

The Bible in Modern Scholarship, edited by J. Philip Hyatt (Abingdon Press: Nashville) 1965
Papers Read at the 100th Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, December 28-30, 1964

"Method in the Study of Early Hebrew History"
by Roland de Vaux, O.P.

p.20 Since the biblical narratives are documents of history which we possess and which must be explained, it is from them that we must start, and literary criticism is foremost and indispensable. The enormous work accomplished in this domain for a century cannot be neglected. Many points remain debatable, but the principal lines of the distinction of the sources and their relative age must be accepted. Because Y. Kaufmann refuses certain established conclusions of literary criticism, the picture which he presents of the conquest of Canaan cannot satisfy an historian.⁹ For a long time the mistake has been to consider that the documents detected by literary criticism supplied valid evidence only for the history of the period where they had been put down in writing. The classical expression of this judgment has been given by J. Wellhausen: from the accounts of Genesis, he says, "One cannot gather any historical knowledge about the Patriarchs, but only about the time when the narratives which concern them took shape in the people of Israel."¹⁰ Since then literary criticism has evolved. It is no longer exclusively concerned with the great "documents" in their final writing (whose dates moreover have been put back), but it considers also the pre-literary state of these documents and the oral "traditions" from which they have come.