

CHAPTER IV

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER OF GENESIS AND THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

IN 1869 the great Semitic scholar, Professor Nöldeke, published a treatise on the 'Un-historical character of the fourteenth chapter of Genesis'¹. He declared that 'criticism' had for ever disproved its claim to be historical. The political situation presupposed by it was incredible and impossible; at so distant a date Babylonian armies could not have marched to Canaan, much less could Canaan have been a subject province of Babylonia. The whole story, in fact, was a fiction based upon the Assyrian conquest of Palestine in later days. The names of the princes commemorated in it were etymological inventions; eminent Semitic philologists had already explained those of Chedor-laomer and his allies from Sanskrit, and

¹ *Untersuchungen zur Kritik des alten Testaments*, Abhandlung III, pp. 156-172 (Kiel, 1869), and *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Theologie* (1870), pp. 213 et seq. On the 'Iranian' origin of Babylonian names see Renan, *Histoire générale des Langues sémitiques*, pp. 62-64.

those of the Canaanitish princes were derived from the events in which they were supposed to have borne a part.

This was in 1869. In 1903 'criticism' is discreetly silent about the conclusions which it then announced with so much assurance. In the interval the excavator and archaeologist have been hard at work, regardless of the most certainly ascertained results of 'criticism,' and the ancient world of Western Asia has risen again from the grave of centuries. A history which had seemed lost for ever has been recovered for us, and we can now handle and read the very letters which passed between the contemporaries of Abraham. We now know almost as much, in fact, about the Babylonia of the age of Abraham as we do about the Assyria of the age of Isaiah or about the Greece of the age of Perikles.

And the increase of knowledge has not been favourable to the results of 'criticism.' It has proved them to be nothing but the baseless fabric of subjective imagination. It is the Book of Genesis, and not the works of the modern German critic, whose claim to credence has been vindicated by the discoveries of

56 The Fourteenth Chapter of Genesis

archaeology. It is true that the discoveries have been disputed by the 'critic' inch by inch, that first the philological scholarship of the Assyriologist, and then his good faith was questioned, and that now, when at length a grudging assent to undeniable facts has been extorted, we are told that the 'critical position' still remains unaffected. Unaffected! When the foundation upon which it rested is absolutely gone!

We read in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis that 'in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedor-laomer king of Elam, and Tid'al king of Nations (Goyyim); that these made war with Bera king of Sodom, and with Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar. . . . Twelve years they served Chedor-laomer, and in the thirteenth year they rebelled.' And in the fourteenth year came Chedor-laomer and the kings that were with him, and smote 'the Amorites of Canaan as far south as the later Kadesh-barnea.'

There are several points worthy of notice in this narrative. Though it is dated in the reign of a king of Babylonia, the leader of the

forces, and the suzerain to whom the Canaanitish princes were subject, was a king of Elam. Elam, therefore, must have been the predominant power at the time, and the Babylonian king must have been its vassal. The narrative nevertheless is dated in the reign of the Babylonian king and not in that of the king of Elam, and it is to the reign of the Babylonian king that the events described in it are attached. Babylonia, however, was not a united country; there was another king, Arioch of Ellasar, who divided with Amraphel of Shinar the government of it, and like Amraphel acknowledged the supremacy of Elam. Finally the 'Nations,' whoever they were, were also subject to Elam, as well as the distant province of Canaan.

Now let us turn to the contemporaneous monuments of Babylonia, and see what they have to tell us in regard to the very period to which the Book of Genesis refers. Elam, we find, had conquered Babylonia, and the sovereigns of Babylonia, accordingly, had become the vassals of the Elamite king. Along with the conquest had gone the division of Babylonia into two kingdoms; while Khammuri or Ammu-rapi was reigning at Babylon—

58 The Fourteenth Chapter of Genesis

the Biblical Shinar in the north—Eri-Aku, the son of an Elamite prince, was ruling at Larsa—the Biblical Ellasar—in the south.

Eastward, in the Kurdish mountains, were the Umman Manda or 'Barbarian Nations' of whom Tudghula appears to have been the chief. Canaan had long been, in name, if not always in reality, a Babylonian province, and when Babylonia passed under Elamite domination the Elamite king naturally claimed all the provinces that had been included in the Babylonian empire. Indeed, Eri-Aku of Larsa gives his father Kudur-Nankhundi the title of 'Father' or 'Governor' of the land of the Amorites, the name under which Canaan was known at the time in Babylonia.

