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Bearing on the Bible

"ONE by one," says Professor Sayce, of Oxford, "the narratives of the Old Testament upon which the oversubtle analysis of modern criticism had cast suspicion and doubt are being vindicated by the progress of Oriental research." It should be said, moreover, that the critics have largely ignored this realm of scientific research. All along they have based one of their strongest arguments on the assumption that both the Israelites themselves and the populations by whom they were surrounded were ignorant of the art of writing books at the time of the conquest of Canaan and during the age of the judges. They supposed the literary period of Israel to have begun with Samuel. The oldest description yet discovered in the Phœnician alphabet is fixed at the time of the Moabite king Mesha, the contemporary of Ahab. The critics asked why no older inscriptions had been found, if the art of writing had been known centuries earlier. Within recent years the archaeologist has given the answer. True, the earlier literature was not inscribed upon papyrus or written in forms of the Phœnician alphabet. It was entrusted to more enduring tablets of clay, while the language and script in which it has been preserved were both disused in the Palestine of a later day. A single blow of the excavator's pick has shattered some of the most ingenious conclusions of the critics.

In the year 1887-8 a number of cuneiform tablets were taken from the ruins of a city of ancient Egypt, the site of which is now known as Tel el Amarna. They consist of letters and dispatches sent to the Egyptian court by the kings of Babylonia, Assyria and Syria, and the Egyptian governors and vassal princes in the subject province of Palestine. They are written in the script and language of Babylonia, which was at that time the common language of diplomacy, and it proves that there must have been a very general literary activity and some educational system to have mastered the complicated writing of Babylonia all through the East. The most interesting of the letters from Palestine are from a certain Ebed-Tob, the governor of Jerusalem. He was not governor by appointment of the king of Egypt, but an ally who paid tribute. He speaks of "the city of the mountain of Salim." The word "Uru" signified city, so that Urusalim is the city of Salim, identical with Jerusalem. This Ebed-Tob speaks of himself as being a "priest of the most high God." We turn to Genesis xiv. and read the account of Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, and identify this description with that of the tablets, which thus carry us back to the time of Abraham. Not only so, but the "written bricks" confirm the account, in that same chapter of Genesis, of the incursion of Chedorlaomer, a Babylonian prince.

But the most remarkable coincidence in the history of this work occurred in the year 1892. Among the letters of the Tel el-Amarna tablets are two that were written by governors of the city of Lachish, one of whom was Zimrida. One of the letters from the king of Jerusalem conveys the information that Zimrida was murdered at Lachish by the servants of the Egyptian king. In 1890

Dr. Flinders Petrie was excavating in Southern Palestine, at a lofty mound known as Tel el-Hesi. From various indications he suspected that he had identified this very city of Lachish. In 1892 the work was continued by Mr. Bliss, of Beirut. Not only did he fully identify the ancient Amorite city, but he found tablets exactly like those of Tel el-Amarna, and upon them this very name of Zimrida occurs twice. Scarcely have the letters from upper Egypt been translated, when their counterparts in Southern Palestine come to the light, and the two parts of a correspondence which took place before the Exodus are joined together. It is but the beginning, for Mr. Bliss is just at the entrance of the ancient archive chamber of the governor's palace.

The result of this recent discovery is conclusive evidence that the land of Canaan was inhabited by people who were by no means the unlettered tribes imagined by the critics. One of their cities was named Kirjath Sepher, which means "the city of books," and indicates libraries in Canaan as there were in Babylonia. In the song of Deborah and Barak we read, in Judges v. 14, that "out of Zebulon came down they that handle the pen of the ready writer." This was clearly the Hebrew, but some other meaning was put into it, in the supposition that there were no ready writers. But the original text is now most clearly vindicated. Moreover, the tablets show that Canaan before the exodus was the great highway between the Mediterranean Sea and the eastern centres of commerce. Canaan paid to Egypt an annual land tax, which was assessed according to surveys of the Egyptian Government. The enlightened and warlike Amorites and Hittites were there, and many of the cities mentioned in the Scriptures are also mentioned on the tablets. Professor Maspero says: "The land of Canaan was a vast emporium where Africa met Europe and Asia." Professor Erman says: "There was hardly anything which the Egypt of the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasty had not obtained from Syria. The culture of the Syrians must therefore have been very highly advanced to have obtained such a conquest."

With all this information let it be remembered that the conquest by Israel was only partial even until the time of David. We are told in the first chapter of Judges that "the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem, but the Jebusites dwell with the children of Benjamin in Jerusalem unto this day." We also read that Manasseh and Ephraim failed to dislodge the inhabitants of some six cities, while Zebulon, Asher, Naphtali and Dan failed to make their conquest complete. We know also how Israel grew into intimate relations with the people of the land, and whatever else they received of hurtful influences, we cannot doubt that they must have felt the touch of their intellectual development and literary activity. Such was the literary atmosphere which pervaded the time when Moses wrote the Pentateuch. The increasing evidence from the monuments indicates that it was the golden age of literature in the history of the ancient East. Thus one of the strongest assumptions of the critics against the Mosaic authorship is completely annihilated.—Herald and Presbyter.