

PREFACE

MODERN researches into the early history of man, conducted on different lines, have converged with almost irresistible force on the conclusion, that all civilized races have at some period or other emerged from a state of savagery resembling more or less closely the state in which many backward races have continued to the present time; and that, long after the majority of men in a community have ceased to think and act like savages, not a few traces of the old ruder modes of life and thought survive in the habits and institutions of the people. Such survivals are included under the head of folk-lore, which, in the broadest sense of the word, may be said to embrace the whole body of a people's traditionary beliefs and customs, so far as these appear to be due to the collective action of the multitude and cannot be traced to the individual influence of great men. Despite the high moral and religious development of the ancient Hebrews, there is no reason to suppose that they formed an exception to this general law. They, too, had probably passed through a stage of barbarism and even of savagery; and this probability, based on the analogy of other races, is confirmed by an examination of their literature, which contains many references to beliefs and practices that can hardly be explained except on the supposition that they are rudimentary survivals from a far lower level of culture. It is to the illustration and explanation of a few such relics of ruder times, as they are preserved like fossils in the Old Testament, that I have addressed myself in the present work. Elsewhere I have had occasion to notice other similar survivals of savagery in the Old Testament, such as the sacrifice of the first-born, the law of the uncleanness of women, and the custom of the scapegoat; but as I am unwilling to repeat what I have said on these topics, I content myself with referring readers, who may be interested in them, to my other writings.

The instrument for the detection of savagery under civilization is the comparative method, which, applied to the human mind,

enables us to trace man's intellectual and moral evolution, just as, applied to the human body, it enables us to trace his physical evolution from lower forms of animal life. There is, in short, a Comparative Anatomy of the mind as well as of the body, and it promises to be no less fruitful of far-reaching consequences, not merely speculative but practical, for the future of humanity. The application of the comparative method to the study of Hebrew antiquities is not novel. In the seventeenth century the method was successfully employed for this purpose in France by the learned French pastor Samuel Bochart, and in England by the learned divine John Spencer, Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, whose book on the ritual laws of the ancient Hebrews is said to have laid the foundations of the science of Comparative Religion. In our own age, after a lapse of two centuries, the work initiated by these eminent scholars and divines was resumed in Cambridge by my revered master and friend William Robertson Smith, and the progress which the study made during his lifetime and since his too early death is due in a large measure to the powerful impulse it received from his extraordinary genius and learning. It has been my ambition to tread in the footsteps of these my illustrious predecessors in this department of learning, and to carry on what I may be allowed to call the Cambridge tradition of Comparative Religion.

It is a familiar truth that the full solution of any one problem involves the solution of many more; nay, that nothing short of omniscience could suffice to answer all the questions implicitly raised by the seemingly simplest inquiry. Hence the investigation of a point of folk-lore, especially in the present inchoate condition of the study, naturally opens up lines of inquiry which branch out in many directions; and in following them we are insensibly drawn on into wider and wider fields of inquiry, until the point from which we started has almost disappeared in the distance, or, to speak more correctly, is seen in its proper perspective as only one in a multitude of similar phenomena. So it befell me when, many years ago, I undertook to investigate a point in the folk-lore of ancient Italy; so it has befallen me now, when I have set myself to discuss certain points in the folk-lore of the ancient Hebrews. The examination of a particular legend, custom, or law has in some cases gradually broadened out into a disquisition and almost into a treatise. But I hope that, apart from their immediate bearing on the traditions and usages of Israel, these disquisitions may be accepted as contri-

tions to the study of folk-lore in general. That study is still in its infancy, and our theories on the subjects with which it deals must probably for a long time to come be tentative and provisional, mere pigeon-holes in which temporarily to sort the multitude of facts, not iron moulds in which to cast them for ever. Under these circumstances a candid inquirer in the realm of folk-lore at the present time will state his inferences with a degree of diffidence and reserve corresponding to the difficulty and uncertainty of the matter in hand. This I have always endeavoured to do. If anywhere I have forgotten the caution which I recommend to others, and have expressed myself with an appearance of dogmatism which the evidence does not warrant, I would request the reader to correct all such particular statements by this general and sincere profession of scepticism.

Throughout the present inquiry I have sought to take account of the conclusions reached by the best modern critics with regard to the composition and dates of the various books of the Old Testament; for I believe that only in the light of these conclusions do many apparent discrepancies in the sacred volume admit of a logical and historical explanation. Quotations are generally made in the words of the Revised English Version, and as I have occasionally ventured to dissent from it and to prefer a different rendering or even, in a very few places, a different reading, I wish to say that, having read the whole of the Old Testament in Hebrew attentively, with the English Version constantly beside me, I am deeply impressed by the wonderful felicity with which Translators and Revisers alike have done their work, combining in an extraordinary degree fidelity to the letter with justice to the spirit of the original. In its union of scrupulous accuracy with dignity and beauty of language the English Revised Version of the Old Testament is, as a translation, doubtless unsurpassed and probably unequalled in literature.

The scope of my work has obliged me to dwell chiefly on the lower side of ancient Hebrew life revealed in the Old Testament, on the thaces of savagery and superstition which are to be found in its pages. But to do so is not to ignore, far less to disparage, that other side of the Hebrew genius which has manifested itself in a spiritual religion and a pure morality, and of which the Old Testament is the imperishable monument. On the contrary, the revelation of the baser elements which underlay the civilization of ancient Israel, as they underlie the civilization of modern Europe, serves

rather as a foil to enhance by contrast the glory of a people which, from such dark depths of ignorance and cruelty, could rise to such bright heights of wisdom and virtue, as sunbeams appear to shine with a greater effulgence of beauty when they break through the murky clouds of a winter evening than when they flood the earth from the serene splendour of a summer moon. The annals of savagery and superstition unhappily compose a large part of human literature; but in what other volume shall we find, side by side with that melancholy record, psalmists who poured forth their sweet and solemn strains of meditative piety in the solitude of the hills or in green pastures and beside still waters; prophets who lit up their beatific visions of a blissful future with the glow of an impassioned imagination; historians who bequeathed to distant ages the scenes of a remote past embalmed for ever in the amber of a pellucid style? These are the true glories of the Old Testament and of Israel; these, we trust and believe, will live to delight and inspire mankind, when the crudities recorded alike in sacred and profane literature shall have been purged away in a nobler humanity of the future.

J. G. FRAZER.

1 BRICK COURT TEMPLE,
LONDON, 26 May 1918.