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Literature

ORAL TRADITION AND WRITTEN DOCUMENTS

Readers of this journal are aware that 'literary' criticism is being challenged by a new method, the traditio-historical, which lays great emphasis upon the part played by oral tradition in the formation of the Old Testament, and whose most vocal proponent is Professor Engnell of Uppsala. But it has been difficult for those who do not read the Scandinavian languages to come to conclusions about the debate, since up to now there has been no presentation, in English, of the traditio-historical case by one who advocates it.

This lack is now to some extent met by the publication, under the title *Oral Tradition: A Problem in Old Testament Introduction*, of three articles which appeared in a Danish journal in 1952 by Mr. Eduard Nielsen [Studies in Biblical Theology, No. 11 (S.C.M.; 7s. net)]. After a few pages of Introduction, in which he outlines the history of the discussion, Mr. Nielsen gives an account of Oral Tradition in the Near East, followed by The Role of Oral Tradition in the Old Testament, and concludes with Examples of Traditio-Historical Method, illustrating his thesis from Jer 36, Mic 4-6, and the Flood Story in Genesis. This last chapter, though by no means satisfying, is welcome, since so much of the discussion, even in Scandinavia, has been in only general terms, and what we need are illustrations of the ways in which the traditio-historians will deal with specific texts which have been worked over again and again by the literary critics.

Mr. Nielsen's point of departure is taken from Professor Nyberg of Uppsala, who wrote almost twenty years ago: 'The written Old Testament is a creation of the post-exilic Jewish community; of what existed earlier undoubtedly only a small part was in fixed written form.' It may be so, but the evidence as Mr. Nielsen presents it is by no means compelling. One gets the impression that oral and 'written' are like Demetrius and Lysander in 'A Midsummer-Night's Dream,' chasing one another in the dark wood. There is no doubt that writing was employed in Israel long before the Exile, though it may well have been, as Mr. Nielsen insists, the business of specialists—but the writers of the putative documents were presumably such specialists; and no doubt either that practice by no means ceased when the oral traditions received literary fixation—how could it? In the age of printing?

If we admit that much of the Old Testament

was in fixed oral form long before it was committed to writing, we have as good reason to apply source-critical methods to what Engnell calls 'oral literature' as we have to actual documents. Most disjunctives are false, and if we are bidden to choose between oral tradition and writing we must decline the either-or and insist on having both. Even Mr. Nielsen says of the traditio-historian: 'However strange it may sound he can accept some of the detailed work of the literary critic.'

C. R. NORTH

CONFIRMATION

Father L. S. Thornton's latest book, *Confirmation: Its Place in the Baptismal Mystery* (A. and C. Black; 15s. net), is described on the dust-cover as 'of immediate importance to every thinking member of the Church of England.' It will be read with interest also by members of other Communion, even though its thesis includes the assertion that 'the completion of our baptism is fittingly effected through the intervention of the bishop, whose apostolic authority is the indispensable link between the individual parts and the Body as a whole.'

The significance of Christian initiation, Father Thornton believes, has been greatly lessened by a process of erosion in the history of the Church. A false distinction between Baptism and Confirmation, including a non-Scriptural separation in time between the two parts of 'a single complex mystery,' has given misleading emphasis to either one or other aspect of what should really be an all-inclusive act. In Baptism the neophyte enters into the divine-human being of the incarnate Word; in Confirmation he receives his share of the Spirit for the fulfilment of his mission. There is a sense in which we are in baptism identified with our Lord's poverty in order that in confirmation we may be dowered with His riches.

This line of argument is worked out in terms of the principles of Scriptural interpretation which Father Thornton has expounded elsewhere. The interpretation of the Bible, he believes, lies in the purity of the thought, and he is able, therefore, to use an elaborate apparatus of typology from the Old Testament alike in the development of his theme. Thus the record of the second circumcision in Joshua, noted by Justin Martyr, can throw light upon the experience of the Christian neophytes 'who had passed through Jordan's waters in baptism, and who had received from the bishop the seal of the new circumcision.' Father