The Development of Western Civilization

Narrative Essays in the History of Our Tradition from
Its Origins in Ancient Israel and Greece to the Present

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ANCIENT ISRAEL

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Ancient Israel

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THE proposition that each generation must rewrite history is more widely quoted than practiced. In the field of college texts on western civilization, the conventional accounts have been revised, and sources and supplementary materials have been developed; but it is too long a time since the basic narrative has been rewritten to meet the rapidly changing needs of new college generations. In the mid-twentieth century such an account must be brief, well written, and based on unquestioned scholarship and must assume almost no previous historical knowledge on the part of the reader. It must provide a coherent analysis of the development of western civilization and its basic values. It must, in short, constitute a systematic introduction to the collective memory of that tradition which we are being asked to defend. This series of narrative essays has been undertaken in an effort to provide such a text for the introductory history survey course offered in the College of Arts and Sciences of Cornell University. It is being published in the present form in the belief that the requirements of this one course reflect a need that is coming to be widely recognized.

Now that the classic languages, the Bible, the great historical novels, even most non-American history, have dropped out of the normal college preparatory program, it is impera-
tive that a text in the history of European civilization be fully self-explanatory. This means not only that it must begin at the beginning, with the origins of our civilization in ancient Israel and Greece, but that it must introduce every name or event that takes an integral place in the account and ruthlessly delete all others no matter how firmly imbedded in historical protocol. Only thus simplified and complete will the narrative present a sufficiently clear outline of those major trends and developments that have led from the beginning of our recorded time to the most pressing of our current problems. This simplification, however, need not involve intellectual dilution or evasion. On the contrary, it can effectively raise rather than lower the level of presentation. It is on this assumption that the present series has been based, and each contributor has been urged to write for a mature and literate audience. It is hoped, therefore, that the essays may also prove profitable and rewarding to readers outside the college classroom.

The plan of the first part of the series was to sketch, in related essays, the narrative of our history from its origins to the eve of the French Revolution; each was written by a recognized scholar and was designed to serve as the basic reading for one week in a semester course. The developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be covered in a succeeding series which will provide the same quantity of reading material for each week of the second semester. This scale of presentation has been adopted in the conviction that any understanding of the central problem of the preservation of the integrity and dignity of the individual human being depends first on an examination of the origins of our tradition in the politics and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the religion of the ancient
Hebrews and then on a relatively more detailed knowledge of its recent development within our industrial urban society.

The decision to devote equal space to twenty-five centuries and to a century and a half was based on analogy with the human memory. Those events most remote tend to be remembered in least detail but often with a sense of clarity and perspective that is absent in more recent and more crowded recollections. If the roots of our tradition must be identified, their relation to the present must be carefully developed. The nearer the narrative approaches contemporary times, the more difficult and complicated this becomes. Recent experience must be worked over more carefully and in more detail if it is to contribute effectively to an understanding of the contemporary world.

It may be objected that the series attempts too much. The attempt is being made, however, on the assumption that any historical development should be susceptible of meaningful treatment on any scale and in the realization that a very large proportion of today’s college students do not have more time to invest in this part of their education. The practical alternative appears to lie between some attempt to create a new brief account of the history of our tradition and the abandonment of any serious effort to communicate the essence of that tradition to all but a handful of our students. It is the conviction of everyone contributing to this series that the second alternative must not be accepted by default.

In a series covering such a vast sweep of time, few scholars would find themselves thoroughly at home in the fields covered by more than one or two of the essays. This means, in practice, that almost every essay should be written by
a different author. In spite of apparent drawbacks, this procedure promises real advantages. Each contributor will be in a position to set higher standards of accuracy and insight in an essay encompassing a major portion of the field of his life’s work than could ordinarily be expected in surveys of some ten or twenty centuries. The inevitable discontinuity of style and interpretation could be modified by editorial co-ordination; but it was felt that some discontinuity was in itself desirable. No illusion is more easily acquired by the student in an elementary course, or is more prejudicial to the efficacy of such a course, than that a single smoothly articulated text represents the very substance of history itself. If the shift from author to author, week by week, raises difficulties for the beginning student, they are difficulties that will not so much impede his progress as contribute to his growth.

This essay, *Ancient Israel*, by Mr. Harry M. Orlinsky, is written to provide a brief narrative account of the history of the peoples who created the Hebrew Bible and, at the same time, to outline the integral relationship between the development of their society and the growth of the Biblical tradition. The importance of this subject can hardly be overstated. Not only do we draw our earliest and deepest social and moral—not to mention religious—concepts from the experiences of ancient Israel, but throughout its entire history western European civilization has maintained the Bible as the central document of its cultural inheritance. Therefore, any heir of the western European tradition who would understand the development of his society must at once look for its earliest roots in Biblical society and study not only the content, but the expression, of its principal moral precepts in the Biblical writings. It is hoped that this
essay will provide an introduction to both aspects of the subject and, while indicating the significance of the historical origins of our tradition, will lead the reader to return to a new reading and new understanding of the Bible itself. All English translations of the Hebrew text of the Bible cited in this essay are the author's own; he consulted occasionally the Jewish Publication Society translation (Philadelphia, 1917) and the Revised Standard Version (New York, 1952). Chapter and verse numbers refer both to the Hebrew Bible and to the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

