

CHAPTER II

THE ANTIQUITY OF LITERATURE

FOR more than half a century after the publication of Wolf's *Prolegomena* the assumption of the late use of writing for literary purposes was one which no one who pretended to critical scholarship ventured to dispute. Among the Greeks, it was assumed, it did not go back beyond the sixth century before our era; among the Hebrews only the more conservative critics allowed that it might have been known in the age of Solomon. But even this concession was not universally admitted, and Biblical criticism ended by denying the pre-exilic origin of the larger part of the Old Testament literature. The early Israelites could not read or write; how then could a mature literature such as we find in the Old Testament have come into existence at an early date?

But this supposed late use of writing for literary purposes was merely an assumption,

with nothing more solid to rest upon than the critic's own theories and prepossessions. And as soon as it could be tested by solid fact it crumbled into dust. First Egyptology, then Assyriology, showed that the art of writing in the ancient East, so far from being of modern growth, was of vast antiquity, and that the two great powers which divided the civilized world between them were each emphatically a nation of scribes and readers. Centuries before Abraham was born Egypt and Babylonia were alike full of schools and libraries, of teachers and pupils, of poets and prose-writers, and of the literary works which they had composed.

Egyptian literature goes back almost to the earliest period of its history. From the days of the founder of the First Dynasty onwards the events of each year of the king's reign were recorded in writing. Notes written in a cursive hand have been found in the tombs of the First Dynasty, and some of the chapters in the Book of the Dead—the Prayer-book of the ancient Egyptians—are older than King Menes himself. The tombs and other monuments of the Fourth Dynasty show that a knowledge of writing was already as widely spread as it was in the later

days of Egyptian history, and the walls of the pyramids of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties are covered with ritual texts which had been handed down from a remote antiquity.

The Proverbs of Ptah-hotep, written in the time of the Fifth Dynasty, remained an Egyptian classic, and we may gather from them that education was generally diffused among the people. Indeed, if Virey's translation can be trusted, a sort of competitive examination was already known¹. At any rate the style of the book belongs to an advanced period of literary culture. It aims at attracting notice by its terseness and complicated turns, and by its departure from the language at once of ordinary life and of current literature.

The Proverbs of Ptah-hotep, in fact, though written more than five thousand years ago, represent the close of a period in the history of Egyptian literature. They had been preceded by earlier books, many of which survived to a later day. One of them has come down to

¹ 'Let (the pupil) win success by placing himself in the first rank; that is for him a position proper and durable, and he has nothing (further) to desire for ever.' *Records of the Past*, new series, III, p. 31 (1890).

ourselves in a mutilated form. It is a moral treatise, the work of a certain Qaqemna, who lived in the remote age of the Third Dynasty. But even then there were already schools and libraries in Egypt stored with papyrus books written in a running hand.

Egypt continued to be a literary country through all the vicissitudes of its political fortunes. It was emphatically a land of readers and scribes. The passing traveller scratched his name upon the rocks, and the smaller objects of every-day life were inscribed. The articles of toilet that were made for the Egyptian lady had appropriate inscriptions carved or painted upon them, and even the objects that lay hidden away in the darkness of the tomb were covered with written characters.

Not only the professional scribes, but every one who pretended to be a gentleman was required to be educated. The man of business, the wealthier fellahin, even the overseers of the workmen, were expected to be acquainted with the hieroglyphic system of writing and the hieratic or cursive hand which had developed out of it. The dead man himself could not pass in safety through the perils that sur-

rounded him on his entrance into the other world, unless he could read the inscriptions on the walls of his sepulchre or the ritual of the dead which was buried with him.

And the literature with which the libraries of Egypt were stocked was of the most varied character. Even the historical novel was represented in it, as well as political satires and books of travel. One of the most popular books written in the reign of the Pharaoh of the Oppression is a sarcastic account of the adventures of an Egyptian official in Palestine. No one, in short, could live in Egypt without coming under the spell of its literary culture. Written characters literally stared him in the face on every side, and all who were in any way connected with the government were obliged to read and understand them.

The literary culture of Egypt has its parallel in Babylonia. There too we find a land of books and schools and libraries and a nation of readers and writers. Babylonia was a great commercial community, and for the purposes of trade a knowledge of reading and writing was required among all classes who took part in it. From a remote antiquity not only schools but

libraries as well had been established in the numerous cities of the country, and as in Egypt, so too in Babylonia, the literature represented in them was of the most varied description.

The cuneiform characters of Babylonia were far more difficult to learn than the hieroglyphs of Egypt. They were, in fact, a hieratic or cursive hand developed at an early date out of hieroglyphs of which but few traces have come down to us. There was consequently nothing in their forms to assist the memory, any more than there is in the form of Chinese characters to-day. Moreover, they had been the invention of a people who spoke an agglutinative language, like that of the Turks or Finns, and who had been subsequently supplanted by Semites. When accordingly the Semites adopted and adapted the old writing of the country along with the rest of its civilization they found it necessary to learn the language which the writing embodied. There was already a large literature composed in it, and even after the Semitic occupation it long remained the language of those two conservative branches of study, law and religion.

