

REVIEW OF A.L.OPPENHEIM: LETTERS FROM MESOPOTAMIA Samuel Paley

Ferdinand Lot once wrote that classical science suffers from the "spirit of mythology".¹ He refers, of course, to ancient man's speculative attempts rather than scientific approaches to his own human and superhuman past ² - - and, accordingly, the use of this speculative history by modern historians to reconstruct the history of the classical world.

Dr. Oppenheim has made this point again for the benefit of the students of Ancient Near Eastern history and culture. He calls attention to the pitfalls of trying to exact too much from a stereotyped text: "Letters are far more revealing than the formalized historical and literary texts with their ideological narrowness and tradition-determined contents" (p.15). It is the letters, the correspondence of Mesopotamia, which is the subject of this book. The letters really allow the historian perhaps the only contemporaneous and simultaneous insight into Mesopotamian history.

Dr. Oppenheim's motives for writing this volume are perhaps in keeping with Huizinga's remarks concerning the techniques of writing good history: "...this differentiation of historical insight can only be scientific, and consequently the corresponding historical product can only be convincing to the critical mind, in so far as the craving for historical truth is inspired by the highest aim which the carrier of the

1. Ferdinand Lot, The End of the Ancient World and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 170.

2. On the subject of Greek speculative history see H. J. E. Peake, "The Study of Prehistoric History," Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, LXX, 1940, pp. 103-46.

civilization, in virtue of its moral and intellectual faculties, is able to conceive. The power of a people or of a state is too limited and too obscure an aim..."³

How often does one pick up a volume or two and read data force-fitted into historical frameworks long out of touch and taste with modern historiography and readers of history - - reflecting, let us say, Biblical terminology or theology and divided into Age of Patriarchs, etc., or divided into the old standard dynastic "rise and fall" which reflects the course of history of only one "level" of society in the cultural continuum.

Huizinga sums up this thought with this statement: "History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past."⁴

So Dr. Oppenheim realizes himself in a modern, present-day age and discusses Mesopotamian culture as a modern historian and behavioral scientist. He has found a frame of reference in social, intellectual, and technological tradition wherein and wherewith he can determine the spirit of Mesopotamian culture and make it palatable to the modern reader. In this book, in keeping with the beginning he made in his Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization, he has joined with the best of the struggling twentieth century historiographers in tracing cultural continuums and stressing the tensions of society which make up the character of Mesopotamian Civilization.⁵ He does so, for example, rather than discussing the personality of one or another ruler - - the nineteenth century biographical technique popular among historians of that century, and still, unfortunately, popular in our normal schools and colleges. Thus a more up-to-date concept of historical truth is arrived at than is common among the other so-called Ancient Near Eastern Historians.

We notice that Oppenheim acknowledges the geopolitical background in which ancient material is excavated (p.3). Thus he stresses the importance of the inner diversity of the Mesopotamian plain and the contribution of each area to the "mosaic of life," the "symbiosis" which parallels the structure of its civilization, conceptual and literate as well as visual and material. In this context one remembers the oftentimes

3. Johan Huizinga, "A Definition of the Concept of History" in Philosophy and History: the Ernst Cassirer Festschrift edited by R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton, Harper Torchbooks, 1963, p. 7.

4. Huizinga, op. cit., p. 9.

5. For the problems of the so-called "New History" see Milton Gold, "In Search of a Historian," The Centennial Review VII, no. 3, 1963, pp. 282-305.

employed analogy in Ancient Near Eastern Art that the artistic conception of the Mesopotamian is formulated out of sets of geometric figures placed together in every which way - "mosaic-like" - to create a design.

As we have stated above, Dr. Oppenheim stresses in this book the written record as a stepping off point to a true conception of ancient life. For the scribes preserved the characteristic Mesopotamian attitudes and beliefs. Who else but the educated scribes of the temple or palace school would have survived the conqueror's sword and, in turn, taught him the Mesopotamian way of life?

Based on this clever and obviously correct assumption, Oppenheim develops his theme of history. 1) the origin and development of the scribal tradition; 2) the diffusion across the Near East of Mesopotamian tradition by way of the scribe, after the collapse of the First Dynasty of Babylon. Then the language of the Babylonian court scribe became the lingua franca and "all the world" had Babylonian teachers as, later, the conquering Romans were taught by their Greek slaves. (Perhaps the "brain-drain" of Mesopotamian educated minds was so great that it may account for the cultural and economic stagnation during this period of Mesopotamia proper.) In this period, Assyria is the foremost student, steeping itself in Babylonian learning and perhaps, at last, providing the political stability in Mesopotamia itself which made it possible for a Babylonian revival. 3) The last period is that of the modification and eclipse of the Mesopotamian scribal tradition because of the new and easier techniques of first the Aramaeans and Phoenicians and then the Greeks and Romans.

