

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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## Current Old Testament Studies

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 10, no. 3 (1962): 443—471

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

# Survey

## *Current Old Testament Studies*

This article will present a survey of current studies that are engaging Old Testament scholars and that are largely responsible for widespread interest in the Bible. But first a few introductory remarks on the nature of the Bible and on the causes of the new biblical methodology are in order.

### THE BIBLE, DIVINE AND HUMAN

The Bible has always been considered a sacred book by Catholics, Protestants and Jews precisely because of its origin. It is the Word of God. When Catholics use this expression, they make an act of faith: the Bible is the Word of God because God is its author. Naturally there were human authors for the Bible, as there would be for any human book, in fact dozens of them. But the Bible is unique in that God is truly its author, that he inspired the human authors to write exactly what he wanted them to write. The description of inspiration found in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical letter, *Providentissimus Deus*, of 1893, is a standard summary of Catholic doctrine.

By his supernatural power, God (through inspiration) moved the authors to write, and assisted them in the writing, with the result that they conceived rightly in their mind, and willed faithfully to write down, and actually did express with infallible truth everything and only those things which he commanded. Otherwise he would not be the author of the entire Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ROME AND THE STUDY OF SCRIPTURE (Indiana: St. Meinrad, 5th edition, 1953), p. 24. All citations from papal documents have been taken from this collection (abbreviated RSS) with some adaptations.

Hence, God is the author of the Bible by his influence over the mind, will and executive faculties of the human authors. In philosophic terminology, God as author is the principal cause of the Bible and the human authors are instrumental causes in a free, human manner; and, according to the concept of instrumental causality, God is the author of the whole Bible and man is the author of the whole Bible, but each in his own way.

As a necessary corollary of divine inspiration and already referred to by Leo XIII is the traditional Catholic doctrine of inerrancy, the infallible truth of the Bible. If God is the author of the Bible, then this book cannot teach what is wrong. To suggest that would be blasphemous. The Bible, in what it states as fact, cannot err, for God cannot deceive. The essential theological foundation, then, for any discussion of the Bible is that God is its author and that therefore the Bible is necessarily true.

But as a humanly written book, the Bible stands in the stream of history, in fact has flowed along with history. Rather than a single book, it is actually a collection of books—*ta biblia* in Greek or “the books”—an anthology or whole library of books composed and written down during a period of almost two millennia. The process began with the traditions of Abraham around 1900 B.C. and was completed only with the writings of John or Peter about 100 A.D. Thus the Bible was written by men in different periods of history, subject to different national and international influences, of different social and political backgrounds, of different temperaments, intelligence, education; it was written in three languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and made up of different types of literature—poetry and prose, narrations and legal documents, letters and hymns, history, theology, even fiction.

All this should lead one to expect innumerable possibilities for studying the Bible as a human book and as a divine book. Current studies in the OT alone, for instance, seem to be an indefinitely expanding ocean to the scholars who have to swim in it. The vast amount of investigations on the OT as a

human book concern the text itself, the languages employed with their lexicography and grammar, the literary forms, the archaeological and literary evidence for its historical background, political institutions, religious philosophy; the OT as a divine book raises questions about its inspiration and inerrancy in terms of the apparent conflict with science, about its religious meaning and value, about its relationship with the New Testament, with Catholic theology, etc. A similar wealth of research fields is available to NT scholars and may be discussed in a future article.

#### NEW DISCOVERIES AND PAPAL DIRECTIVES

These various objects of study have been intermittently investigated by theologians and exegetes, but never so intensively and extensively as in the past hundred years, due in great part to the fantastic discoveries unearthed by archaeologists in the Bible lands of the Near East. The biblical renaissance has been made possible by the excavations of countless cities that have actually turned up new languages, peoples, cultures, and that have revealed the material culture, history and religion of biblical people like the Egyptians, Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians, and the Israelites themselves. Even oil jugs and receipts bearing the names of individual kings of Israel have been dug out of the ground.

Pius XII in his encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, of 1943, charting out the paths to be followed by Catholic biblicalists, affirms that "the conditions of biblical studies and their subsidiary sciences have greatly changed within the last fifty years." He explicitly mentions several discoveries as providentially acquired and exhorts scholars to "make diligent use of this light, so abundantly given, to penetrate more deeply, explain more clearly and expound more lucidly the Divine Oracles."<sup>2</sup> The surge of books, pamphlets, articles coming from the pens of Catholic scholars since 1943 indicate how well they have followed the papal directives. But in case these studies should produce results that at first glance seem start-

<sup>2</sup> RSS, p. 86-87.

ling because they are new and novel, Pius XII cautions Catholics to exercise charity and to temper their zeal.

Let all other children of the Church bear in mind that the efforts of these resolute laborers in the vineyard of the Lord should be judged not only with equity and justice, but also with the greatest charity; all moreover should abhor that intemperate zeal which imagines that whatever is new should for that very reason be a fit object for attack or suspicion. Let them remember above all that in the rules and laws promulgated by the Church, there is question of doctrine regarding faith and morals . . . There remain therefore many matters, and of the greatest importance, in the discussion and exposition of which the skill and genius of Catholic commentators may and ought to be freely exercised.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note that in this important task of interpreting Sacred Scripture, Catholic biblicists are neither alone nor isolated. At the scholarly level, there is among Catholics, Protestants and Jews cooperation and even in instances actual collaboration. The Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome publishes books by Jewish and Protestant scholars and accepts their articles for its two quarterlies, *Biblica* and *Orientalia*. Non-Catholics write for other Catholic journals and accept Catholic contributions in theirs. Learned biblical societies, both national and international, welcome members of all faiths. There is still talk in America, though not without opposition, of Catholic and Protestant cooperation in producing a common Bible that would be acceptable to both groups, and official approbation has been given for Catholic participation in a modern translation and commentary of the Bible being prepared under the editorship of two eminent Protestants. Nor is cooperation among the faiths limited to the OT. Despite insuperable difficulties, there exists at least one international society of New Testament scholars, publishing an official journal, with Catholic-Protestant representation on their governing board. Due to the new discoveries and certainly also to the Spirit of God breathing the desire of peace and unity among separated Christians, the very Bible

<sup>3</sup> RSS, p. 101-102.

that has divided the world into rival camps is today a veritable unifying force among scholars.

A survey article cannot adequately review all the numerous and varied aspects of current OT studies. Even if it were possible, far more advantage would be gained, I believe, in singling out three fields of OT research and indicating their importance and some of their methods and results.

#### LANGUAGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The bulk of the OT was written in Hebrew, and since it was this original text produced by the sacred writers that was divinely inspired, it must be well studied and well understood by scholars intending to interpret it or to translate it into modern languages. The present Hebrew text is filled with linguistic difficulties, especially in the poetic books, like Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and all the Prophets. Many of these difficulties are due to errors on the part of ancient copyists, reproducing older manuscripts and passing them on to later generations. The science of textual criticism, practiced and held in esteem even in the days of the early Church Fathers, attempts to recognize the omissions, additions, repetitions and all other mistakes likely to creep into a text copied again and again through the centuries, and thus to restore the original text as perfectly as possible.

But innumerable difficulties are to be attributed, not to scribal errors, but to a deficient knowledge of Hebrew. Today this is a recognized handicap which, however, is gradually and steadily being compensated for by fruitful scientific studies in various languages more or less related to Hebrew.<sup>4</sup> There are the living languages like Arabic, and ancient tongues like Sumerian, Egyptian, Akkadian (Assyro-Baby-

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<sup>4</sup> Most up to date technical summary of these linguistic studies is W. L. Moran, S.J., "The Hebrew Language in its Northwest Semitic Background", in *THE BIBLE AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 54-72.

lonian), Aramaic, Phoenician, but above all Ugaritic.<sup>5</sup> The city of Ugarit, situated on the coast of Syria opposite Cyprus, was one of the wealthiest Canaanite establishments in the pre-Israelite era, 1600-1200 B.C. Excavations there, begun in 1929 and still continuing, have uncovered numerous tombs, temples, palaces, shops, that testify to the material riches and culture of the people, but far more important for biblical studies are the numerous clay tablets, preserving poetic epics, legends, and thousands of business documents. Decipherment of this newly discovered language was accomplished swiftly. Ugaritic is now considered by many scholars to be a Canaanite dialect, related to that of Phoenicia directly south of Ugarit and to the language spoken still further south in the land of Canaan (Palestine), which was adopted by the Israelites about 1200 B.C., shortly after their exodus from Egypt. Ugaritic, then, as a somewhat older language, would be a sort of uncle to biblical Hebrew.

Studies in Ugaritic have appreciably increased knowledge of the Bible itself. They have illuminated hundreds of biblical verses; supposed scribal errors have proven to be unknown Hebrew words on the basis of Ugaritic words; Hebrew grammar, style and poetic references have been clarified. Only a few examples can here be listed to illustrate this type of linguistic study and to show its usefulness in gaining a better understanding of the original biblical text.

1. Often enough scientific explanations originating in the last century must be rejected in favor of the traditional translations of the Latin Vulgate of St. Jerome or of the Greek Septuagint, because of the unassailable evidence of Ugaritic. Genesis 1,2 had been interpreted according to the image of a bird protecting its little ones or hatching its eggs, and Msgr. Knox accepted this in his early translation of the OT: "The Spirit of God *brooded* over the waters". But the obscure Hebrew word, occurring only here, has found its certain meaning in

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<sup>5</sup>Two non-technical summary articles on Ugaritic are W. F. Albright, "The Old Testament and Canaanite Language and Literature", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 7 (1945), p. 5-31, and M. Dahood, S.J., "Ugaritic Studies and the Bible", *Gregorianum* 43 (1962), p. 55-79.

the Ugaritic counterpart which is used of eagles soaring or hovering in the air. The correct version found in the Catholic Confraternity edition: "The Spirit of God *was stirring* above the waters", confirms the old Latin translation with its more generic *movetur*, "was moving".

Two words in the Song of Anna (1 Kings 2, 5) have long been misunderstood. They are rendered in various ways: "The hungry *have-ceased to-toil*" or *have-ceased* working forever." But the Hebrew word usually taken to mean "cease" has been related to a verb in Arabic signifying "to grow fat", and the second problematic word has been shown to mean "food" on the basis of both Arabic and Ugaritic. Hence, the verse is to be translated, with almost perfect parallelism, as is to be expected in Hebrew poetry:

The sated hire themselves out for bread,  
And the hungry *grow-fat* with food (or *are-filled*).

This is similar to the Vulgate and confirms the testimony presented by the Magnificat, Mary's song of joy modeled so closely on Anna's. Mary's words, then, in Luke 1, 52, reflect the first-century Jewish interpretation of the similar verse in Anna's song, its model, and agree remarkably with the translation proposed above. Thus, "The hungry he *has-filled* with good-things", *esurientes implevit bonis*.

2. New meanings are also discovered, as for Lamentation 2, 10, where the old men are usually pictured sitting *silent* in ruined Jerusalem. But the Hebrew word is better understood as identical with the Ugaritic, meaning "to mourn, weep, wail". Silence seems not to have been a part of Semitic lament. Even in NT times, Our Lord saw "a tumult, people weeping and wailing greatly" because Jairus' daughter had died (Mark 5, 38). The verse then should read:

They sit upon the ground, they *mourn*, the elders of Sion.

In Job 39,14 the common translation describes the ostrich as negligent towards its future offspring.

For she *abandons* her eggs to the earth,  
and lets them be warmed on the ground.

But this is contrary to scientific fact. The ostrich lays eggs in a shallow trench, covers them with a foot of sand, and sits on them in the day to protect them from beasts of prey. The apparently inexcusable ignorance of the biblical writer about an easily observable fact of nature is based on a mistranslation. The word (used by Our Lord on the cross: "My God, why have you *forsaken* me?") is shown, on the Ugaritic evidence, to have a second meaning, "to place, set, arrange". What the author of Job writes accords perfectly with the natural activity of the ostrich.

She *places* (or *arranges*) her eggs in the ground,  
and upon the sand she warms them.

3. New interpretations are likewise provided by Ugaritic. The psalmist addresses the gates of Jerusalem, as the ark of God is about to be carried in procession into the holy city (Ps 23,7).

Lift up your head, O gates . . . for the king of glory  
is coming!

This "lifting up of the head" has been explained as necessary because the gates were considered too low for the high and lofty God. But the Ugaritic expression, connoting joy and expectation, bids us understand the psalmist's cry as an exhortation to the gates, or to the city itself, personified: "*Rejoice, O gates!*" This is the same idea directly expressed in Zachary 9,9: "*Rejoice, O daughter Sion . . . behold your king is coming!*" and metaphorically used by Our Lord in Luke 21,28: "*When these things come to pass, lift up your heads, for your redemption is at hand.*"

A reexamination of Proverbs 12,28 in the light of Ugaritic reveals the doctrine of immortality which is generally denied to the Hebrew books of the OT and admitted only for the Greek books (e.g. Wisdom 2,22; 3,1-4). "*In the path of justice there is life, but the way of wickedness leads to death.*" The Hebrew expression for "to death" can also be understood

as "*not death*", and occurs in Ugaritic precisely to denote life eternal, immortality. Hence, the new and theologically valuable interpretation can be rendered:

In the way of justice there is life,  
And the treading of her path is *immortality*.

