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What is Meant by the Torah?

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR SAYCE, D.D., LL.D.

HEBREW lexicons and commentaries on the Old Testament are unanimous in declaring that the Hebrew word *tôrâh* signifies "teaching" or "instruction." The only dispute is as to whether or not it still retained this sense when first applied to the Pentateuch, or whether it was not until late post-exilic times that it acquired the technical meaning of a Divinely inspired law. The critical school maintains that before the Exile, and, indeed, for some time after that event, its true rendering would be "oral teaching"; while the defenders of traditional views believe that in most cases where we meet with it in the Old Testament it refers, as in later days, to the Pentateuch. But about the fact that it is a word of Hebrew origin derived from a root signifying "to instruct," the critics and the orthodox are at one.

Critics and orthodox alike, however, are behind the times. Assyriology—that *enfant terrible*—has thrown a new light on the matter, and shown that *tôrâh* is neither a Hebrew word nor did it ever mean "instruction." During the last ten years Assyriological research has moved on at such a rapid pace that the Assyriologists have been too busily occupied in examining and deciphering the masses of new material to find time for much work outside their own province, and few of them, I think, realize how little Old Testament scholars are acquainted with the recent results of discovery. Not only in popular works and articles, but even in those which claim to be upon a higher level, I am constantly coming across assumptions and statements which the progress of Assyriology has rendered obsolete.

The culture of Western Asia was derived from Babylonia, and the technical terms of the culture consequently came also from Babylonia. One of these was *tertu*, a "Divinely revealed law." Professor Friedrich Delitzsch first pointed out that *tertu*

and *tôrâh* were one and the same, but as the exact meaning of *tertu* and the nature of its relationship to *tôrâh* were not as yet known, the importance of the fact was not appreciated. To-day we are in a different position.

Tertu is a characteristically Babylonian (or "Assyrian") formation from the *t*-conjugation, which of itself would suggest that *tôrâh* was a borrowed word in Hebrew. The verb is *êrû*, which in the intensive conjugation appears as *hurû* and *urû*, "to send." From it comes the participle *muirru*, also written *muhirru*, which is given as a translation of the Sumerian words *kingêa* and *lu-âgga*, "messenger," and denotes "the King's messenger," who was sent on special missions to foreign lands. The word was borrowed by the Egyptians, and one of the few literary compositions that have survived to us from the age of Ramses II., the Pharaoh of the Oppression, is a sarcastic account of the misadventures of a "Mohar," or *Muirru*, in Canaan. As the Egyptian form of the word shows, the Hebrew root corresponding to *êrû*, if it had existed, would have been *הרה*, *hârâh*.

One of the derivatives from *êrû* is *ûrtu*, "a command" or "law," such as would be laid upon a royal messenger. Another was *tertu*, which at an early date acquired a special technical sense. It is the Semitic translation of the Sumerian *âgga*, primarily a "message" or "edict," and then more particularly the "message" or "edict" of a god. *Tertu* is accordingly used, not only in later times, but also in the earliest texts, in the sense of "a divine revelation," made either through an act of divination, such as the examination of the liver by an *haruspex*, or through a law made known to man by the priest, prophet, or King. As the King, however, was both the vicegerent of the deity and himself a god, the word *tertu* was applied more especially to the laws which he made, and which were believed to be of Divine origin. Thus, the legal code of Khammu-rabi, or Amraphel, the contemporary of Abraham, was a *tertu*, or collection of individual *têrêti*, in a twofold sense; it was inspired by the Sun-god, from whom the King is represented as receiving

it in a sculpture engraved at the head of the code,¹ and the law-giver was himself a god. Khammu-rabi describes himself in it as the *musaklil têritim*, "the executor of the Divine law."

