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SOCIOLOGY AND THEISM

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In an earlier paper we argued that higher criticism of the Bible must be made in the light of sociology before its work is completed.¹ The present paper claims that sociological criticism delivers the biblical material over to theism in better form than do preceding stages of inquiry into the Bible. We reproduce, by way of introduction, the following excerpts from a recent article by a theological scholar:

For twenty-five years or so biblical theology in America has been in the antithetical swing of the pendulum, and many of our foremost scholars have denied the fundamental postulates of the older theology on account of facts observed in the biblical literature. The thesis from which these scholars have turned maintained the transcendent operation of God in the gift of a revelation external to the mind of man; the antithesis is that the truths of the Bible have proceeded from the human mind by purely natural means. The latter has been presented in our day with great power, and the evidence has been collected with marvelous skill, so that few theological circles remain in which the so-called modern conclusions are not accepted either wholly or in part. It has been observed, however, by more than one lover of the Bible and of men, that the new phases of truth are not paralleled in the church by that careful attention and enthusiastic interest which alone can make the new views effective in the production of character. The people have not assimilated them. They appear indifferent to them. It would seem that a synthesis of the opposing views must be made before the Old Testament can have vital interest for men; and many scholars are endeavoring to effect the synthesis. . . . It must be recognized that historical criticism thus far has done little more for the popular mind than to demonstrate facts in the biblical domain which must be considered by all lovers of truth, and that a decided readjustment of theology is demanded.²

The idea that the Bible is the result of a revelation in which men are mechanical agents, or mediums, was inherited by Chris-

¹ *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XII, No. 4 (January, 1907); also in *Egoism: A Study in the Social Premises of Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 1905).

² Professor Charles Rufus Brown, in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XI, No. 6 (May, 1906), pp. 850, 851.

tianity from Judaism. It may be said, for the sake of characterizing this view briefly, that old theology practically regards the Bible as the product of a wholesale spiritistic séance. God is contemplated as imparting messages to the world through the medium of certain Hebrews, and enforcing these messages by physical marvels which contravene the ordinary course of nature. The first shock to this view came through literary criticism, which showed that the biblical documents represent a greater diversity of standpoint, authorship, and age than was formerly held. These facts, however, were reconciled with old theology on the view that inspiration was distributed over a wider area than had been supposed, and that there is an internal agreement in cases of apparent contradiction. The next shock came through historical criticism which indicated that the Old Testament system, instead of being given at a single stroke at the outset of the national history, was the result of a long development. The attempt is made to adjust this proposition with old theology by the same methods with which the difficulties of literary criticism have been treated, save that the idea of inspiration is given broader scope to include the religious genius of Israel—a factor which the older theology did not assume. At the same time it becomes evident that the historical phase of criticism has introduced a larger element of doubt than ever before. The investigation has not reached a standpoint of sufficient authority to command general allegiance; and the spread of critical views has raised problems which have not yet been satisfactorily solved for any large number of people. Not only are there many schools within the camp of the critics; but there still exists within the field of scholarship a respectable opposition which adheres to unmodified old theology. This opposition is naturally recruited more from the smaller institutions than from the larger centers of learning. But that it still must be reckoned with as an important force is clear from the recent appearance of such a work as Professor James Orr's *Problem of the Old Testament*. It is no exaggeration to say that Professor Orr speaks for a larger number, clerical and lay, than do his critical opponents.

The literary and historical stages of biblical higher criticism

have supplied an indispensable clearing of the atmosphere; but it is beginning to be felt that they do not go far enough down to the root of the problem. It is coming to be seen that historical criticism in general helps to pave the way to what is now called "the sociological standpoint."³ And since historical criticism of the Bible is an application of a general principle, it follows that Israel, equally with the rest of the world, offers a legitimate field for the method of the sociologist. The static phase of biblical sociology is represented by Edward Day's *Social Life of the Hebrews*, and incidentally in Professor W. Robertson Smith's *Religion of the Semites*, and Professor George Aaron Barton's *Semitic Origins, Social and Religious*. The dynamic phase of biblical sociology appears in works by the present writer mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

If the sociological view of the origin of the Bible is valid, it follows that the history of Israel can be explained in precisely the same terms that are used in describing any other history. This view results from application of sociological methods to the material which comes to us through literary and historical criticism of the Bible. It shows how the Old Testament system was developed in the process of actual experience.⁴

³ "Sociology is in part a product of the critical method which has become standard in historical investigation since Niebuhr's reconstruction of Roman history." Small and Vincent, *Introduction to the Study of Society* (New York, 1894), p. 45.