New meanings and interpretations such as these change nothing substantial in the OT. The majority of them are not at all striking, and practically all occur in poetic passages, where there is question of a metaphor or some other figure of speech. But technical studies of this type, though unexciting and thoroughly dull for most people, are extremely important. The two hundred or so verses that are reexplained each year by scholars will, for the most part, find their way into the Bible translations of tomorrow. More than that, these new scientific interpretations are bringing us ever closer to a fuller understanding of the original meaning of the Bible as intended by the human author, and this is the truly inspired meaning intended by God.

#### LITERARY FORMS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND INERRANCY.

Over and beyond the study of the biblical text and vocabulary, the greatest task of exegetes is discovering and explaining the genuine meaning of the sacred books. This science is properly called hermeneutics or exegesis. In any attempt at interpretation, a sharp distinction must constantly be made between the *material words* of the Bible and the *intentions* of the authors in using those words, between what the Bible *says* and what the Bible *means*. This distinction is absolutely necessary for anyone wishing to understand and vindicate the Catholic doctrine of inerrancy, which is a matter of faith.

In the Bible everything is divinely inspired, not in the sense of being dictated by God, but in the sense explained above of divine supernatural influence. But not every statement in the Bible is necessarily true. Not everything there corresponds to reality as we know it, but this is not necessarily error. For instance, Psalm 13.1 says, "There is no God". This is patently false, but in the full context there is truth.

What the author *means* is true, as is clear from the whole sentence: The fool says in his heart, "There is no God!" In Psalm 29, "The mountain of Lebanon jumped like a calf!" This is hardly a normal pastoral scene, but what the author *means* is clear enough. The loud bursts of thunder seemed to make the earth tremble and shake, and Mt. Lebanon as well. In Judges 9,8 Jotham speaks to the men of Shechem: "Once the trees went forth to anoint a king over them; and they said to the olive tree, 'Rule over us'." Obviously trees do not walk and talk, but the author's *meaning* is expressed in that fable.

What the author *means* is necessarily true and inerrant, according to this doctrine of faith. Truth pertains to the judgment and hence to the affirmations of the author, the facts or teachings he intends to present. God as author, then, vouches for the truth of the human author's judgments, affirmations and teachings. But what the author *says* may or may not correspond to reality, as we know it or as we would express it. What the author says is his literary form.<sup>6</sup>

Literary forms are simply the accepted ways of writing (and speaking) in a given age or society. An author chooses this or that particular type of writing, with its peculiar literary conventions, as the vehicle or medium for expressing his meaning. He can select prose or poetry, fact or fiction, fable, parable, or biography, accurate technical description or a popular description. Each literary type has its own expression of truth. The type itself is not true or false, it is only beautiful or ugly according to esthetic norms. What it expresses—the content, doctrine, meaning intended by the author who chose the particular poem or biography as his vehicle of expression—may be either true or false. Here is where we must look for truth or falsehood, while in the meaning of the Bible we look for truth alone.

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<sup>6</sup> The question of inerrancy and literary forms is treated in practically all modern introductory books on the OT, e.g., A. Jones, UNLESS SOME MAN SHOW ME (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1951), p. 20-37; J. Castelot, S.S., MEET THE BIBLE! (Baltimore: Helicon, 1960), p. 29-44; and technically by P. Synave, O.P. and P. Benoit, O. P., PROPHECY AND INSPIRATION (New York: Desclee, 1961), p. 132-145, 159-163.

In the Bible it is necessary to judge in each case what the author's *literary form* was, and to look for his precise *meaning*, that is, what he intends to affirm or teach. Sometimes the particular form is easy to identify because both the biblical and the modern author use the same form, like poetry or parable. But sometimes he is using forms peculiar to the ancient semitic world of 3000 years ago; and if we misinterpret the form, we misinterpret the meaning. For this reason Pius XII insists in his encyclical that

...the interpreter must endeavor very carefully, overlooking no light derived from recent research, to determine the personal traits and backgrounds of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the oral or written sources which he used, and his *ways of expressing himself*. . . . It is absolutely necessary for the interpreter to return in spirit to the remote ages of the ancient East, and to use the resources of history, archaeology, ethnology, in order to discover what *literary forms* the writers of that early age intended to use and did in fact employ. For to express what they had in mind the ancients of the East did not always use the same forms of expression as we use today; they used those which were current among the peoples of their own time and place; and what these were, the exegete cannot determine *a priori*, but only from a careful study of ancient oriental literature.<sup>7</sup>

Among the works of ancient literature which bear resemblance to the OT books and require careful study<sup>8</sup>, we might mention the creation and garden stories of Sumeria and Babylonia, the flood stories of many peoples, an Egyptian tale of two brothers which is close to the Joseph story, a Babylonian Job who suffered and complained. There are Egyptian, Babylonian, Aramaic proverbs and countless hymns or psalms from various lands. But in this brief survey article only a few of the literary forms used in the OT can be examined. This will put flesh on the skeletal principles outlined above and offer a sampling of the type of studies being pursued by biblicalists, who attempt, through such analyses, to understand the meaning of the author all the more clearly and thus to see where truth and inerrancy lie.

<sup>7</sup> RSS, p. 96-97.

<sup>8</sup> See D. W. Thomas, editor, DOCUMENT FROM OLD TESTAMENT TIMES (London: Nelson, 1958).

The literary form of the Bible as a whole can be summed up as "sacred history" or "salvation history". It is not political history, nor economic, nor constitutional, but "salvation" history. It is *history* because facts that actually happened are related, *salvation* because they are related from a particular point of view, that of God's saving activity in the world and especially for Israel. Hence, it is religious and theological, not secular. It shows God's salvific activity in the world—from creation in the beginning, to the creation of the new people, Israel, as they were saved from Egypt and the desert, to the final grand act of salvation in the Cross and Resurrection, which introduced a new creation, as St. Paul says, and a new creation!