The two centres of early Babylonian culture and religion were Nippur in the north and Eridu in the south. Ellil, the god of Nippur, was believed more particularly to hold in his hands the *têrêti* or "Divine laws" which governed heaven and earth, and which were revealed to men in portents and omens, as well as in the commands of the law-giver. One of his titles was "the establisher of the *têrêti*," and an old mythological poem, which recounted the theft of the "tablets of destiny" from Ellil by the storm-bird Zu, tells us how Ellil had left his throne to wash himself with "purifying water," after having taken off his crown of sovereignty and laid the tablets of destiny beside him, so that for the time he had ceased to "establish the laws (*têrêti*) of all the gods." When the thief saw "the father of the gods" thus divested of his attributes and power, the story further tells us, he said within himself: "Now will I seize the Divine tablets of destiny, and determine the laws (*têrêti*) of all the gods: I will set up (my) throne; I will be master of the commandments; I will send forth the angels (*Igigi*), all of them."

The chief messenger or "angel" of Ellil was Nin-ip, and accordingly he, too, is said to "hold in his hand the law (*têrit*) of all the gods"—that is to say, the code of laws laid down by Ellil which they were all called upon to obey.

Eridu was the city of the Culture-god Ea, whose home was in the deep; and ancient tradition described how he had brought civilization to Babylonia, and given the Babylonians their first code of laws. An old Babylonian document which prescribes the duties of the King, and commands him to govern his people with justice and righteousness, refers to "the book of Ea" as that upon which its prescriptions were based (*cf.* Deut. xvii. 18).

The word used for "book" is *sipru*, borrowed in Hebrew

¹ The god hands to the King the stylus with which the code was engraved on the tables of stone.

under the form of *sepher*, which properly means "message"; but since royal and other messages were conveyed in writing, it came to signify also "a writing" or "book." Babylonian culture, it must be remembered, was emphatically literary; it was, in fact, based upon the art of writing, and the Babylonian found it difficult to conceive of a message or command which was not written down. Hence it was that from the first the *tertu* or "Divinely revealed law" was also a written law.

Merodach, the Patron-god of Babylon, was the son of Ea, and it is therefore not surprising that he should be entitled "the lord of revelations" (*têrêti*); "the establisher of the law of the deep" (*têrit apsi*)—i.e., of his father Ea, the god of the deep. The "revelations" included oracles: hence, a synonym of *tertu* is given as *taklimtu*, which signifies "a revelation"; hence, too, the goddess Istar is described as "mediating" or "communicating the oracles" (*têrêti*), and "making fast" their meaning. Some of these oracles have come down to us, and the first translations of them were made by Dr. Pinches. Like the laws, they were written on clay tablets, and so communicated to those who had consulted the interpreters of the future.

Perhaps "written revelation" would be a better translation than "oracle" for the Babylonian *têritu* when used in this sense. The word denoted more exactly "a Divinely revealed message," which was delivered by the god or gods to their properly qualified ministers. In the early days of Babylonian history an "oracle-tree" had stood near Eridu, in the land of Edin—"the plain" of Babylonia—whose divine revelations the Kings of Southern Babylonia boasted of carrying out. It was called *gis-kin*, "the tree of the (Divine) message," in Sumerian, and the messages delivered through its means revealed a knowledge of coming good or evil. We are reminded of the Divine message that was similarly sent to David in his war against the Philistines through "a sound in the going of the tops of the mulberry trees" (2 Sam. v. 24).

The messages thus revealed to man included the laws which he was called upon to obey. Indeed, it was the laws

regulating life and conduct which formed the principal part of the revelation ascribed by Babylonian tradition to the Culture-god Ea. It was also the laws of the land which constituted the *tertu* or "revelation" of the Sun-god. As we have seen, it was from the Sun-god that the legal code of Khammu-rabi was believed to have been derived, and he is consequently addressed as "the revealer of Divine laws" (*barâ terêti*). In the age of Khammu-rabi solar worship was predominant in Babylonia; Merodach, the god of the capital, Babylon, had been resolved into a solar deity, and the Sun-god tended to become the supreme object of cult.

