

## VII.

### GENUINENESS OF THE MOABITE STONE.

IT may perhaps seem to the general reader at first sight that the genuineness of important monuments like the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser, the Rosetta Stone, and our inscription of Mesha, is assumed without sufficient investigation. He seldom finds any discussion of such matters in popular publications. But doubtless very slight reflection leads him to the conclusion that the question of genuineness is always carefully and thoroughly considered by the scholars concerned ; and that the confident, unhesitating and universal assumption of genuineness is not a mere otiose assent to

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some hasty and possibly worthless judgment, but is due to overwhelming evidence. Every fresh discovery is subjected to the keenest criticism, and a forgery could not long survive unchallenged. Of course it is not safe to accept at once the statements made by a discoverer as to the nature and value of a newly found treasure ; he is apt to exaggerate its importance, and to interpret it according to his critical or theological bias. But the public may safely accept a monument which has been known to scholars for some years, and has been generally acknowledged to be genuine.

There is no doubt that the Moabite Stone was actually inscribed by the command of Mesha somewhere about 840 B.C. This view is held by a legion of scholars of various churches, nations, and schools of criticism. But it is the more certain, in that it has been challenged by a very small minority. Here, if anywhere, the exception proves the rule. Judgment has

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not been allowed to go by default, there have been *advocati diaboli*; all that the utmost ingenuity of hostile criticism could say against the Stone has been said, and the saying has only made it clear that there is absolutely no case. The general verdict of scholarship remains practically unanimous in favour of the genuineness.

There is, indeed, no cogency in any of the adverse arguments. It is only worth while mentioning one or two. It is urged that breaks between the words, vertical lines between some of the sentences, and dots between most of the words is not in accordance with the mode of writing early Hebrew records. But the Moabite Stone, though in a dialect similar to Hebrew, is not Israelite; it is unique, the sole relic of Moabite literature, and these *a priori* objections could in any case have little weight. But, further, such an objection could be relevant only if we possessed a sufficient collection of Israelite MSS and monuments actually

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written before the Exile, and no such collection exists.<sup>1</sup> We have one Hebrew document, the Siloam inscription, which is usually regarded as pre-exilic, and in this the words are divided by dots as on the Stone. In another pre-exilic Hebrew inscription, the Gezer Calendar, there are perpendicular dividing lines. Also words are often divided by dots on ancient Aramaic inscriptions.<sup>2</sup>

Another objection may be stated thus. The Stone mentions a number of towns;<sup>3</sup> of these all but three or four are named in the Old Testament, many of them in Isa. 15. 16. One of those named on the Stone but not in the Old Testament is QRḤH;<sup>4</sup> there is, however, a Hebrew word *QoRHāH*, "baldness," which occurs

<sup>1</sup> Of course, various parts of the Old Testament were composed before the Exile, but the extant MSS of the Old Testament were written long after the beginning of the Christian Era.

<sup>2</sup> Lidzbarski, *Handbuch der Nordsemitischen Epigraphik*, p. 202.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> There are no vowel points on the Stone.

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in *Isaiah* in the immediate neighbourhood of the names of some of the towns mentioned on the Stone. Thus *Isa.* 15<sup>1, 2</sup> reads, "The burden of Moab. For in a night Ar of Moab is laid waste, and brought to nought. He is gone up to Bayith, and to Dibon, to the high places, to weep: Moab howleth over Nebo, and over Medeba; on all their heads is baldness (*gorḥah*), every beard is cut off."

Of these names Dibon, Nebo, and Medeba are mentioned on the Stone;<sup>1</sup> but Ar and Bayith are not. It is possible, however, that Bayith in *Isaiah* is a common noun, "house."

The adverse argument based on these facts apparently amounts to this. As the Old Testament never mentions a Moabite town QRḤH, no such town existed; and the writer of the Stone obtained his QRḤH from *Isaiah* by mistaking the common noun *gorḥah*, "baldness," for the name of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. p. 36.

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a town. He thus betrays his ignorance of the geography of Moab, and shows that he is not Mesha, but an impostor writing at a much later date.