If the author intended to write a *religious book* of this nature, then it is clear that he did not intend to write a book on natural science. If he *says*, "At sunset God saved Israel", he is not affirming anything scientific about the gyrations of the sun. He affirms and *means* merely, "At the close of day, God saved Israel." If he says, "God made the firmament, that inverted bowl above the earth, with all its windows and sluices for letting down rain, and with its army of brilliant lights that march across its surface", he is not affirming anything about the scientific structure of the universe. Of course the firmament looks like a bowl and stars seem to march across it. But the author is affirming and *means* only that God made this world, with its bowlish roof and waters as he (the author) saw it. His intention and meaning are concerned with fact, but with religious fact and religious truth, namely that God is the creator. He can hardly be accused of error when he had no intention of describing the cosmogony or the cosmos scientifically.

#### GENESIS I-II AND CHURCH TEACHING

A closer look at the important first chapters of Genesis is here warranted, for these are a kind of preface to the Bible, laying the theological foundation for everything that is to

follow, and, together with the Exodus story, are the most well known sections of the OT.<sup>9</sup>

The author's intention in Genesis 1 is clearly and certainly to express a religious *fact*, that God created the world and everything in it. The vehicle he chooses for expressing this truth is the workweek, six days of work with a seventh for rest. Did the author also intend to affirm and teach the *manner* of creation? Did he mean that God really spent six days of 24 hours each on his creative labors and rested on the seventh, and that he created things in exactly the order in which they are described? An analysis of the literary form of this account would indicate that the author intended to teach the *fact* of creation, not the *manner*.

There is the artificial framework of the workweek, with labor confined to the daytime. Nothing was done at night: "And there was evening and morning, the first day", and God rested on the seventh day. This is the Hebrew workweek, which has its religious basis in the Ten Commandments. Here, then, God is pictured as the Divine Artisan, fulfilling the very law he promulgated for the Hebrews. Since God is eternally and continually active, this description cannot be understood literally. It is an extended metaphor, or more precisely an anthropomorphism, that figure of speech which attributes human characteristics to God and which is inevitable in any human language attempting to speak of the divine. The workweek as applied to God's activity must be understood in the same way as "the hand of God", "the face of God", "the anger of God". These are human expression, inexact and even incorrect since God has neither human body nor human emotions, but there is hardly any other way in which we can speak about God's activity and qualities.

There is the artistic and orderly arrangement of the various works of creation which can easily be recognized in this scheme.

<sup>9</sup> For fuller treatment of Genesis, see B. Vawter, C.M., A PATH THROUGH GENESIS (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), and for the first three chapters, C. Hauret, BEGINNINGS. GENESIS AND MODERN SCIENCE (Dubuque: Priory Press, 1955).

## DAY/WORK

1. Light — Darkness
  2. Firmament — Waters
  3. Dry Land — Water
- Plants

## DAY/WORK

4. Sun and moon, stars
  5. Birds and fish
  6. Animals
- MAN

The workweek is divided into two three-day periods that show certain contrasts and correspondences. The works of the first three days (except the plants) are all created by acts of "separation". God separates light from darkness, divides the primeval waters with the bowl-like firmament, separates dry land from the seas. What results is a series of "places" or "receptacles", that God then proceeds to "fill up" with suitable creatures and in corresponding order. He "fills" the light with the sun, darkness with its luminaries, the firmament with birds, the waters with fish, the land with animals. Man, the last work and the climax of creation, is not conceived as a mere "filler"; rather he is to be "filled" with the corresponding work of the third day, the plants, which are given to him as food.

This orderly arrangement is clearly artistic and artificial. It is the literary dress or ornamentation decorating the religious truths presented: God, all powerful and good, wholly independent, created the world and everything in it. More than mere literary adornment, however, this symmetrical structure served as a memory device. Long before writing became widespread, the creation story was handed down in oral transmission through generations, from father to son, from priest to congregation. In such a neat and clear symmetrical pattern, the Hebrew religious truths were easily remembered, recited in assemblies, and thus made a lasting impression on the faithful.

There is, finally, the second chapter of Genesis which confirms the author's interest in the *fact* of creation, not in the *manner*. In the first creation account God merely speaks to bring things into being, but in the second he is pictured anthro-

pomorphically as "planting" a garden (2,8), "forming" or "molding" man as a potter would mold a jug from clay (2,7), "forming out of the ground all the beasts and birds" (2,19). The order of creation in the two accounts differs sharply. In the first, man comes at the end of the process, on the sixth day, as the climax and God's masterpiece. In the second account, there is only one day for creation (2,4). After the earth and heavens, with just a mist coming from the ground, God immediately made man (2,7), then plantlife (2,9), the animals (2,19), and lastly woman (2,22). Obviously the author of Genesis did not believe in the logical order of creation as described in Genesis 1. Otherwise he would not have added the second chapter with its different picture of God and the order of creation. The differences have theological significance, as, for instance, man in the first account pictured as the last and most perfect of creatures and in the second as the king of creation who is then given his subjects. Each picture represents different aspects of man as he truly is. The author simply presented two different literary compositions that were handed down in the traditions of his people and that contained religious truths, revealed by God to his ancestors and infallibly true.

Pope Pius XII emphasized the importance of studying the literary forms used in the Bible and in ancient literature in order to arrive at the genuine and correct interpretation and to demonstrate Scripture's immunity from error. "Not infrequently, when some persons reproachfully charge the Sacred Writers with some historical error or inaccuracy in the recording of facts, on closer examination it turns out to be nothing else than those customary modes of expression and narration peculiar to the ancients."<sup>10</sup> The secretary of the Biblical Commission, Fr. Jacques Vosté, O.P., applied these general principles in a concrete way to the first eleven chapters of Genesis in a letter to Cardinal Suhard of Paris, who had asked for clarification on the question of historicity. The Holy Father himself approved the secretary's reply to the Cardinal. These chapters, he wrote,

<sup>10</sup> RSS, p. 98.

relate in *simple and figurative language*, adapted to the understanding of a less developed people, the *fundamental truths* presupposed for the economy of salvation, as well as the *popular description* of the origin of the human race and the Chosen People.<sup>11</sup>

The overly brief analysis of the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2 as offered above represents the endeavors of Catholic biblicists to follow these papal directives. The literary form employed by the author contains simple and figurative language: the extended metaphor in Genesis 1 and the concrete, anthropomorphic language in Chapter 2. It describes the origin of the universe and the human race, not scientifically, but popularly, with the aid of a convenient and orderly outline first, and then with a vivid portrayal of God's activity. This the people could easily understand, remember, and pass on to their children. There is no question of truth or falsity in this figurative and popular description, which is the literary dress or vehicle for the author's meaning. What the author intends to affirm and teach are those fundamental truths presupposed for the economy of salvation and revealed to the Hebrews, and it is this teaching that receives the divine guarantee of infallibility.