But there was a darker side to Babylonian religion. It was closely associated with magic and sorcery, and with an elaborate science of omens which the practical mind of the Semites had evolved out of the old superstitions of Sumer. Astrology flourished, and still more, extispicy—the prognostication of coming events through an examination of the liver of animals. Through the haruspex, the astrologer, the necromancer, and the augur, the messages of the gods could be conveyed to man as well as through the priest, the prophet, or the law-giver. Hence *tertu* came to signify "a portent" or "omen"—a "revelation," that is to say, made through the stars or terrestrial objects, as well as through more spiritual means. It is true that when the word *têreti* is used in this sense it is generally preceded in writing by an ideograph which means "flesh," and which indicates that such a use of the word was of comparatively late date, but in speaking the ideograph would not have been pronounced.

Such, then, are the facts which have been brought to light by Assyriological research. The word *tertu*, which is a characteristically Babylonian word, reappearing in Hebrew as *tôrâh*, signifies originally "a Divine message" or "revelation," and is used primarily of the laws which were believed to have had a Divine origin. Like the Sumerian *âgga*, of which it was the equivalent, long before the age of Abraham it had come to be applied to the collections of laws which we now know to have

already existed in Sumerian times, the individual laws being denoted by the plural *têrêti*. The most important of these collections was the code of Khammu-rabi, or Amraphel, which the King was supposed to have received from the hands of the Sun-god. In the earlier days it had been Ea of Eridu and Ellil of Nippur from whom the Divinely inspired codes had been derived, and the twenty-eighth year of Samsu-iluna, the son and successor of Khammu-rabi, was still known as that in which "the divine law of Ellil"—the Bel or Baal of the Semites—"was revealed" (*âgga Ellil*, in Semitic Babylonian *têrit Ellil* or *Bili*). When Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldees the meaning of *têritu* or *tôrâh* had long been fixed, and every Babylonian was familiar, not only with the conception of a code of laws which had been delivered to the law-giver by the deity, but also with the word *têritu*, or *tertu*, which denoted it.

But the law-giver himself was a god. In Babylonia Khammu-rabi was entitled *ilu*, "the god," which, as we learn from the Tel el-Amarna tablets, became in his province of Canaan the plural *ilâni*. The local Baalim of Canaan were not distinguished from one another as were the great gods of Babylonia, each of whom had a strongly pronounced individuality, and who were represented in art as men of separate individual forms. Hence it is that Abraham was addressed by the Hittites of Hebron (Gen. xxiii. 6) as *nesê elohîm*, a literal translation of the Babylonian *issak ilâni*, or "viceroy of the deified King"—*issakku* (Sumerian *patesi*) being the ordinary title of the provincial governors in the Khammu-rabi age. The *tertu* or "revealed law" was thus doubly Divine; it was derived from one of the deities of heaven, and the royal law-giver was himself a god.

Canaan was for several centuries a Babylonian province, and during this period it became permeated with Babylonian culture. The Babylonian language and script were taught in its schools; its theology and law were borrowed from Babylonia, and its literature were derived from the same source. It was inevitable, therefore, that the language of Canaan should be filled with

Babylonian words and idioms, and that its technical terms should be in large measure of Babylonian origin. The language of Canaan, however, was what we now call Hebrew. When the Israelites entered Canaan they found there a culture which they gradually assimilated, and at the same time they adopted the words in which the culture was expressed.

The so-called critical theories about the origin and composition of the Pentateuch, in so far as they had any tangible foundation at all, rested upon two assumptions, each of which has been swept away by archæological research. It was assumed that the use of writing for literary purposes was unknown in the Canaan of the Mosaic age, and that a code of laws at so early a date was "inconceivable." We now know that the Mosaic age was really the close of a long period of great literary activity, and that some seven centuries before the time of Moses a code of laws had already been compiled for an empire which included Canaan. If Abraham were a contemporary of Amraphel he was bound to be acquainted not only with the code, but also with the technical term for it. And his descendants, after their settlement in Canaan, were equally bound to be acquainted with the term. The *tôrâh* for them would have signified a Divinely revealed legal code, a message from heaven which regulated their life and practice, and was interpreted for them by an individual legislator. The word *tertu* or *tôrâh* never had any connection with a verb meaning "to instruct." When we come to examine the passages of the Hebrew Bible in which the word *tôrâh* occurs, we shall find that in most of them we must restore to it its traditional meaning. "The law of the Lord," "the law of Elohim," are but a reproduction of the Babylonian *têrit Bili*, the Sumerian *âgga Ellil*, "the revealed law of Bel," or *têrit ilâni*, "the law of the gods," which, be it borne in mind, were common phrases in the Babylonian empire centuries before Israel became a nation. The "law of Moses" corresponds with the law of the deified Babylonian monarch, while "the laws" which Moses was called upon to "reveal" (Ass., *barû*) to his people are the