Any study of the Bible encounters serious obstacles. Not only do religious convictions and emotions make any clear summary extremely difficult, but in recent years the complexity of the subject has been vastly increased by startling archaeological discoveries in Israel and the Near East. So far this wealth of new materials has not been fully assimilated. Needless to say, the organization of such a range of new materials within such a complex field has called for frequent consultation with other scholars. Both author and editor wish to express their gratitude to Dr. Solomon Grayzel, Dr. Benjamin Maisler (Mazar), Dr. Ellis Rivkin, Dr. G. Ernest Wright, and Dr. Kenneth E. Stein. Miss Linda Altman, with the aid of Dr. Israel Renov, is responsible for the maps. Mr. Sanford Elwitt assisted in the preparation of this revised edition.

Edward Whiting Fox

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THE tribes of Israel, though small in numbers and relatively late to arrive, were destined to remain unique among the many peoples who appeared in western Asia at the dawn of history. Out of their way of life grew three great religions, the Jewish, the Christian, and the Moslem.

The history and religious experiences of the Israelites are interwoven in a collection of writings called the Bible. No other single book, or collection of books, has played so important and prolonged a role in the development of western civilization. Indeed, the simple use of the word Bible, which derives from Greek *ta biblia* “the books,” with no more identification than the capital “B,” points to its significance as “the Book” par excellence.

*Influence of the Bible*

No other description is needed because the Bible has constituted the supreme religious and moral fount and authority for the numerous nations who have professed the Hebrew, Christian, and Moslem faiths. The moral codes of western Europe have drawn heavily on the ethical teachings of the Bible, particularly on the concepts of social justice which the prophets so forthrightly and dramatically
expressed. Indeed, it is generally accepted that the spirit and the democratic ideals of the Constitution of the United States derive in some measure from this Biblical inheritance.

As literature, too, and as a factor in the development of the literature of western culture, the Bible has no equal. There is scarcely a book in the Bible which has not been described at some time as a literary masterpiece. The Book of Job was called by Carlyle "the grandest book ever written with pen." The Book of Ruth has frequently been cited as a model of short-story writing. Such books as Psalms and the Song of Songs have probably never been matched. If, as has been said, great literature is the expression of arresting thoughts in brilliant diction, then the poetry of Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets are supreme examples of their kind.

In the matter of influence, it is generally recognized that English literature cannot be understood apart from the Bible. In its classical English form, the King James Version, the Bible has constituted from the beginning a standard of prose style. No other single work, be it Latin, Greek, or English, has so deeply affected the style and thinking of English writers.

What Is the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of various kinds of writings composed in different periods which came in time to be regarded as divinely inspired sacred scripture. These writings deal with the career of Israel from its beginning shortly after the twentieth century B.C. until the successful Maccabean war of independence of the Jews against hellenistic Syria in 165 B.C. To the Jews, the Bible consists of twenty-four books. During the first four centuries A.D. the Christian
Church compiled an additional twenty-seven books, and named them the New Testament, to distinguish them from the Old Testament, the term which it came to use for the Hebrew Bible. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church recognized several other books, which it introduced into the Old Testament. The Protestant Church, however, followed the Jewish tradition in rejecting these additional books, which are now generally known as the Apocrypha. For the purposes of this essay the Bible will be accepted to mean the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible.

The first, and most authoritative, division of the Hebrew Bible is the Law, or the Five Books of Moses, sometimes called the Pentateuch or Torah. These five books include Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This section contains two kinds of material: historical and legal, both terms being taken in their widest sense. The historical data relate the story of mankind, as understood by the Biblical writers, from the Creation until the days of Abraham (Genesis 1–11), proceeding from there to the career of the Hebrews in Canaan, Egypt, and the wilderness of Sinai, up to the death of Moses on the eve of the invasion of Canaan in the thirteenth century B.C. The legal part details the civil as well as the religious constitution of Israel.

The second great division of the Bible, the Prophets, consists of eight books and covers a period lasting about 750 years. In this epoch, Canaan was conquered, Israel’s united and divided kingdoms rose and fell, and the state of Judah and the Temple of Solomon were restored, in part, after the Babylonian Exile, at the end of the sixth century B.C.

During this phase, the role of the prophetic movement was dominant. First of all, its adherents took the royal ar-
chives and other source material and wove them together carefully and vividly into a social and political history of Israel, carving out for themselves, in the process, a reputation as the world's first systematic historians. The books of Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings—these books are sometimes called the Former Prophets—constitute this great achievement. Secondly, in intervening in the political and social life of their fellow Israelites, the prophets expressed their ideas so forthrightly and in such beautiful and powerful poetry that they placed themselves forever among the greatest social moralists of all time. The books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel (the so-called Major Prophets) and the twelve so-called Minor Prophets—among whom Hosea, Amos, and Micah stand out—are the repository of this unsurpassed material.