Some of these truths are the following. God is unique, transcendent, dependent on nothing and all-powerful. God created all things and they are all good. God created man by a special action, endowing him with a nature that sets him apart from animals and above them. He created male and female that the single human species might be propagated. Woman possesses the same nature as man, is his natural complement and helper, equal in dignity yet subordinate because of her physical and moral dependence upon him, joined to him in indissoluble marriage. Truths expressed so baldly could hardly have moved the Hebrews to constant loyalty to God amidst the paganism of sophisticated neighbors. Little wonder, then, that the inspired author composed creation stories that appealed to the Hebrew imagination and heart as well as to the mind.

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<sup>11</sup> RSS, p. 150-151.

Studies in Genesis 3-11 have emphasized their significance in showing sin throughout human history and society, in individuals (our first parents), in the family (Cain and Abel), in the nation (Noah), on the international level (Tower of Babel). To present these basic, historical and theological truths the authors utilized different stories and traditions from various sources. The Cain-Abel story is typically Hebrew, with its glorification of pastoral life and its numerous puns, intelligible only in Hebrew. The Flood story comes from north Mesopotamia. The Paradise story has elements reminiscent of the Sumerian and Babylonian myths, but these are used as background material and stage props for the truly historical drama of sin. The few puzzling verses in Genesis 6,1-4 about the giants are the remnants of a pagan myth that has been reworked and given a symbolic meaning.

The distinction in these eleven chapters between the *literary forms* and the author's *meaning* conveyed by them must constantly be kept in mind, if the inspired meaning is not to be obscured or wholly lost. The literary forms with the pictures they portray are beautiful or not, according to one's own literary preferences and esthetic norms. Authors today might prefer avoiding such forms, but the biblical authors used them precisely because they were "current among the people of their own time and place". But there can be no justification in charging them with error, if they do not present us with a strictly photographic record of what happened during those hundred thousand years and more between Adam and Abraham. They could not have done this even if they had wanted to, but they were not concerned with such matters. They were not interested in the events as mere happenings, but as charged with meaning. They narrated historical facts, true happenings, that were imbued with the activity of God and the ungrateful response of man. The author's clear teaching in these chapters that all good in the world and in man comes from God, and that the evil in the world man has brought on himself through sin, is vouched for by Infallible Truth.

## VARIOUS OT LITERARY FORMS

Since the Bible is a veritable library, it should surprise no one that many literary forms have been incorporated into it.<sup>12</sup> And even though the Bible is salvation history, it is quite different from modern historical works in method, manner, and purpose. These record history as it is scientifically observable in contemporary written documents and in verifiable eye-witness testimony. The historian is, or should be, objective and uncommitted in his search for what exactly happened. The biblical writer, however, is wholly committed to his religious view of the world and history and interprets everything in that light. His purpose, as thoroughly religious, is concerned more with the significance of the fact than with the fact itself. Since scientific documents and testimonies were unavailable, he utilized the materials at hand, which were in part unreliable oral traditions, although there were also the official royal records of Israel and Judah for later writers.

The accounts in Genesis 12-50 contain *family traditions*, popular recollections about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob as they were preserved by their descendants and retold again and again for the glorification of the patriarchs. Scholars see in Exodus and Numbers a *national epic* that freely employs hyperbole and exaggeration with patriotic fervor. In epics everything happens in a grand and heroic manner. The book of Joshua (Josue)<sup>13</sup> continues the epic, but simplifies and idealizes the complicated story of the conquest of the promised land by connecting almost all the Israelite victories with Moses'

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<sup>12</sup> Reliable guides to the OT literary forms are F. L. Moriarty, S.J., FOREWORD TO THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS (Weston: Weston College, 1954) and J. Castelot, S.S., MEET THE BIBLE: OLD TESTAMENT (Baltimore, Helicon, 1961). More complete and technical is A. Robert and A. Feuillet, editors, INTRODUCTION Á LA BIBLE, I (Tournai: Desclee, 2nd edition 1959), p. 123-142 and *passim*, and 142-151 for the NT literary forms, which are not as numerous as those of the OT.

<sup>13</sup> The forms of biblical names and places will be those found in English dictionaries and based for the most part on the Hebrew. The spellings more familiar to Catholics from the Douai version, which is a translation from the Latin Vulgate, will be added in parentheses if there are substantial divergences.

youthful successor. The book of Judges is a collection of *popular stories* from the days before the kings. These vary from the sober, factual account of Abimelech's ill-fated kingship over Shechem to the imaginative, almost legendary tales connected with Samson. 1 and 2 Kings narrate the founding of the Israelite monarchy. The court history of David (2 Kgs 9-20; 3 Kgs 1-2) has been described by a rationalistic scholar as the "outstanding prose writing and the historical masterpiece of the OT", that is "unsurpassed in historicity, psychological insight, literary style and dramatic power." A briefer modern term for this might be *historical biography*. Strictly *historical writing* continues into 3 and 4 Kings, where older historical material has been gathered into a theological unity and framework. The history of the kings of Israel and Judah is summarily recorded, but constantly in the light of theological principles laid down chiefly in the book of Deuteronomy, such as their fidelity to worship in the one sanctuary of Jerusalem, and their opposition to false gods and the "high places". The documents, personal memoirs, and narrations in Ezra-Nehemiah and 1 Macchabees, which are perhaps the nearest of all OT writings to a modern historical work, were assembled primarily to present a *religious history* of their people, that is, a history of their relations with God in the post-exilic era. The book of Judith appears to be a *short story* of a sort; Esther and Tobias belong to the same category but with a definite historical nucleus. Pure fiction is present in the *fable* of the talking trees in Judges 9, the *parable* of Nathan in 2 Kgs 12, and in *allegories* such as that of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 and of the two sisters in Ezekiel 23. The Greek and Latin Bibles, with which Catholics are most familiar, list all the narrative books as historical. The Jewish tradition, perhaps more accurately, has always emphasized their religious characteristic, calling the first five books the Law of Moses and the Joshua-Judges-Kings complex the Former Prophets. These are termed prophetic inasmuch as they interpreted the history of the Israelites in a divine and religious light.

