

Study of Oral Transmission

1. Statements as to alleged accuracy of oral transmission, with precise references.

The Bible in Modern Scholarship, edited by J. Philip Hyatt (Abingdon Press: Nashville) 1965. Papers read at the 100th Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, December 28-30, 1964.

"Method in the Study of Early Hebrew History" by Roland de Vaux, O. P.

pp. 29,30 Literary criticism by itself does not bring a sufficient answer to the questions of the historian, and he, beyond the texts, must go back to the study

p.30 of the traditions. Recently the accuracy of the oral tradition has been greatly insisted upon, especially in the Near East and especially among the people who did not use writing, or used it very little.¹³ This affirmation needs serious restrictions.¹⁴

The oral transmission of an account achieves a certain fixity only when this account has received a poetic or rhythmic form, and this fixity is helpful if there is a parallel written tradition which controls and sustains it. Neither in the Near East nor elsewhere are historic memories transmitted for long without being deformed if there is only an oral transmission. On the other hand, certain characteristics attached to names, places, sanctuaries, or rites are preserved with astonishing persistence.

These reservations made, the form and the content of the ancient biblical traditions permit one to think that they have preserved accurate memories of the origins of Israel. They contain indeed certain of those elements which oral tradition preserves best, they retain ancient poetic compositions, and they refer to two (or one?) collections of poems or epic tales, the "Book of the Wars of Yahweh" (Num.21.14) and the "Book of the Braves" (Josh.10.13).¹⁵

13. Cf. the works of H. S. Nyberg, H. Birkeland and, generally, E. Nielsen, Oral Tradition, 1954

14. Cf. among others J. van der Ploeg, "Le rote de la tradition orale dans la transmission du texte de l'Ancien Testament," RB, LII(1947), 5-41; W. F. Albright, From the Stone Age to Christianity, 1957, pp.64-76

15. S. Mowinckel, "Hat es ein israelitisches Nationalepos gegeben?" ZAW, LIII (1935), 130-52. But cf. N. H. Tur-Sinai, "Was there an Ancient 'Book of the Wars of the Lord?'" Bulletin of Israel Exploration Society, XXIV (1959-1960), 146-48.