Babylonian education thus included not only a knowledge of the complicated cuneiform signs, but also of the language of the older Sumerian population. Sumerian became to the Semitic Babylonian what Latin was to the mediaeval European, the foundation and background of his literary education, the language of religion and law, and even of a part of the literature which he was required to know.

What years of patient labour all this implies may easily be conceived. An old Sumerian proverb, used as a text for a copybook, declared that 'he who would live in the school of the scribes must rise like the sun,' and the exercise books of Babylonian learners who lived before Abraham was born have recently been found by the American excavators at Nippur in Northern Babylonia. The pupil was first taught how to form his characters, then he committed them to memory from lists in which they were arranged according to their forms. For the acquisition of Sumerian he had grammars and dictionaries, vocabularies, phrase-books and interlinear translations, as well as grammatical analyses and explanations of difficult passages.

But even with all this the young Babylonian had far greater difficulties to contend against than the young Englishman of to-day with his simple alphabet of twenty-six letters, but they were difficulties which had to be overcome before he could even read the deed in which he leased his house or bought his wool. That education should nevertheless have been so widely diffused in Babylonia as we now know it to have been, women as well as men sharing in it, is a truly astonishing fact. The Babylonia of the age of Abraham was a more highly educated country than the England of George III.

'Criticism' so-called met the great fact of the advanced literary culture of ancient Egypt and Babylonia by either ignoring or minimizing or denying it altogether. As late as 1862, Sir George Cornwall Lewis denied it¹, and as late

¹ *An Historical Survey of the Astronomy of the Ancients*: 'Whoever calmly considers the long possession of Egypt by the two most civilized nations of antiquity, while the sacred language and writing of the ancient Egyptians were still perpetuated by an unbroken tradition, will be slow to believe that these supposed treasures, if they really existed, could have remained untouched, or that they would have been left to be opened by the laborious investigation of modern

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as 1871 the eminent Semitic scholar Professor Nöldeke declared that the results of Assyriology in both linguistic and historical matters had 'a highly suspicious air.' It was subjective theory against objective fact, and in accordance with the usual 'critical' method fact had to give way to theory.

But facts are stubborn things, and gradually the accumulation of them forced an unwilling and half-hearted assent from the disciples of the 'critical method.' At last, in 1887, came a discovery which revolutionized our conceptions of ancient Oriental history, and made the assumption of ancient Oriental illiteracy henceforth an impossibility. This was the

archaeologists, more than 1,500 years after the key of this secret had been lost. . . . The future discoveries of the Egyptologists will be attended with results as worthless and as uncertain as those which have hitherto attended their ill-requited and barren labours' (pp. 395-396). 'It must not be assumed that any authentic memorials of the early Assyrian history were in existence when Herodotus and Ctesias collected their information. Oral tradition would not have carried them back with safety for much more than a century; and we have no reason to suppose that any contemporary chronicles or registers, of a historical nature, had been composed and preserved' (pp. 432-433). So much for the value of literary 'criticism'!

discovery of the cuneiform tablets of Tel el-Amarna.

Tel el-Amarna marks the site of a city which stood on the eastern bank of the Nile, midway between the modern towns of Minia and Assiût. It was built by Amon-hotep IV, one of the last kings of the Eighteenth Egyptian Dynasty. Born of an Asiatic mother, and himself a philosopher and visionary, he endeavoured to reform, or rather to abolish, the state religion of Egypt, of which he was himself the official head, and to replace the worship of Amon of Thebes by a sort of pantheistic monotheism. For Amon-hotep there was but one God, the creator and upholder of all things, and in whom all things exist. Omnipresent, omniscient, and all-good, the visible symbol of this one God was the solar disk.

But the reforming efforts of the Pharaoh met with fierce opposition, and in spite of persecution the followers of Amon succeeded in holding their own against 'the heretic king.' He retired northwards from Thebes, the capital of his fathers, and founded a new capital where the mounds of Tel el-Amarna now line the river bank. Here he erected a temple for his

God and a palace for himself, and here he died surrounded by the adherents of the new faith, and the foreigners from Canaan and other parts of Western Asia, to whom he had entrusted the higher offices of state.

When he died religious and civil war was breaking out throughout the land. It was not long before the national party were triumphant; the city of the heretic Pharaoh, with the temple and palace, was razed to the ground, and the mummy of the Pharaoh itself dragged from its sepulchre and torn into fragments. The city of Khu-n-Aten, 'the glory of the Solar Disk,' as the Pharaoh had renamed himself, lasted hardly more than thirty years.