The books of the prophets also show a variety of forms, the most common of which is poetry. Modern translations now

illustrate this vividly by printing the poetic sections in verse structure. There are also narrations as in Jeremiah and Jonah, maledictions as in Amos and Isaiah, oracles, laments, sermons, blessings, prayers. The seven didactic books frequently called the books of Wisdom include the Psalms, which are devotional lyrics or hymns, and the book of Proverbs, which is a collection of common-sense maxims. Love songs, most likely used for nuptials, make up the Canticle of Canticles. Job is a dramatic dialogue on the age-old problem of suffering. Ecclesiastes (or Cohelet) is a somber, reflective monologue on the meaning of life. Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach) and the Greek book of Wisdom are reflective lyrics concerned with life and wisdom.<sup>14</sup>

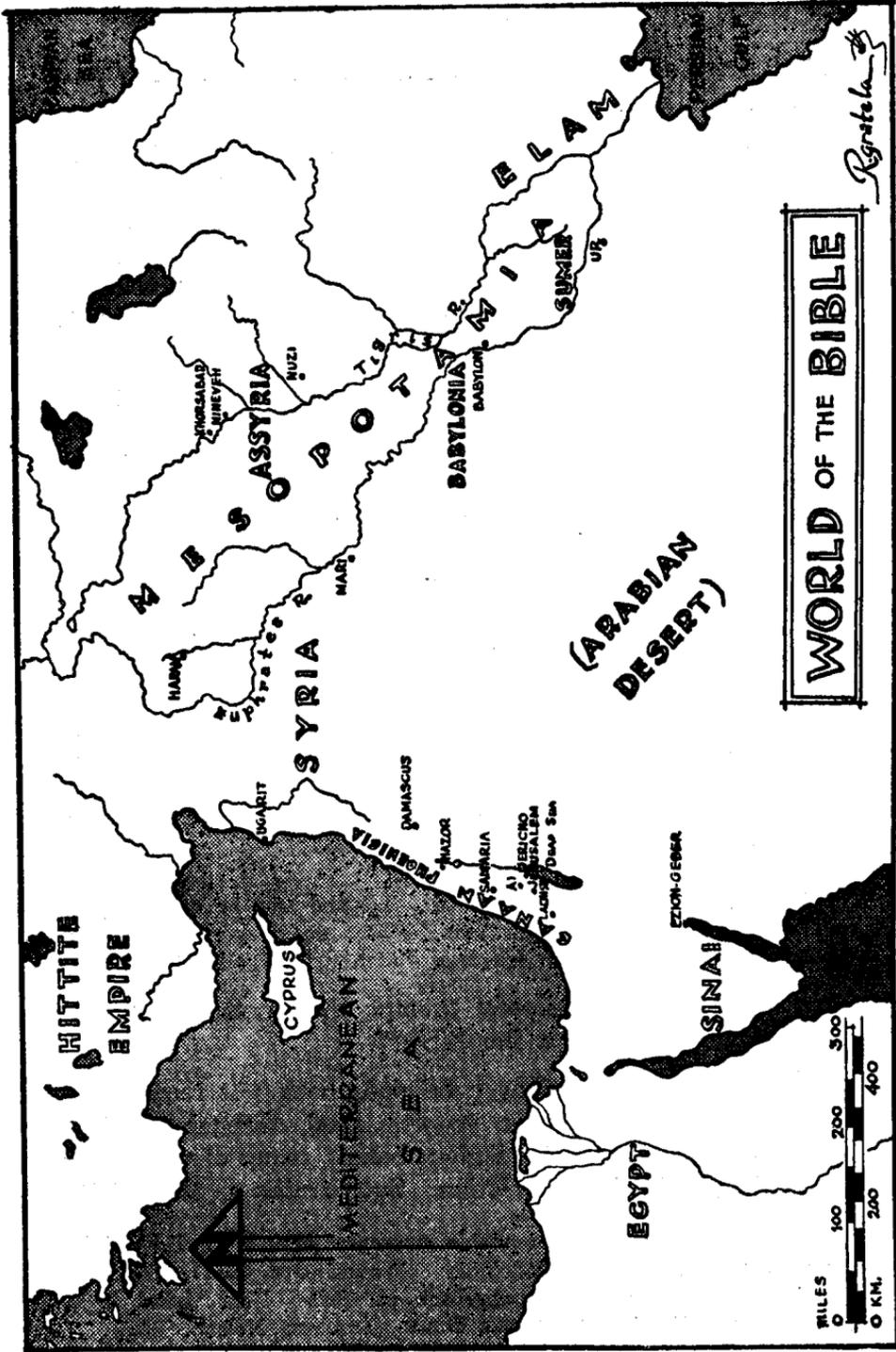
Scholars are sparing no efforts in attempting to recognize and categorize the various literary forms employed in the OT with ever greater clarity and precision. They will ultimately vindicate the optimistic prediction of Pius XII concerning these studies which will efficaciously "contribute to a fuller and more luminous understanding of the mind of the Sacred Writer".

#### ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Archaeology, the "study of antiquities", is technically a branch of history. It is one of the historical sciences, directed towards the understanding of human life and civilization by the systematic study of material remains from the past. The literary documents, copied and transmitted over centuries and a necessary source for the work of historians, have been remarkably supplemented for the pre-Christian era by written and unwritten records dug up by the archaeologist's spade in excavations. Inscriptions and documents on stone, clay, papyrus, the ruins of ancient cities with temples, houses, shops, the countless objects such as pottery, tools, weapons, clothing,

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<sup>14</sup> See B. Vawter, C.M., *THE CONSCIENCE OF ISRAEL. PREEXILIC PROPHETS AND PROPHECY* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961); R. E. Murphy, O. Carm., *SEVEN BOOKS OF WISDOM* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1960).



**WORLD OF THE BIBLE**

*Rydstedt*

**HITTITE  
EMPIRE**

**ASSYRIA**

**SYRIA**

**BABYLONIA**

**ELAM**

**(ARABIAN  
DESERT)**

UGARIT

DAMASCUS

HAZOR

SAMARIA

JERICHO

HEBRON

JERUSALEM

GAZA

DEAD SEA

EZRAH-GEBER

**SINAI**

**EGYPT**

**MEDITERRANEAN  
SEA**



jewelry have all thrown light on the world of the Bible and on the Bible itself.<sup>15</sup>

Excavations in the Near East (or Middle East) have from the very beginning of scientific archaeology touched upon places and personalities that feature in the Old or New Testament. In 1842, the first attempts in northern Mesopotamia at Khorsabad, a city of ancient Assyria, turned up innumerable bas-reliefs showing the figure of Sargon II (721-705 B.C.), the conqueror of Samaria, Israel's capital.