Could there be closer agreement between the fragment of old-world history preserved in the Book of Genesis and the revelations of the native monuments? Even the proper names have been handed down in the Scriptural narrative with but little alteration. In the name of Ellasar, indeed, there has been a transposition of letters, but, apart from this, it is only in the name of the king of Shinar or Babylon himself that any serious difference is

observable. Between Khammu-rabi, the usual form of the royal name, and Amraphel the difference is considerable, and long made me doubt whether the two could, after all, be identified together.

But, again, with the increase of knowledge has come a solution of the difficulty. The dynasty to which Khammu-rabi belonged was not of Babylonian origin. It had conquered the north of Babylonia in the troublous times which followed the fall of a dynasty whose capital had been Ur. The kings were of Canaanitish and South Semitic origin, like Abram the Hebrew, and their ancestral deity was Samu or Shem. Though the language spoken by them was Semitic it differed from the language of the Semitic Babylonians, who found some of the sounds which characterized it difficult to pronounce.

Hence the Babylonian scribes did not always represent them in the same way, and the same royal name appears under different forms in different documents. The first element in the name of Khammu-rabi is the name of a god which enters also into the composition of the Hebrew names of Ammi-el, Ammi-nadab,

60 The Fourteenth Chapter of Genesis

Rehobo-am, Jerobo-am and Ben-Ammi, and of which Ammon is merely a derivative. More usually this was spelt Khammu by the Babylonians, but we often find the spelling Ammu or Ammi as well. Even the spelling of the second element in the name of Khammu-rabi was not uniform, and, as Dr. Pinches was the first to point out, Ammu-rabi is met with by the side of Khammu-rabi.

Khammu-rabi, like others of his dynasty, claimed divine honours, and was addressed by his subjects as a god. In Babylonian *ilu* is 'god,' the Hebrew *el*, and *Ammu-rabi ilu* would be 'Khammu-rabi the god.' Now *Ammu-rabi ilu* is letter for letter the Amraphel of Genesis.

Thus the difficulty presented by the variant forms of the name of the king of Shinar or Babylon has disappeared with the progress of archaeological knowledge. It is one more illustration of the fact that 'critical' difficulties and objections commonly turn out to be the result of the imperfection of our own knowledge. Archaeological research is constantly demonstrating how dangerous it is to question or deny the veracity of tradition or of an ancient record until we know all the facts.

Chedor-laomer, once the despair of etymologists, proves to be a good Elamite name. We have only to turn to the older Hebrew lexicons to see how helpless mere philology was in face of it; archaeological discovery has made it as clear as the noon-day. There are numerous Elamite names which are composed of two elements, the second being the name of a divinity, and the first the word *kudur* which meant 'servant' or something similar. The father of Eri-Aku or Arioch, for instance, had the name of Kudur-Nankhundi, 'the servant of the goddess Nankhundi.' Lagamar was one of the leading Elamite deities, and Lagamar is letter for letter the Hebrew *la'omer*, which is written *logomor* in the Septuagint. The name of Chedor-laomer can be no Jewish invention.

Even the names of the Canaanitish princes have been illustrated and verified by the cuneiform inscriptions, and thus shown to be no etymological 'fictions' suggested by the story in which they are found. The name of Shinab of Admah was borne by a king of Ammon in the time of Tiglath-pileser III, who writes it Sanibu, and perhaps means 'the moon-god is (my) father,' while Shem-eber of

62 The Fourteenth Chapter of Genesis

Zeboiim reminds us of Samu-abi, the founder of the dynasty to which Amraphel belonged.

The accurate preservation of these foreign names of ancient date leads to two conclusions. On the one hand the narrative in which they occur cannot have been handed down orally. It must have been copied from a written Babylonian record and been written from the outset in Hebrew as we find it to-day. In other words, the Hebrew writer had before him a Babylonian chronicle from which he extracted just as much as related to the subject of his own history.

