

OBITUARY NOTICE

Theodor Nöldeke

On Christmas Day of last year Theodor Nöldeke, one of the greatest Orientalists that ever lived, who was elected an Honorary Member of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1890, ended a long career of ceaseless labour. Of the external events of his life little need here be said. He was born on 2nd March, 1836, at Harburg, which then belonged to the kingdom of Hanover. He studied at Göttingen, became Professor at Kiel in 1868, and in 1872 was appointed to a Professorship at Strassburg in Alsace, where he continued to reside till some months after the end of the Great War; from that time onwards he lived with some of his relatives at Karlsruhe. In his old age he suffered much from ill-health, but he retained his mental vigour till the very last.

To convey any adequate idea of the services which he rendered to linguistic and historical science is quite impossible, for his researches extended over an almost unlimited field and in every subject that he treated he proved himself a consummate master. From the first he took a special interest in the Old Testament. A collection of popular essays on Hebrew literature which appeared in 1868 was followed by an important contribution to Biblical criticism "Untersuchungen zur Kritik des alten Testaments" (1869). Here, as in all his later works, he combines great acuteness with a remarkable caution and sobriety of judgment. Thus in dealing with the critical analysis of the Pentateuch he warns his readers against the notion that it is *always* possible to distinguish the various sources with certainty. Much, he says, remains doubtful; moreover, we have no reason whatever to suppose that the text has come down to us unaltered and that we can ascertain the precise wording and spelling of the original authors (p. 5, foot-note). Similar warnings,

it is needless to say, have since been uttered by many other writers of the critical school. With regard to the modern theory which assigns the so-called Priestly Code to the post-exilic period—a theory usually associated with the name of Wellhausen—it is to be noted that Nöldeke for many years regarded it with suspicion and only after long hesitation accepted it as substantially correct (see the *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, vol. xxi [1908], p. 203, foot-note).

The greater part of his life was devoted to Arabic and Aramaic literature, and in both of these departments he produced an immense amount of valuable work. It was one of his favourite maxims that the scientific study of languages must always be combined with the study of history, of religion, and of general culture. Hence in his writings even the most strictly technical details of philology acquire a human interest. It may be doubted whether any European scholar was ever better acquainted with ancient Arabic poetry than he was, and he treated it not merely as a repertory of rare words and peculiar grammatical forms but also as vividly illustrating the history and customs of the time. Of his numerous contributions to the study of Islām it is superfluous to speak, as they are probably the best known of all his writings, but it is interesting to record that having in his younger days planned a work on the early Muhammadan Empire he at length abandoned the project chiefly from a sense of his inability to give a satisfactory account of the Prophet's character (see the *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, vol. xxi, p. 298, foot-note).

Among the greatest of his achievements must be reckoned the discovery of the true relation of the various Aramaic dialects to one another. Eighty years ago the most confused notions on this subject prevailed even among genuine scholars, as is shown by the fact that the Aramaic of the Old Testament was still believed to be a language which the Jews imported from Babylonia; hence the misleading term "Chaldee". It was one of Nöldeke's merits finally to dispel this and many

similar delusions. His Aramaic studies included even the most obscure sources of information, not only the inscriptions of heathen Syria but also the literature of the Mandæans which, as he himself says in the Introduction to his "Mandäische Grammatik" (1875), is "full of the greatest nonsense". Nevertheless, he adds, this literature and the dialect in which it is written are of vast importance from a scientific point of view. Accordingly he spent years in the elucidation of these strange compositions, little suspecting that half a century later the Mandæans and their religion would suddenly become objects of interest to European theologians and that serious attempts would be made to connect the Fourth Gospel with the "nonsense" of the *Sidrā Rabbā*.

He was likewise a diligent student of Æthiopic and the modern languages of Abyssinia. In his *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (1910) will be found a most instructive dissertation on the words which passed from Æthiopic into Arabic and *vice versa*; among these expressions are some which play an important part in Muhammadan theology, and as their real origin was naturally unknown to the Arabs they were often wrongly interpreted by Muslims.

His profound knowledge of Persian literature, from the earliest times to the present day, is proved by many of his works, in particular by his *Persische Studien* (1888-92) and his masterly treatise on the *Shahnāmah* of Firdausi, *Das iranische Nationalepos* (2nd edn., 1920). It is characteristic of his mind, in which the critical faculty always predominated, that in the preface to his *Aufsätze zur persischen Geschichte* (1887) he expresses himself thus:—
 "Vielleicht befremdet Manchen, dass ich im Ganzen die Orientalen und namentlich die Perser nicht allzu günstig beurtheile. Mich haben eben meine orientalischen Studien immer mehr zum Griechenfreunde gemacht, und ich denke, so wird es ziemlich Jedem gehn, der mit Ernst aber mit

unbefangenen Sinn das Wesen der orientalischen Völker kennen zu lernen sucht."

This notice would be singularly defective if stress were not laid on the extraordinary amiability of his nature. No scholar was ever more ready to assist others, and the promptitude with which he responded to requests for information on all manner of subjects was a constant wonder to his numerous friends.

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