Then the king of Assyria came up against the whole land and went up to Samaria and besieged it for three years. In the ninth year of Osee, the king of Assyria took Samaria and carried Israel off as captive to Assyria. (4 Kgs 17,6)

Inscriptions added to this brief biblical notice, recording in detail the deportation of the Israelites, giving the number of prisoners at 27,290, with 50 chariots. Shortly afterwards, excavators discovered a six and a half foot stone obelisk with twenty bas-reliefs and inscriptions depicting Shalmeneser III collecting tribute in 841 B.C. from Jehu, king of Israel, who is pictured on his knees before the Assyrian (4 Kgs 9-10). A generation later, a rock inscription was found at the mouth of the canal of Siloam in Jerusalem, giving an account of the cutting and referring no doubt to King Hezekiah (Ezechias) of Judah (715-687 B.C.).

The rest of the acts of Hezekiah . . . and how he made a pool and a canal and brought water into the city, are they not written in the Book of the Acts of the Kings of Judah? (4 Kgs 20, 20)

Such discoveries immediately prompt the question: "Does archaeology, then, prove the Bible?"

The Bible is essentially a religious book. It records the religious experiences of the people, Israel, throughout their history and contains their religious beliefs, many of which owe their origin to Divine Revelation. Such truths as the unicity

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<sup>15</sup> The fullest and most readable summary work is G. E. Wright, *BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), also published as a much abridged paperback in 1960. Very useful is L. Grollenberg, O.P., *ATLAS OF THE BIBLE* (London: Nelson, 1956).

of God, the creation of the world, the divine institution of marriage, providence in life, eternal life and resurrection after death, the Incarnation of the Son of God, which are the heart of the Bible, have nothing whatever to do with archaeology. How can archaeology "prove" or "disprove" them? They pertain to the sphere of theology, and even of philosophy in some cases, but not of the natural or social sciences.

The Bible is not a book of history, although it records much of Israel's history. If archaeology should turn up something in certain conflict with a biblical statement, it would not "disprove" the Bible. The Bible uses many literary forms to express religious truths. In the book of Judith, Nebuchadnezzar (Nabuchodonosor) is called the king of Assyria, when he was actually the king of Babylon. Historically, this is as silly a blunder as calling Chiang Kai-shek the emperor of Japan. Archaeology would at most tend here to confirm the biblical author's intention. From the various historical inconsistencies in Judith, it is clear that he intended to write an exciting short story, not a historical annal, as the medium for his religious teaching.

If archaeology, then, should turn up something in complete accord with the Bible, it would still not "prove" the Bible. It would merely be confirming the historical accuracy of the author, who in this instance intended to affirm a particular fact. It is theologically certain that the Divine Author vouches for everything the human author is affirming, whether it be a historical fact like the birth of Jesus in the time of Herod and Caesar Augustus or a religious truth like God's providence. But archaeology, as a profane science, cannot "prove" this fact to be infallible on the basis of Divine Authorship. Such would be beyond its scope and evidence. However, it can illustrate, explain, clarify the literary and especially the historical aspects of the Bible. This is not to "prove" the Bible, but to make it intelligible.

The value of archaeology in recovering ancient languages and literatures that have a direct bearing on the language and literature of the Bible has already been mentioned. Archaeo-

logy has also illuminated almost every phase of Israelite history and culture.

#### FROM ABRAHAM TO MOSES

The patriarchal age of Hebrew history has until recent times been treated with great skepticism. Many have seen in the Abraham-Isaac-Jacob traditions sheer fiction or mere reflections of the monarchical age (1000-587 B.C.), but practically nothing from the alleged period of the patriarchs (2000-1700). Discoveries in Mesopotamia at sites such as Mari, Nuzi, Haran, Ur have strikingly confirmed the Hebrew traditions concerning their origin in northwestern Mesopotamia about a thousand years before the Israelite kings.

Young Abraham's trek with his family from Ur northward to Haran (Gen 11,13) is quite plausible. Ur was destroyed by the Elamites around 1950 B.C. and many of its inhabitants fled to the sister city, Haran, which worshipped the same patronal deity. The permanent associations with Abraham were in this city, where his family felt completely at home, since the whole area was now in the hands of west Semitic relations who had moved in from the desert. Haran flourished prosperously in the 19th and 18th centuries, and several cities in the vicinity are found in Abraham's genealogical lists: Peleg (Phaleg), Nahor, Serug, even Terah (Thare). Moreover, the names of the patriarchs themselves, such as Abraham, Jacob, Zebulon, Levi, are known to have been current in both Palestine and Mesopotamia in this same period.

Numerous incidents in Genesis can now be explained in the light of customs that prevailed in the second millenium. Abraham was following the customary practice of this period when Sara supplied him with a handmaid because she was unable to bear children (Gen 16,1-4). Another problematic episode, Rachel's theft of her father Laban's idols (31,19-35), was clarified when it was found that possession of the household gods played an important role in inheriting family property.

A more precise dating is suggested for the stories about Joseph from the reign of the foreign kings called Hyksos,

between 1700 and 1550. These were Semites who had pushed into Egypt from Palestine and the desert, and only in such circumstances is it fully plausible for a fellow Semite like Joseph to rise to the post of prime minister "in charge of the whole land of Egypt" (41,43). The Egyptian coloring in these stories is thoroughly authentic. The titles, "chief of the butlers" and "chief of the bakers" (40,2), occur in Egyptian documents. Interpretation of dreams was held in esteem and magicians were plentiful (41,8). Joseph's age of 110 years (50,22) was the traditional length of a happy and prosperous life and embalming was typically Egyptian.

The large number of Egyptian names among the Hebrews also confirms the substance of the Egyptian sojourn. Moses itself is an abbreviated name for something longer, similar to Rameses (which means "born-of the-god-Ra). That the pharaoh used Semitic slaves for brickmaking and construction work is graphically portrayed on a tomb painting.

None of the patriarchs are mentioned by name and none of their adventures is found recorded outside the Bible. Even the Exodus from Egypt is buried in silence. Nevertheless, this sampling of the tremendous archaeological evidence which is available to scholars today indicates that the patriarchal narratives as a whole fit authentically into the second millenium in Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt.

#### FROM THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

The first explicit reference to Israel comes from a victory stele set up by the pharaoh, Merneptah, the successor of Rameses II, about 1220 B.C. on which he had recorded a list of his triumphs.

The people Israel has been laid waste, it has no offspring.

The land of Hurru (Palestine-Syria) has become a widow for Egypt.

Israel is thus attested to be in the land of Canaan, but as a "foreign people", not yet fully settled nor in full control of the land.