⁴ Professor Cheyne observes that "post-exilic Jewish religion is to a large extent a fusion of inconsistent elements, or prophetic and priestly origin respectively" (*Jewish Religious Life after the Exile*, New York, 1898, p. 28). In other words, the Old Testament system, as it now lies before us, is compounded of interests which, although more or less incompatible, are able to find some common ground. The factors that compose the structures of society are not generally able to function harmoniously at all points. Social institutions are those areas of human contact where otherwise jarring interests function in common. The blending of inconsistent elements in the life of Israel, then, is not so anomalous as it may seem. In fact, it is thoroughly typical of the social process. What we have been trying to show is that only by linking the Old Testament system with the actual working of Israel's interests can we expose to view the tremendous internal forces that gave us the Bible. The sketch in the preceding paper was so brief that we may profitably recur to it by help of a new illustration: As Professor Cheyne observes, the Old Testament system after the exile was a fusion of inconsistent elements, prophetic and priestly. The long process by

If the sociological position is correct the séance view of the Bible is entirely superfluous as an explanation of the history of Israel. From the standpoint of science we reach the end of the whole matter at this point. But just here emerges a philosophical question of the greatest importance: What is the bearing of sociological criticism of the Bible upon theistic doctrine? It is not, of course, any part of the sociologist's business, as such, to argue for theism. That is the work of the philosophic theologian, who has the right to the last word in this discussion. But if, in the phrases of our preceding paper, the Bible "is a fact for

which this fusion was effected, however, had come to a provisional period before the exile. We refer to the great reformation of Josiah, which occurred a generation prior to the carrying-away into Babylon. Guarding our statement by qualifications, we have indicated that the *prophetic* element, as it appears in the Old Testament, was derived *originally* from the reaction of the country districts against the fortified cities; while, on the other hand, the *priestly* element, as it appears in the Old Testament, stands for the reaction of the fortified cities against the rural districts. This tension of interests began in the middle of the ninth century B. C., and reached an accommodation of great importance in the seventh century. A conservative reaction on behalf of ancient Canaanite Baalism had been associated with Kings Manasseh and Amon. This movement represented formalism in religion as opposed to the ethical claims of that school of Yahweh prophecy which originated in the country districts. But now the pendulum swung back; and the country districts (עַם הָאֲרֶץ, *am ha-arets*, or "people of the earth," as the Hebrew text calls them) arose and placed their candidate on the throne in the person of Josiah, the "good" king. But the victory of the country party was not substantial. In return for its hold upon the throne, it was compelled to relinquish the Yahweh shrines at the *bamoth*, or "high places," which, until now, had been located all over the land, "on every high hill and under every green tree." This innovation, along with other changes, was formally based upon a book brought forward from the temple by a priest. The writing was a short form of our present Book of Deuteronomy; and its official adoption at this late date in the history marked the early stage of the canon of Old Testament literature. Yahwism now began to be a *book* religion. Since the requirements of religion could now be announced from sacred writings by the priesthood, the voice of the prophet—the advocate of the commonalty—was therefore silenced by what seems to be the victory of prophetism. The urban plutocracy, in alliance with the priesthood, thus obtained a *monopoly* of religion by its concentration at the capital city in accordance with the platform of Deuteronomy. The change in the direction of legalism and ritualism was a necessary objective step in the development of religion. Although the priestly interest is largely inconsistent with the prophetic, it is at least equally useful in the long run. Prophecy is always weak on the side of organization; and this deficiency was compensated by the priesthood.

sociology before it is a fact for theological discipline;" if it "is primarily material for scientific treatment;" if this be true—then it is the duty of sociology to bring its results to the clearest possible statement, in order that the higher disciplines may, with the greatest economy of attention, take up the subject at the point where science leaves it.

