptian and means "son." The priest Phinehas and some other members of the Levites also have Egyptian names. That would prove that the tribe of Levi, or at least a part of it, must have lived in a country strongly influenced by Egyptian culture. It does not prove that the Levites were enslaved in Egypt for centuries or so. Nor does the fact that no other tribe of Israel has members with Egyptian names prove that the other tribes were free from Egyptian influences and were not liberated by Moses.

The existence of a personality called Moses is only known to us from Biblical sources. No Egyptian document mentions this name or the enslavement of Israelitic tribes. If we were dependent on extra-Biblical sources only, we should not know of the existence of the twelve Israelitic tribes in the Mosaic age before the settlement of Canaan, or how many, if any, left the Egyptian house of bondage under the leadership of Moses.

The Biblical story of the Exodus is highly dramatized: Moses negotiates with the king of Egypt himself and forecasts ten different national calamities, all of them coming true as he prophesied. All this magical power, however, makes no great impression on the stubborn king. But when the king's first-born dies, and with him all the first-born sons of the whole land, king and people drive the Israelites out of the land. Closer research into the Biblical sources, by methods of the Higher Criticism, suggests that this highly dramatized story goes back to a less dramatic and more plausible one. All the calamities except the last one were not infrequent in Egypt. It may be that a plague of locusts, frogs, or dog-flies, or a hailstorm, gave some of the Hebrew and other slaves a chance to escape; that there was not one general exodus, but a continuous process of escaping; and that Moses organized all these escaped slaves or their descendants in the desert and made them a people. But all this is speculation. Archaeology, which is a science of the tangible, has nothing to tell us here.

Nor can archaeology tell us anything about the period of time during which Moses, according to the Biblical record, led his people through the desert to the gates of Canaan. Moses spoke in the name of Yahweh. Was this a new God or the God of the fathers? The Israelites apparently did not know, for there are two opposed Pentateuchal traditions. The Yahwist master-narrator calls God Yahweh from the beginning of mankind; but both the northern prophetic Elohists and the southern priestly narrator hold that it was Moses who introduced this new name, and that the fathers had called God by a different name. The oldest personal name in the Bible involving elements of the divine name Yahweh or Yah is that of Yochebed ("Honor to Yah"), the mother of Moses, but we do not know whether this was her original name. And so the puzzle remains: the oldest Biblical narrators had no common tradition about the origin of their God. This suggests that the records of the Mosaic age were written centuries after Moses.

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That Yahweh was a storm god whose abode was in the southern Palestinian mountains, we know from the

Biblical sources themselves. What we really want to know is how this local storm god became a universal spiritual God of righteousness and mercy. Was this religious transvaluation the work of Moses, or was it the achievement of other Hebrew leaders who lived before or after him? Or did the Hebrews get this new religious conception from others?

We know from Egyptian sources that the priests who lived in Heliopolis near Memphis (in lower Egypt near Cairo) and in Thebes (in upper Egypt) declared the sun god the "greatest of all gods," the "father of the gods, the fashioner of men, the creator of animals, the lord of all beings." That was already before the young King Amenophis IV broke completely with the traditional sun god, Amen-Ra, and declared Aton, the solar disk, to be "the sole God, beside whom there is no other . . . whose designs are benevolent . . . who made the seasons and all beings . . . who is still in my heart when he has gone away." For over fifteen years this solar monotheism held sway over Egypt. And then, as radically as this king had repressed the traditional polytheism, his new religion was eliminated by the priestly reaction of the worshippers of Amen-Ra after Akhenaton's death, about 1360 B.C.E.—that is, about seventy years before the exodus of the enslaved Hebrews from Egypt under the leadership of Moses (if that took place under Ramses II).

"By 1300 B.C.E. the stage was set, culturally and religiously, for the emergence of a heroic figure like Moses," writes Albright. That would be true if Moses were an Egyptian reformer who returned to the solar monotheism of the heretic king Akhenaton. But what we know about Moses we can learn only from a critical analysis of the Hebrew documents; no extra-Biblical sources have either confirmed or denied any of the Biblical traditions about Moses. And Albright's Moses is not the Moses of the Bible. That Biblical Moses is no Egyptian priest interested in the religious reform of the Egyptian people, and his God is not a sun god but a storm god of the desert mountains. Although Moses was born and brought up in Egypt, he lived among Hebrews and related tribes, mostly in the deserts east of Egypt and south of Palestine. He forbade his people to worship other gods than Yahweh; but there is in fact no Biblical record that he believed this god to be the only existing one. Moses unified the Hebrew tribes and gave them one law and one religion. We may call his religion monotheism, but it was of a national and pragmatic kind, a nomadic religion, and not a monotheism of universal and aesthetic character such as that of the revolutionary Egyptian king.