The book of Joshua undoubtedly simplifies the complexities of the conquest of the promised land, with Joshua himself pictured as leading a successful and lightning three-pronged attack against central, southern, and finally northern Palestine. But according to professional archaeologists, the biblical account of this wholesale destructive invasion of the Israelites in Canaan is confirmed by traces of the simultaneous destruction of Bethel, Lacish, and Debir before 1200 B.C. This evidence has been supported by the recent Israeli excavation at Hazor (Hasor) in the north, which unearthed what must have been the largest Palestinian city of the 13th century, covering more than 80 hectares, an astonishing verification of the biblical description: "Hazor formerly was the chief of all those kingdoms" (Jos 11,10). Its violent destruction was followed up very closely by an impoverished Israelite resettlement. However, Palestinian Archaeology has also posed problems for the Josuan accounts of Jericho and Ai (Hai). Jericho, the oldest known city in the world, appears to have been unoccupied when it was supposed to have been captured by the Israelites, and Ai had already been destroyed 1000 years earlier. Only future excavations can clear up this fog.

During the 12th and 11th centuries, reflected in the book of Judges, Israel was engaged in constant struggles against invaders like the Philistines and against the remaining Canaanite cities. The excavations reveal repeated destruction of important sites and confirm the bloody anarchy deprecated in the Bible: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what he wanted" (Jud 21,25). The apostasy of Israelites in running after false gods, as often mentioned in Judges, is surprisingly illustrated in an 11th-century Israelite settlement in Hazor. It contained a pagan shrine, with various cult objects and a statuette of the war god.

No direct light has been shed on the periods of Saul and David, except the discovery of the rough fortress in Gibeah that Saul called his palace. A sample of King Solomon's extensive building operations showed up in the huge stables at Megiddo for almost 500 horses (3 Kgs 9,15-19), and in the largest copper and iron smelting refinery ever found in the

Near East. It was discovered at Ezion-Geber on the west arm of the Red Sea. The Bible makes no mention of a refinery, but this archaeological bonanza explains one purpose of the fleet which Solomon built at that port, and indicates the value of such metals, which undoubtedly were exchanged for gold in Ophir (3 Kgs 9,26-28). Hazor has also turned up a remarkable parallel for the Solomonic temple (3 Kgs 6-7) with the tripartite construction of porch, central room and "holy of holies", as well as the bases for the two puzzling free-standing pillars on the porch. The ruins yielded a full set of ceremonial objects such as lavers, bowls, and altar.

The Assyrian royal inscriptions, furnishing a great deal of information on the political history of Palestine-Syria, provide a valuable commentary for the books of Kings and Chronicles (Paralipomenon) and for the prophetic works of Isaiah and Jeremiah. A few examples were cited above.

The Palestinian excavations indicate catastrophic destruction in the northern kingdom of Israel due to the Assyrian campaigns of 732 and 724-721, and also later in the southern kingdom, Judah, when the Babylonians devastated the land prior to taking Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Out of this period came one of the most sensational finds in the biblical world, the Lacish letters, a dozen or so clay sherds with messages written on them in ink for the military commander of Lacish. They were written within a year or two of Jerusalem's fall and reflect the chaotic and helpless situation in which the Judahites found themselves with the Babylonians overrunning the land. They have unusual philological significance, since their language is that of Jerusalem in the time of the prophet Jeremiah. In one letter the princes are accused of "weakening the hands" of the army and people in their struggle against the enemy, which is exactly what the same princes accused Jeremiah of doing by advocating surrender (Jer 38,4). Another remarkable discovery was the group of Babylonian cuneiform tablets listing the rations delivered to certain captives, including "Yaukin, king of the land of Yahuda"—Jehoiakin (Joachim), king of Jerusalem and Judah, deported in 597 (2 Kgs 24,12). One tablet even bore the precise date, the equivalent of 592

B.C. It is rare that evidence singles out a biblical personage by name and with date.

There is relatively little archaeological testimony, either written or unwritten, for the post-exilic period from 538 B.C. on, but more than enough to substantiate the historicity of the background in the books of the prophet Ezekiel and of Ezra-Nehemiah. However, not much light is shed upon the Persian and Greek periods, roughly from the 5th to the 1st centuries.

This survey must include at least mention of the most important find of the century. The now famous Dead Sea Scrolls<sup>16</sup> had been buried for almost two thousand years in several caves at the northeast corner of the Dead Sea, when they were accidentally recovered by an Arab shepherd boy. The biblical texts among them come from all the OT books, except Esther, and provide us with a Hebrew text one thousand years earlier than the previously known Hebrew manuscripts. These are of incalculable value for OT textual and linguistic studies. Together with the non-biblical materials, originating with the Jewish sect related to the Essenes and dwelling in the Qumran monastery, these scrolls will keep scholars occupied in their study and interpretation for many years to come. But it is already clear that the revolutionary significance of the new finds for our understanding of the OT is far surpassed by the importance of Qumran for our knowledge of the historical and religious background of the New Testament. Hence, the topic of the scrolls is not too pertinent for this article but will be treated, I hope, in a later survey.

Archaeology has illuminated almost every page of the Bible and particularly OT social, cultural and religious history, about which, unfortunately, this article has said very little. But enough has been said to show how archaeology fits biblical events into their place and time in ancient Near East history and illustrates in innumerable ways the language, life, customs

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<sup>16</sup> See R. E. Murphy, O. Carm., *THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND THE BIBLE* (Westminster: Newman, 1956); J. T. Milik, *TEN YEARS OF DISCOVERY IN THE WILDERNESS OF JUDEA* (London: SCM, 1960).

and politics of Israel and its neighbors. Archaeological evidence for Israel's moral and religious life merits a separate study.<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, then, the Bible as a human book arose in that ancient world and necessarily reflects its language and culture. As a divine book, it was not of that world. Its essential qualities in the moral and religious sphere, because of its Divine Author, are infinitely richer and profounder than those found in any comparable literature, and of everlasting value to the present Judaeo-Christian civilization, the seeds of which were planted on Sinai with the birth of the people, Israel, and the fulness of which is the Church. Textual, linguistic, and historical investigations of the human words enshrined in the Old Testament play their role in leading the investigators and the faithful to a deeper and more accurate understanding of the Word of God.

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<sup>17</sup> See W. F. Albright, *ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1956); R. de Vaux, O.P., *ANCIENT ISRAEL, ITS LIFE AND INSTITUTIONS* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), Part V, "Religious Institutions".