

TRADITIO-HISTORICAL CRITICISM

ORAL TRADITION. By EDUARD NIELSEN. S.C.M. Press. 7s.

TRADITIO-HISTORICAL criticism is not as obscure as it sounds. It may be defined as the study of the nature, origin and history of tradition. The use made of it in Scandinavian Old Testament studies recently under the leadership of Professor Ivan Engnell of Uppsala is somewhat narrower than this and, implying a number of dogmas about the role of oral tradition, tends to obscurity. The difficulty of knowing with precision what it means, together with the accident that the most systematic account of it is in Swedish, makes interpretation necessary. Here now is a book which presents this form of inquiry in action.* It is of modest length, though packed with good things and happily inexpensive in the *Studies in Biblical Theology* series. In a foreword, Professor Rowley describes it as "a better introduction to traditio-historical criticism than can be found elsewhere in any of the international languages of scholarship". With this favourable judgement the reviewer is disposed to agree. And since the questions discussed are acutely important for the way in which biblical texts are handled and some commitment on the issues imperative, the book ought to have an extensive circulation and lead to some salutary clarifications.

The first chapter presents a rough outline of the modern debate, and attempts to put the real problem of oral tradition into focus. That problem is raised by the unimaginative and anachronistic habit of the typical western literary critic of reading the assumptions of his own literary culture into a quite different oriental (biblical) culture. Against this entrenched habit, some (mainly) Scandinavian scholars, led by Engnell, have entered a vigorous and loud protest. They claim that it is no longer possible to make a simple distinction between a literary and a pre-literary (oral) stage of tradition.

The second chapter seeks to illustrate the value and use of oral tradition in the ancient near East generally, and to contrast this with the value that a modern literary culture sets upon it. The special spheres of oral and written tradition are distinguished, and the status and function of early scribes described. The use of writing in prophetic and poetical texts is linked (following Nyberg) with a general crisis of confidence in Israel following the events of 586, and even thereafter there is an interplay between oral and written transmission which keeps alive the oriental reliance upon the memory and the creative power of oral tradition.

In the third chapter the subordinate role of writing in pre-exilic Israel is demonstrated, and conversely the positive role of oral tradition is traced in the Law and Wisdom literature. The signs of this positive role in respect of the historical and prophetic traditions are confined to a fascinating last chapter, in which the traditio-historical method is tested in the detailed exposition of three texts, viz, Jer. ch. 36, Mic. cc. 4-5, and Gen. cc. 6-9. This transition from the general to the particular, a

*It is by a Danish scholar, and comes to England in an excellent translation.

brave and able effort to illustrate principles within the unyielding limits of precise texts, is in some ways the most important part of the book and certainly illuminates the whole issue.

In general the Scandinavians may well claim to have administered a corrective to much modern critical study of the Bible. They have created a more favourable attitude to the power and reliability of oral tradition. They are teaching us to take more account of the ancient oriental culture within which Israel grew up, and to take corresponding care to see that we do not impose the assumptions of our own literary culture upon our interpretations of the biblical traditions. This is great gain, and Mr. Nielsen has now played a notable part in making clear just what has happened in recent scholarship, notable for an advocacy which is both weighty and refreshingly free from bombast and scathing denunciation. This must not suggest that he is content to echo the opinions of others. On the contrary, this book contains his own independent investigations and original applications of the method he advocates.

But it is doubtful whether, beyond this, the illumination reveals to the reader quite what the author intends him to see. For this book, while clarifying the main issues, also clarifies the excesses and ambiguities of the Scandinavian contribution. Its principle excess is largely a result of polemical exaggeration. The enlightened Swede has been set over against the obscurantist Wellhausenian, the traditio-historian over against the literary critic. This vivid and exciting antithesis has been made possible only by setting the older generation of literary critics in opposition to the new enlightenment. It is Wellhausen, Duhm, Marti, Gunkel and the like who are the main foils, together with those contemporaries who still agree with some part of their method. The literary critics are lumped together as "the literary critics", a phrase which now takes on a somewhat ominous and depreciatory tone. This conceals the very real and healthy differences within their ranks, and, indeed, their varying evaluations of oral tradition. Many have acknowledged truth in Scandinavia, but are made to look like submitting to an enemy in doing so. The prophetic tendency to see things in blacks and whites is a liability in the field of careful scholarship. It is impossible to see in literary critics a homogeneous body who can be set in dramatic opposition to the traditio-historians. After the great classical names, Gunkel and Gressmann represent one decisive advance, T. H. Robinson and Eissfeldt another, while the work of Mowinckel, Bentzen and others makes clear-cut distinctions nonsensical. This also conceals the extent to which the modern Scandinavian traditio-historian still owes more to Wellhausen and the old literary critics than he does to any before them and, viewed from the perspective of pre-critical days, belongs with them over against all other types of biblical scholarship of this or any other age. He is an ungrateful child and ought to have been able to correct his parent without being so arrogant and aggressive. In fact, he sees further than his parent only because he has been able to stand on his shoulders and has been granted a wider (but not deeper) education.

The principal ambiguity of the Scandinavian contribution is a result of the excitement of the chase. It is undoubtedly true that a favourable