If we want to know the origin of the ethical monotheism of the great literary Hebrew prophets, we must investigate the sources of the oldest of these literary prophets, who is not Amos, as most people still believe, but the Yahwist master-narrator of the Pentateuch narratives. His book was probably written in the period of David and Solomon: universal monotheism is more probably the theology of a growing empire than that of a chieftain of nomadic tribes escaped from enslavement.

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When we seek to reconstruct the details of the Israelite invasion of Canaan, we have again almost nothing but the Biblical sources. The tradition is not uniform; often it is clearly untrustworthy. According to one tradition, the process of invasion and settlement was relatively peaceful and slow, a gradual process of infiltration by different tribes and generations. In another tradition, Joshua, the leader of all the Israelite tribes, conquered the land at one stroke, recklessly destroying life and possessions.

What have the cuneiform tablets unearthed at Tell el-Amarna, which contain correspondence between the vassal princes or governors in Syria and Palestine and the Egyptian kings Amenhotep III and Akhenaton (1400-1360), to tell us about the Israelite invasion of Canaan? The governors or princes ask for Egyptian troops to use against the invasion of the 'Apiru, semi-nomadic mercenaries of mixed origin. If the 'Apiru were identical with the Hebrews, or the Hebrews were part of the 'Apiru, the picture of the invasion would be quite different from that presented by the Biblical sources. The names of the kings of the Canaanite cities are not identical

with the names in the Book of Joshua, and since the time is nearly a century before Ramses II, these "Hebrews" must have been other Hebrews than those of the time of Joshua, who, according to the Bible, was the successor of Moses.

Excavations have shown that Jericho, Lachish, Debir, Bethel, and other cities were destroyed in the 14th or 13th centuries B.C.E. But there are considerable intervals between these destructions, so that we do not know whether these cities were all destroyed by the Israelites, or by other invaders. It seems that some towns, such as Gibeon, Shechem, Tirzah, and others, were peacefully incorporated into the Israelite tribal system by negotiation. Jericho may really have been destroyed by an earthquake; but that was a century or so before the Israelites came. The Israelites may have heard the story and credited their God with causing the earthquake. The archaeological finds allow various interpretations. Professor Meed, for instance, in his *Hebrew Origins*, assumes two different ages of invasion: gradual infiltration in the Amarna age under Joshua, and a later conquest by the Mosaic group about 1200. But that would mean that Joshua had lived nearly two centuries before Moses. Such a radical break with the tradition is not very plausible. If we leave aside this question of Moses' or Joshua's precedence, however, it is not improbable that the Biblical traditions reflect different periods and places of a long course of invasion that was partly military and partly one of peaceful infiltration. Here, as in the patriarchal and Mosaic periods, archaeology has neither confirmed nor refuted the Bible but has supplied new material which poses new questions without solving the old ones.

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Archaeology has made us richer in problems and poorer in certainty. The more we find, the more puzzles arise. Take the great invention of the alphabet. In 1904-1905 Flinders Petrie discovered inscriptions in an alphabetic script about fifty miles from the traditional site of Mount Sinai. The language is Semitic. These inscriptions may date from the first quarter of the 2nd millennium, and the letters are presumably founded on the Egyptian hieroglyphic script. In 1929, on the northern coast of Syria at Ras Shamra, C. F. A. Schaeffer discovered hundreds of clay tablets bearing texts in a cuneiform alphabet. The language is Ugaritic, closely related to Biblical Hebrew and Phoenician. The documents may date from the 15th and early 14th centuries. This Ugaritic alphabet has not twenty-two characters like the Hebrew alphabet, but thirty.

From these discoveries, it would appear that the Western Semites were making alphabetic experiments in the age between Abraham and Moses; these were partly based upon the Egyptian hieroglyphic non-alphabetic syllabic script, and partly on the Mesopotamian cuneiform syllabic script. We only know of two of these experiments, but there may have been more. The Phoenician, the Hebrew, and the Greek alphabets, which are similar in many respects, must stem from one of these experiments. But we cannot now say more with any certainty. The Bible tells us that on Mount Sinai Moses was given some laws in a divine script. Whether there is in this any dim reminiscence of rock inscriptions is very hard to ascertain. There is a uniform Biblical tradition that Moses wrote down some laws on stone tables in the desert of Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb. It is psychologically not very probable that such an element of the story should have been a later invention. On the other hand, we cannot understand for whom he could have written these laws, when the people were illiterate slaves. Or were there literate people among the escaping Hebrews? As soon as a problem becomes interesting, archaeology is as silent as the Sphinx.