This conclusion is confirmed by an examination of some of the geographical names which are mentioned in the story and which indicate a cuneiform original. I have discussed them elsewhere, and need not therefore repeat here the philological details. Those who are interested in the matter can refer to my *Higher Criticism and the Verdict of the Monuments*, pp. 160, 161.

What the Babylonian record was like is not difficult to discover. The Babylonians reckoned their chronology by the chief events which occurred in each successive year of a king's reign. 'The year of a king's accession,' 'the year in which such and such an event took

place,' was the general formula. It was a shorthand summary of the more detailed history recorded elsewhere, which, however, was similarly dated in the reign of a particular king and in the particular year of it when a certain event had happened.

Now if we turn to the beginning of the narrative in Genesis we find that it, too, is dated, not in the reign of the suzerain and leader of the expedition, Chedor-laomer, much less in that of a Canaanitish prince, or in the life-time of Abram himself, but in the reign of the king of Babylonia. It must have come, therefore, from the official chronicles of Babylonia, from one of those historical works, in fact, which we know to have been current in Babylonia, which would have formed part of the literature studied in the schools and stored in the libraries of Canaan in the age of Babylonian supremacy and influence.

It is even possible that one of the official historical documents sent to the West in the reign of the son and successor of Amraphel has actually come down to us. A cuneiform tablet is preserved in the Museum of Beyrut, which is said to have been found in the

64 The Fourteenth Chapter of Genesis

Lebanon, and which Dr. Pinches has shown to have been one of the memoranda or 'state papers' sent by the Babylonian government to its officials and scribes in order to notify to them the special event or events from which the year was to receive its name. As Canaan was included in the Babylonian empire at the time to which the tablet belongs, it is by no means impossible that it was really found in the district of the Lebanon, more especially as Babylonian seal-cylinders of the same period have been discovered there¹.

There is a second conclusion to be deduced from the accuracy with which the names contained in the Babylonian record have been preserved in the Hebrew text. Only one of them has suffered from the carelessness of scribes or the attacks of time; in Ellasar for Larsa two of the letters have been transposed. The fact enhances our opinion of the Hebrew

¹ See the *Quarterly Statement* of the Palestine Exploration Fund for April and July, 1900 (pp. 123, 269-273). The inscription reads, 'The year when Samsu-iluna the king dedicated a polished shining weapon of gold and silver, the glory of the temple, to Merodach E-Sagila (the temple of Merodach at Babylon), like the stars of heaven it made brilliant.' This was the seventh year of Samsu-iluna's reign.

text of the Pentateuch; it cannot be so uncertain or corrupt as it has sometimes been the fashion to believe. Even the proper names contained in it have been handed down correctly. The text, in short, must have been transcribed and re-edited from time to time with the same official accuracy as we now know to have been enforced in the case of Assyrian and Babylonian literature.

In Assyria and Babylonia the work was entrusted to the hands of professional scribes. And the minute care which was bestowed upon the accurate transcription of the texts was extraordinary. Where we can compare a text compiled, let us say, for one of the Babylonian libraries of Amraphel with a copy of it made for the library of Nineveh fifteen hundred years later the differences are slight and unimportant. Indeed, the tablets are full of examples of the scrupulous honesty with which the copyists set about their work. If the copy before them was defective, they state the fact and make no attempt to fill in the missing characters by conjecture or by recourse to more perfect tablets; if the original Babylonian character was uncertain, its various Assyrian

66 The Fourteenth Chapter of Genesis

equivalents were given; if a date or fact was omitted in the original, the scribe honestly tells us that he does not know it. The reproduction of the older documents was carried out with almost Massoretic exactitude; we look in vain for that free handling of the original authorities about which the 'higher criticism' has so much to say.

The accuracy with which the Babylonian names have been preserved in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis is evidence that the literary methods of Babylonia and Assyria were in use also in the schools and libraries of Israel and Judah. They were not the methods presupposed by the modern critic, but they were methods consecrated by the usage of centuries wherever the influence of Babylonian culture had penetrated. In Judah also, where we hear of the scribes of Hezekiah's library copying the proverbs of Solomon (Prov. xxv. 1), the older literature must have been re-edited and handed down with the same care and accuracy and the same permanence of literary tradition as in the kingdoms of the Euphrates and Tigris, and we may therefore place the same confidence in the letter of its texts as we do in that of the clay tablets of Nineveh.