But, Oppenheim's historical divisions are based on more than just scribal tradition and its history. And so, parallel to the divisions of scribal history, he tries to write within the framework of the accumulation of historical and social experience which must have been Mesopotamia's lot, owing to the influx of many people continually throughout all of its known human history. The scheme of the "New History" of Ancient Mesopotamia has more precise phases. These phases are based on Oppenheim's solution to what he thinks is the basic problem of Mesopotamian History, which is: When and under what circumstances do new elements occur in the cultural continuum which is Mesopotamian life? When many new elements occur and accumulate in one temporal instance, a new phase is thus created.

Thus, Mesopotamian History is divided according to this scheme:

- 1) The Basic Aggregate which means everything not Semitic or Sumerian - - a catch-all of problems before and at the moment when proper history begins: origins of urbaniza-

tion, social organization, technology, religion and writing.

2) The Catalyst (the Sumerians --- if they do not belong to Phase I) is characterized by a tradition of political conquest and palace rulership, the temple estate-community, and the resultant struggle between palace, temple and city.⁶ Sumerian becomes the official language because rulers need history and records, and Sumerians are the rulers.

3) The Transformation or Rise of Mesopotamian Civilization⁷ means the development of bureaucratic, statesman-like control and administration, the acculturation of ruling elements outside of lower Mesopotamia (Babylon is the best student and will from now on try to maintain Mesopotamian tradition despite its own ethnic background because it feels Mesopotamian culture is superior), the accumulation of a corpus of Sumerian literature, the growth in use of Akkadian, the development of the scribal tradition to keep Sumerian the religious and educational language, the royal court as center of cultural life, and the tension between imperialism and city-king tradition.

4) Tradition and Experiment has as its key word "standardization" by which term is meant the collection of texts to stimulate literary production and to create a standard corpus of literature, syllabaries and lexicons for teaching purposes. Also important in this phase is the expansion of the cuneiform writing techniques, the development of capitalism and especially its practice of usury, the interest in mathematics and medicine as handmaidens to the new techniques of divination, and de-urbanization caused by economic failure of government and temple and the growth of absentee landlordism. The Mesopotamian city was a pre-World War II Beirut. Social law was institutionalized as the duty of the ruler in this period.

5) The formation of the legacy deals with the closing years of Mesopotamian civilization as a separate and

6. This contrasts the approach of Robert Mac Adams (Land Behind Baghdad, The University of Chicago Press, 1965) and others who stress that Mesopotamian history developed along a system of cooperation between the "desert and the sown." But, does cooperation imply original tension?

7. Oppenheim disagrees with the use of the term renaissance as a description of the Third Dynasty of Ur. This term has already received severe criticism by Medievalists in discussing their own centuries. They see the 15th and 16th centuries A.D. as an intensification of relevant values of previous ages incorporated into the new values of the centuries in point of discussion. In like manner Oppenheim views this phase as a transformation of values of the previous phase by those of the present which will be passed on, because they are relevant, to future generations.

viable entity and the "formation" of values which will be acceptable to future generations. It is characterized by a literary revival with additions to its lexicon especially from Aramaic; the renewal of trade; the importance again of royal courts; the "acculturation" of Aramaean elements; changes in technology such as date farming, fallowing fields, pig-raising and absence of fishing; changes in social arrangements such as the lowering of the social status of women, and slaves viewed as capital investment not as members of the household, the concept of family lineage and social status (based on personal wealth), and the preferred status of the urban citizen; changes in economy by the adoption of silver as a means of payment and free capitalism; changes in the status of the ruler in that he relies on mercenaries and answers to "semi-independent sheikhs," and the overpowering importance of astronomy, mathematics and astrology. This phase is kept alive by Babylonians and Aramaeans (at first through Aramaeanized Assyria) who spread it, even after the Persian conquest, until it mixes with Hellenism to form the Hellenistic tradition which is absorbed by the Romans and transmitted to the western world. Mesopotamia is best remembered for omenology, astronomy, astrology, mathematics and free trade both by the ancient and modern historians.

Dr. Oppenheim's next problem is that of the techniques of translation. He comes to an understanding with himself which allows him to command as best he can the material he proposes to translate. These are the letters which are supposed to provide the insights into the life - the everyday life of the ancient Mesopotamian! He wants no wooden translation, rather a free flowing style which reflects the tone, mood and emotion of the letter. His translations are therefore approximations, commentaries - as all good translations should be - on the sense of the texts at hand. He realizes that a new text may at some time or other prove his translation erroneous, but those are the difficulties in translating a language which relies on the accumulation of new texts not on the approval of a native speaker. We leave the tedious job of criticism of each phrase of each letter to a proper study by proper philologists - provided they argue their case on Dr. Oppenheim's terms. If they do not, there is no common ground for debate and we are left with their cold and insipid counter-translations.