The third and final division of the Bible is called the Writings, or the Hagiographa. This section consists of eleven books which run a considerable gamut in variety of style and content, and nearly every one of which is a classic in its own right. Devotional literature is well represented by the familiar Book of Psalms. Wisdom literature, the speculation of what constitutes the good life and the practical means of achieving it, is exhibited in such books as Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The Song of Songs is a lyrical poem of love, tender and passionate; in later times the lover and his beloved became identified with God and His beloved people Israel. The Book of Daniel, in its final form a product of the second century B.C., tells a dramatic story of the purported career of a Judean youth living in the Babylonian Exile in the days of Nebuchadnezzar (early six century B.C.), a time which to this day symbolizes for the Jews the pit of despair. Daniel’s dreams and visions, which
among other things supposedly foretell Maccabean victory over Syria about 165 B.C., became the forerunner and model of the apocalypses or supernatural revelations which appeared first in Jewish and then in Christian literature. The memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah constitute both interesting autobiography and important source material for the restoration of Judea after the Babylonian Exile. These post-exilic memoirs appear to have been edited by the person who wrote the Book of Chronicles, which provide a survey of Biblical history from Adam to Nehemiah (about 400 B.C.). Chronicles is the last of the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible.

The Bible as History: The Role of Archaeology

The Bible is the major source for our knowledge of the history of Israel in ancient times; yet its value for the historian has not always been appreciated sufficiently.

Until the eighteenth century the Bible was generally accepted as a trustworthy history of antiquity. The Book, indeed, was regarded as being literally true, the Creation, the Flood, Noah’s Ark, the walls of Jericho, and all. But as the Age of Reason dawned and in turn gave way to nineteenth-century philosophies of evolution and scientific materialism, the Bible, in common with the New Testament and all records of antiquity, Greek, Roman, and the rest, came to be very considerably discounted as a reliable basis for the reconstruction of history.

The heroic doings of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as described in the Book of Genesis, were discounted as mere myth. The very existence of Moses was doubted. Joshua was believed to have had little or nothing to do with the Israelite conquest of Canaan. David and Solomon were
considered greatly overrated. The story of the Babylonian Exile was relegated to the realm of fiction. And so on.

With the more recent archaeological discoveries and analysis of the ancient Near East today, however, the pendulum has now swung considerably the other way. Modern historians do not, to be sure, accept every part of the Bible equally as literal fact. Yet they have come to accept much of the Biblical data as constituting unusually reliable historical documents of antiquity, documents which take on new meaning and pertinence when they are analyzed in the light of the newly discovered extra-Biblical sources. The civilizations which flourished in the Fertile Crescent of old are better known today than anyone before World War I thought possible. The ancient Near East can now be seen from a thoroughly new perspective, and so it has become necessary to re-examine the Biblical record in the light of our broadened understanding.

*The Bible as Sacred History and Its Interpretation*

The major problems that confront the modern historian in handling the Bible as a source are twofold. First, he cannot fulfill his task when his materials are inadequate and of uncertain authorship and date. Only occasionally can a Biblical book, or its component parts, be ascribed to a definite time, place, author, and purpose; and, furthermore, extensive as the extra-Biblical material has become, it generally suffices only for the most general sort of corroboration or criticism of the texts. Secondly, in the handling of the Biblical material there is the major problem of discovering the fundamental economic, social, and political background from documents couched almost exclusively in religious terminology.
Those who were responsible for the composition of the Hebrew Bible believed that what they uttered and wrote derived from the God who had entered into a mutual Covenant with Israel. According to the terms of the Covenant, God loved and protected Israel and no other people, and Israel worshiped no other god but Him. The modern historian, however, cannot accept such an interpretation, but must seek—behind the religious terminology—the same kind of documented human story, with an examination of its underlying dynamics, that would be his proper objective in any other field. Otherwise he would achieve no more than a compilation of myths, chronicles, annals, oracles, autobiographies, court histories, personal apologia.

The historian cannot regard any human activity or statement, be it religious or secular, sacred or profane, as beyond his domain. His competence is limited only by the nature and adequacy of his sources. The limitations inherent in the Biblical sources thus militate against an historical reconstruction which will be clear in every respect; in spite of these inherent difficulties, scholarly researches have been supplying flashes of light where none existed before. So the work of interpretation goes on, some results of which form the basis of this essay.
CHAPTER 1

The Fertile Crescent:

Hebrew Origins

THE Near East, that quadrangle of land lying between the Mediterranean, the Caspian and Red Seas, and the Persian Gulf, and connecting Asia with Africa, is in general a barren and uninviting area. Running across it, however, from the alluvial flatlands of the Tigris and Euphrates in the southeast through Syria in the northwest, and then curving down along the coast of Palestine to the Nile Delta, lies a crescent-shaped region of rich, well-watered land (see Map I). It was in this Fertile Crescent that the first great civilizations appeared and that man first made the transition from hunting, fishing, and cave dwelling to systematic farming within an organized community. From this focus, the new mode of civilization extended to lower Mesopotamia, and from there to the Syro-Palestinian coast, to Egypt, to the Anatolian plateau, to the Indus Valley in Pakistan, to Crete, and to Greece.

The Ancient Near East

This change began during the latter stages of the Neolithic or Late Stone Age, about 5500–4000 B.C. In ever-