têrêti or "revelations" of the early Babylonian texts.¹ And as the Babylonian *têrêti* were based upon previous judicial decisions—Babylonian law being case-made, like the laws of England—so, too, in the Pentateuch the *mishpâtim* or "judgments" are followed by the *tôrôth* (Lev. xxvi. 46). But law or laws alike came ultimately from the gods; an old Babylonian hymn declares that it is the god who "directs the law of mankind" (*têrit kissat nisi sutesir*), and David similarly asks whether the revealed will of the Lord could be "man's law" (2 Sam. vii. 19). Like the creative word of which we hear in the Babylonian story of the Creation, it proceeded from the mouth of the deity (*cf.* Job xxii. 22).

It is only in the Book of Proverbs that the term is used in a later and derivative sense. In Babylonia, as we have seen, it came to denote any and every revelation of the deity, whether made through the laws or through portents and omens, though the ideographic mode of writing prevented the two senses of the word from being confused in literature. In Israel the darker side of Semitic religion was rigorously suppressed. The religion of Yahveh banished the magician and augur from the land. Hence there is no trace in the Old Testament of the secondary sense of *tertu* as an augural sign. But in place of it we hear of "the law of thy mother" (Prov. i. 8, vi. 20), who, a few verses farther on, is shown to be wisdom personified. And the son is bidden to follow the "law" of his father (iii. 1, iv. 2, vii. 2). But this law has come to him, as to the legislator, from the "wisdom" of God, not from the false wisdom which consisted in the interpretation of the appearance of a sheep's liver. "The law of the wise is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death," we read in Prov. xiii. 14, and what is meant by that "law of the wise" is explained a little later (xiv. 27): "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death." In Babylonia "the wise" (*emqi* and *mudê*) were also stated to be "masters of the laws"

¹ *Cf.* the Babylonian expression: *tabarri têriti-sunu*, "thou shall reveal their (*i.e.*, the gods') law."

(*têrêti*), and the phrase *mudê tertî*, "wise in the law," was current; but the wise men of Babylonia drew their inspiration from omens in the skies and earth, from the examination of a liver, and the observation of the stars, rather than from the Divine "wisdom" of which the Hebrew writer speaks. What a contrast the fact affords between the religious conceptions of Babylonia and Israel!

It is true that the "wise men" of Chaldea were not all of them sorcerers or astrologers, or even interpreters of dreams. There were prophets in the Hebrew sense of the word, as well as law-givers and priests. And through them, also, as we have seen, the *tertu* or "Divine law" was revealed. Isaiah would have had his predecessors in Babylonia when he referred his disciples to the "law" which had been announced through himself (Isa. viii. 15, 20), supposing the Hebrew text in these passages to be right. But this is more than doubtful, since the grammatical construction is difficult to defend, and the reading of the Septuagint is different. In any case, however, the word of the prophet, since it was a "message" from heaven, would have been a *tertu* or *tôrâh*.



Christian Truth for the Far East.

BY THE VEN. ARCHDEACON MOULE, B.D.

IT would seem probable, from the assertions and proposals of some who regard themselves, no doubt honestly, as friends of the great and fast-awakening Far East, that the extreme and destructive views of Biblical and religious critics are to be transplanted from Christendom to the Eastern lands from which and about which I write, and are to be offered for the consideration of thinking men in China and Japan.

Now, if I understand anything of their attitude of mind, I do not think that they want such offers. I speak advisedly of the *awakening*, not of the *new-born*, intellect of Eastern thinkers.