Theism contemplates the universe as grounded in a central personality, the living God. Christian theism regards this personality as having the character attributed to him by Jesus. Theism as thus defined is not bound up with the old theology. It does not stand or fall with the séance view of the Bible. It is not in the world as the result of a transcendent revelation external to the mind of man. Its merits, in brief, are independent of the Bible. And not only are the bases of theistic doctrine untouched by sociological higher criticism of the Bible, but its foundations are brought into clearer light by this new phase of biblical inquiry. The séance view of Israel's religion is exactly what that religion has in *common* with other ancient beliefs. If the god of Israel sent messages through holy men, and worked physical marvels contrary to the course of nature, so did the gods of other peoples. That is to say, not only do the writings handed down to us from Israel contain *accounts* of such occurrences; but the writings that come from other ancient sources contain precisely the same element of crude supernaturalism.⁵ If this were all that Israel possessed, it would have nothing to distinguish it. The crude supernaturalism of old theology is exactly what fails to authenticate theism to the modern mind—i. e., to the mind that has a comparative insight into the movement of universal history. Suppose we do read that Yahweh supernaturally sent messages to mankind through certain Israelites, and accompanied these messages by various physical marvels; suppose we grant that all this literally occurred; and what have we gained? Would not the supernatural experiences have to be repeated afresh for each one of us in order to authenticate the doctrine that there is a personal God in the universe? Once

⁵ We distinguish between supernaturalism as above and the Supernatural as the essence of the world. We may be skeptical about the former; but the latter is implicit in everything.

admit that we are to take religion by authority upon the *séance* basis, and the door opens to the principle of subjection to anybody who claims to be the recipient of a supernatural revelation. But at this juncture the old theology invariably shifts the emphasis of the argument, in self-defense, by calling attention to the *nature* of the biblical message, with its demand for *righteousness*, and its ascription of a *moral* character to Yahweh in contrast with other gods. It is very significant that the old theology, when pressed about this point, withdraws temporarily from its main position, and virtually appeals to reason by comparing biblical religion with other ancient faiths. Although the old school is not hereby constrained to abandon supernaturalism, it is forced into a position from which the claims of sociological higher criticism of the Bible can be more clearly seen and appreciated.

The present revival of interest in our sacred literature is not emphasizing the supernaturalism of the Bible, but is coming to a focus upon its ethical character. With reference to Scripture, the function of sociology is to give the final expression to this revival. *Sociology shows that the religion of Israel became fit for the world because it succeeded in dramatizing the divine principle as a factor in the reaction of interests that pervades the process of social evolution.* As observed in the preceding paper, the reaction of interests is always based on moral grounds. It is universally a struggle between "good" and "evil," in which the issue is, of course, the fate of *persons*. Now, obviously, any religion which can dramatize its deity in a form adapted to all situations occupies a position of great strategic advantage as compared with religions that fail to do this. God is not impressive until he becomes dramatic. The practical religious needs of men call for a God who appears in a drama, as in the story of Israel. We are not denying the presence of the ethical element in extra-biblical religions. The point here is that the significance of Israel for mankind consists in the way—the form—in which the ethical factor appears. It is true that all ancient religions contemplated the gods as guardians of morality. The god was figured as laying moral demands upon his people; but he was at

the same time the champion of his own people against foreign foes, whether his own people obeyed the laws of righteousness or not—whether their conduct was good or bad. He must fight for them and against their enemies independently of moral considerations. But Israel's experience broke up for all time this invariable connection between people and god. The prophets declared, in opposition to what was the "old theology" of their day, that if the people broke the moral law the connection between Israel and Yahweh was broken also; and, more than this, that the god of Israel would himself aid foreigners against his own people. Although this doctrine was considered incredible and unpatriotic by large classes in the community, it was finally grafted onto the stock of Israel's official religious ideas.

Doubtless the sociological view of the Bible will be a hard saying. The proposition foreshadowed by earlier criticism, and now brought out more clearly, that Yahweh of Israel has no literal existence—no objective reality—is a shock to souls that have been fed only upon the old theology. This, however, is to be expected in such an era of readjustment as that in which we are living. But sociology has no quarrel with the doctrine of the will of God as a fundamental, essential force in human history, provided that doctrine be stated in a form compatible with the results of scientific discovery. The religious interest is but tardily persuaded of the legitimacy of higher biblical criticism; and the sociological stage of investigation into Scripture will perhaps be resented as much as were the earlier stages of critical inquiry into the Bible. It needs to be steadily insisted that sociology is part of the scientific movement as a whole, and that the problem raised by this method of handling biblical material is the same problem of readjustment that has come up at each turning-point of scientific progress. The advance of science has purged theological propositions of their cruder elements without invalidating the essential positions of theism; and no more than the Copernican astronomy, or the doctrine of evolution, does a sociological view of the Bible disprove the existence of a personal God at the heart of the universe.