All this is interesting and ingenious, but quite inconclusive. There is no reason why Isaiah, or the Old Testament as a whole, should mention all the towns which existed in Moab; and the phrase about baldness on all heads was a commonplace.<sup>1</sup> So Isaiah might very well omit the town QRḤH and refer to "baldness," *qorḥah*. The coincidence, such as it is, presents no difficulties; it could not even be called "a striking coincidence." To take a parallel, no one would see anything significant in a Scotch poem mentioning London, Canterbury, and Brighton, using the common noun "battle," and saying nothing about the town of Battle.

But it is probable that *qorḥah* in *Isaiah*

<sup>1</sup> Jer. 48<sup>37</sup> (cf. 47<sup>5</sup>), Ezek. 7<sup>18</sup> 27<sup>31</sup>; cf. Isa. 3<sup>24</sup> 22<sup>12</sup>, Amos 8<sup>10</sup>, Micah 1<sup>16</sup>.

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refers to the town. The Old Testament is fond of playing upon the real or supposed meaning of proper names and other words ; a writer in using a word will have in mind and intend to suggest to his reader its use as a name and its etymological meaning. For instance, in Jer. 1<sup>11</sup> Yahweh asks Jeremiah what he sees, and the prophet replies, " A rod of an almond-tree, *shāqēdh* " ; and Yahweh rejoins, " It is a true vision, for I am watching, *shōqēdh*, over my word." So here Isaiah may intend to suggest that as Moab had a city QRḤH, it was natural that *gorḥah*, baldness, should befall them. Indeed, as the oracles on Moab in Isa. 15. 16, Jer. 48 are editions of an ancient poem on Moab, it is possible that the original poem explicitly mentioned the town QRḤH ; but that later scribes and editors, to whom the town was unknown, omitted the reference.

But the genuineness of the Stone in no way depends on the possibility of finding

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absolutely clear, complete, and certain explanations of all that is on the monument or connected with it. It is the sole relic of the literature of an obscure tribe which disappeared from history more than two thousand years ago. It would be strange if it did not include obscurities and raise difficulties. Their presence is really a testimony to its genuineness.

The conclusive evidence in favour of this monument is found in the character in which it is written, the language used, and the contents. Its genuineness is a simple hypothesis that explains as much as we have any right to expect to have explained ; the view that it is a forgery is a theory which cannot be reconciled with the facts. No adequate motive can be assigned for a forgery ; it could only have been forged by an expert in palæography in order to make money ; but it was found in the possession of Arabs, and there is no trace of any connection between them and

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any possible forger. The character<sup>1</sup> in which it is written resembles that found in ancient Phœnician, Hebrew, and Aramaic inscriptions ; but it is not a slavish imitation of the writing of any one document ; and there are forms differing somewhat from any found elsewhere. The Stone was discovered in 1868, and it is incredible that a forger working before that date should have concocted the alphabet in which the inscription is written. Moreover, in 1880 the famous Siloam inscription was discovered, and just recently the Gezer Calendar. The Siloam inscription is usually assigned to the time of Ahaz or Hezekiah, *i.e.*, roughly speaking, to the same period as Mesha, and the Calendar is not later than 600 B.C. The alphabets of the Stone and of these inscriptions agree generally, but differ in some details ; the correspondence affords weighty testimony to the genuineness of both documents.

<sup>1</sup> P. 68.

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Further evidence is afforded by the language.<sup>1</sup> This is a dialect closely allied to Hebrew; it might be described as Hebrew slightly modified by Aramaic and Arabic forms. There is nothing whatever in the inscription which is inconsistent with its having been written by a member of a tribe neighbouring and akin to Israel in the time of the Israelite monarchy. But any one familiar with literary forgeries and other pseudepigraphal writings would know that it was in the highest degree improbable that the author of any such work would have been so successful in devising a dialect; he would have made it either more or less like Hebrew.

And as to contents. These are just such as Mesha and his subjects would be interested in, their sufferings and successes, their cities and public works. But why should a forger, with the whole range of Scripture History to choose from, take infinite pains

<sup>1</sup> P. 71.

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to construct an inscription dealing with the dry details of an obscure episode. An inscription from the hand of Moses describing the passage of the Red Sea, or a parchment written by Mary Magdalen giving an account of the Resurrection, might have been produced with less labour ; would have created a greater sensation ; and would have commanded a higher price.

Thus the Moabite Stone commends itself in that it bears all the marks of genuineness ; and at the same time no forger could have been sufficiently ingenious to construct such a monument from the information at his disposal.