But while it lasted the Egyptian Foreign Office was transferred to it from Thebes, and an active correspondence carried on with the Egyptian governors and vassal princes in the subject provinces of Canaan and Syria, as well as with the kings of Babylonia, Assyria, Mesopotamia and Asia Minor. It is this correspondence, including the letters and other documents which had been brought from Thebes, which was discovered in 1887.

The most astonishing and unexpected fact

about this correspondence is, that it is in the cuneiform script of Babylonia and for the most part in the Babylonian language. It proves that the Babylonian language was to such an extent the language of diplomacy and international intercourse that even the Egyptian court had to use it when corresponding with its Asiatic provinces. It also proves that the culture and political ascendancy of Babylonia had exercised so long and so permanent an influence upon Western Asia as to impose upon it the language and syllabary of the dominant state. Throughout Western Asia there must have been schools and libraries like those of Babylonia itself, in which the literature of Babylonia was studied, and its language and system of writing taught and learned.

The correspondence further shows that letters, in what to most of the writers was a foreign tongue and script, were constantly passing backwards and forwards along the high-roads of trade and war. The subjects of them were often trivial; and some of them were written by Bedouin chiefs as well as by women. The writers, in learning the Baby-

lonian script and language, had at the same time to acquire a knowledge of Babylonian literature. Among the clay tablets found at Tel el-Amarna are fragments of mythological poems in which the words have been divided from one another in order to assist the learner, and the legal code of Khammu-rabi recently discovered makes it clear that Babylonian law also was known in the West.

The Mosaic age, therefore, instead of being an illiterate one, was an age of high literary activity and education throughout the civilized East. Not only was there a wide-spread literary culture in both Egypt and Babylonia which had its roots in a remote past, but this culture was shared by Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, and more especially by Syria and Palestine.

Palestine, in fact, was the meeting-place of the two great powers of the Oriental world, and had long been under the influence of the streams of literary culture which flowed from them. The influence of Babylonian culture must have been felt in it at least as early as the era of Sargon of Akkad, who incorporated it into his empire centuries before

the birth of Abraham; the recent excavations at Gezer have shown that monuments inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphs were erected on its soil in the period of the Twelfth Dynasty.

But this is not all. Thanks to the discoveries of Dr. A. J. Evans and others in Krete, we now know that long before the age of Moses there was an advanced literary culture in what was to be in after days the Greek world, and that the hieroglyphs of Egypt and the cuneiform characters of Babylonia were not the only systems of writing which were in vogue. In Krete itself there were three, if not four, wholly different systems, one consisting of pictographs, the others of linear characters which represented syllables.

One of these latter systems was widely used. Inscriptions in it have been found in the island of Melos as well as at Mykenae and Orchomenos in Greece; some of its characters are impressed on the Amoritish potsherds disinterred at Lachish in Palestine; and the syllabary of Cyprus, inscriptions in which have been discovered at Troy and in Jerusalem, was but a local form of it. In the 'Palace of Minos' at Knossos hundreds of clay tablets

have been disinterred, the majority of which are older than the Mosaic age, and all alike are covered with the characters of this still undeciphered script. From one end of the civilized ancient world to the other men and women were reading and writing and corresponding with one another; schools abounded and great libraries were formed, in an age which the 'critic' only a few years ago dogmatically declared was almost wholly illiterate.

The second assumption, then, upon which the method and results of the 'higher criticism' rest has been disproved by archaeological research. Moses not only could have written the Pentateuch, but it would have been little short of a miracle had he not been a scribe. He had been brought up in the Pharaoh's court, he was a law-giver, and the elders and overseers of his brother Israelites in the land of Goshen would have been required to know how to read and write. Egypt, where the Israelites dwelt so long and from which they fled, was a land of writing and literature, and the Canaan which they invaded was even more so. For here three literary cultures met, as it were, together—the culture and script of Egypt, the

culture and script of Babylonia, and the culture and script of the Philistines from Krete.

The very potters scratched written characters, and sometimes words or names, not only on the pottery of Egypt but upon that of Canaan and of Melos. In Palestine the handles of the jars were impressed with the hieroglyphic legends of inscribed scarabs, just as they were at Tel el-Amarna in Egypt. The civilized world was a world of books, and a knowledge of writing extended even to the classes of the population who were engaged in manual labour.

Professor Ramsay has drawn attention to the contrast between the Latin Crusaders in Asia Minor, who have left no written records behind them because they could neither read nor write, and the Greek and Carian mercenaries of the Pharaoh Psammetichus, who employed their leisure at Abu Simbel in covering its stone colossi with inscriptions at a time when, according to Wolf's hypothesis, the Greek world was still illiterate. We have learnt many things of late years from archaeology, but its chiefest lesson has been that the age of Moses, and even the age of Abraham, was almost as literary an age as our own.