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We can now draw some sort of conclusion. There was a time when people generally believed that the Bible was a divine book which gave answers to all the problems of life. But the more the Bible was studied in order to

reconstruct the past, the more it was perceived that this ancient work of literature was full of riddles. To solve these riddles, we took up the spade and searched for historic vestiges that had lain hidden under the surface of the earth. The many discoveries that resulted have necessitated enormous labors of scholarship: languages had to be deciphered; the data of history, anthropology, archaeology, sociology, and psychology had to be correlated; the authentic Biblical text had to be restored, obscure passages clarified, sources separated, dated, and evaluated. Biblical research became a part of the general research of the Near East. Hebrew literature, laws, social and religious institutions, were compared and contrasted with those of the other nations of the ancient world. The Book lost its uniqueness. The People of the Book became a normal member of the Western Oriental family. Its great achievements were reduced to borrowings from older nations, from Sumer-Babylon, Egypt, Syria, Canaan, Phoenicia.

But something was wrong with this reductive tendency. Why did Yahweh become the universal God, and not Amon, Marduk, Melkart, or Baal? Why did neither Egypt nor Babylon nor Canaan produce great historians and great literary prophets such as Israel did? Why did they not create anything like the Hebrew Psalter, the Books of Genesis, of Job, of Ruth, and of Jonah?

The pendulum swung back. After all, the Bible must have had some intrinsic merits to make it the sacred book of Western civilization. Even if it is not the one divine masterwork, it must at least contain a number of great human masterworks and master-words.

Archaeology, which at first had helped to undermine the distinctiveness of Israel in the ancient world, now became the champion of a new valuation of the Bible. The radicalism of Wellhausen, Friedrich Delitsch, and their successors gave place to a new conservatism in the archaeological school of Albright, and archaeology is now credited with having confirmed the "substantial historicity" of the patriarchal and Mosaic ages. But such a claim, as we have seen, has only a limited truth.

And this trend toward a neo-Fundamentalism may be as misleading as the former trend toward radicalism and Biblical nihilism. It is not good for any body of scientific findings to become the weapon of a party or a church, or even of the exclusive claims of one particular scientific discipline. Archaeology has enormously enriched our knowledge of the ancient world, but it has as yet contributed little to the clarification of the origins of the Hebrews and their spiritual development. Research with a "pro-Hebrew" or conservative purpose is as destructive as research with an "anti-Hebrew" or radical bias. Research must have one purpose only: to discover the truth.

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The other claim of archaeology—that it gives us "real," tangible facts, and not mere intangible theories like the Higher Criticism once provided—is not valid either. All good research is based on *interpretation* of facts. When we find the names Abraham, Jacob, and Joshua in extra-Biblical sources for the periods in which the Hebrew chronicles record these names, we are not allowed to conclude automatically that these names refer to the Biblical figures; there must be analysis and weighing of evidence before we can make the identification. And the principles of reasoning that must apply to the evaluation of archaeological discoveries are not different from those that we apply in deciding whether a text is composed from one or two sources, whether the material is genuine or copied, interpolated or corrupted. Even when we have found a code of laws such as that of Hammurabi, we must first interpret the text correctly, then ascertain its probable date and the circumstances of its origin.

Truth is no "tangible" matter. When we pick up some potsherds or clay tablets buried many feet below the present ground level in the Near East, we have not found any "truth," we have only discovered some material

which may help us in working out a hypothesis about the truth. There can be no fact-finding without speculative and evaluative processes. Archaeology is neither superior nor inferior in this respect to any other scientific approach. Only when archaeology abandons its magisterial claims and sees itself as but one of the many scientific servants of truth, can it make its great contribution to historical research; otherwise, it becomes just another of those false "keys" to knowledge which are found at the extremes of the pendulum's swing, bequeathing to new generations a heritage of errors to be corrected. For scholars, there is one special Biblical commandment: "Keep thee far from a false matter" (Exodus 23:7).

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Mr. Lewy, a graduate of the Universities of Berlin and Leipzig and of a rabbinical seminary, has written widely on historical problems, both in Europe and in this country, and is the author of a book, *The Birth of the Bible—A New Approach*, which was published here in 1950. Mr. Lewy was born in Berlin, and came to this country in 1945.

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### **FOOTNOTES**

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**Commentary**

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