

The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament
H. Wheeler Robinson
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This book is exceedingly well written, so well indeed, that one cannot help regretting that it is inspired by the Wellhausenian theory of the history of Israel's religion. It is one of the best succinct expositions of this theory that we have seen and exhibits to an unusual degree the fascination which in virtue of its great unifying sweep the latter is apt to exert. To be sure the author's standpoint is that of a moderated Wellhausenianism. This shows itself in two respects. On the one hand he places greater emphasis upon the redemptive element in Israel's experience and does not so one-sidedly as the extreme advocates of the theory are accustomed to do represent the ethical Monotheism as the exclusively valuable product of the development. On the other hand the ethical nucleus in the conception of God is traced farther back beyond the age of the great writing prophets, via Elijah and Nathan to the time of the exodus. While this, of course, breaks up to some extent the coherence of the scheme, it brings the position somewhat nearer to the traditional view. But so far as the time of Moses is concerned the incipient ethicizing of the conception of God made out to exist is more apparent than real, amounting to no more than the fact that Yahweh and Israel were joined together by a free choice. How this implies the ethical character of the relationship, unless it can be shown that the choice was inspired by moral motives, we are unable to see. As to the other approach to the conservative position, the greater emphasis thrown on grace and redemption, this also falls short of a solid recognition of the redemptive backbone of the Old Testament in the old accepted sense. All grace is free grace; the juristic conception of God is rejected on principle; no satisfaction of the divine righteousness by penal suffering allowed, either as entering into the ritual of sacrifice or into the teaching of prophecy. Even where, as in Isa. 53, the presence of the idea of a "vicarious" suffering on the part of Israel for the Gentiles is recognized and at each point where the exposition might seem to approach such an idea, the author takes special pains to warn the reader against identifying this teaching with the forensic conception of the Protestant theology. Of the reaction which has lately set in against the Wellhausenian construction in the critical sphere the author does not seem to have felt the influence. In his sketch of the Old Testament eschatology, while admitting Gressmann's assumption of the pre-prophetic date and popular character of the ancient hope of Israel, yet the figure of the Messiah is represented as the reflex-product of the experience of Israel with the kingship.

The main fault we have to find with the book is that it entirely subjectivizes the process of revelation: all truth is the result of historical experience, collective or individual. It is not the object of communication on the part of God, but the precipitate of faith and vision on the part of man. The objections which from the point of view of the philosophy of revelation must suggest themselves against this standpoint appear to be clearly felt and are admirably stated in the concluding chapter by the author himself, who here as elsewhere shows himself capable of clear theological thinking. The considerations by which he seeks to invalidate them will hardly satisfy the orthodox reader. If revelation is in its whole compass subjective, and at the same time through its subjective emergence acquires the character of relativity and fallibleness, no objective norm remains by which its actual provenience from the mind of God and its degree of authoritativeness can be tested. To say that all truth inherently commends itself is no solution for a mind conscious of its own spiritual inadequacy through sin in the noetic sphere. Nor do we think it in accordance with the facts of the prophetic

consciousness thus to subjectivize the reception of truth. The author is fair enough to state these facts correctly, but then refuses to be bound by the prophets' own perception of them, and substitutes his own subjectivizing psychological interpretation. It is significant that in the bibliography at the close of the volume König's *Offenbarungsbegriff*, which upholds the objectivity of revelation, to be sure in an extreme sense, is not included, whilst the much briefer and more shallow treatise of Giesebrecht on the *Berufsbegabung* of the prophets is named.

We wish the author could have spared the reader the hackneyed assurance that through the new critical treatment and its conclusions the Old Testament has not lost but gained in religious grandeur and beauty. This may be so from the author's own standpoint, but the assurance is hardly necessary or intended for that. It is obviously offered to allay the fears of the conservative reader. For this, however, it is entirely beside the purpose. The conservative attitude toward the Old Testament expects from it and finds in it something different and something more than the modern religious consciousness. And because the demands on our side are different, in a sense higher, the concern about critical procedures and their results is differently affected and far more easily aroused. From the writer's subjectivizing point of view the genealogy of truth becomes a matter of minor importance and an attitude of unconcern in regard to criticism quite easy of attainment. It is different with those who are accustomed vividly to conceive of God as standing with his personal authority back of the whole process of revelation at every step. With all their historical sense and psychological insight the critics might make a little more effort to project themselves into the conservative position. Probably the reason why it is so difficult for them to do this, is that they cannot conceive of the old view about the inspired Bible in any other way than as an antiquated position, which has lost all vitality in the sphere of practical religion. But surely in this they are mistaken.