

Theology on *the Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes.
Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit
or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the
copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the
ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the
links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbadshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found
here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

Old Testament Problems.¹

PROF. FRANCIS BROWN.

NEW YORK.

IN any science, the things that absorb the thought of those actually working at that science are often very different from the topics that represent that science in the public mind. It is as true in Biblical science as in any other. When one is in the midst of scientific exploration, and has an inside view, it sometimes occurs that questions of large scope and practical application drop out of his sight, not because they are unimportant, but because he has substantially settled them; he is occupied with specific results of the principles which he accepts, and over whose validity the wider world may be still debating. The principles are important; their practical bearing is of moment. But students, among themselves, met for scientific conference, may often do well to assume the principles, and generally do well to leave the practical bearings to take care of themselves, as when the truth is reached they will be sure to do.

I speak, of course, as an Old Testament man, and the propositions assumed in what I have to say are common to me with many of you. All of us are ready to accept, at any moment, what seems to be proven by rational evidence. We do not all agree as to the weight of evidence for current views, but I am sure it will not be regarded as a courtesy if I assume substantial agreement in the principles and the primary facts of Biblical study in order that I may go on, without waste of time, to particular questions.

It has seemed to me that it may help to keep our own minds clear, and give direction to our own work, if we remind ourselves of some of the Old Testament problems now facing the Old Testament student.

That there *are* problems is only an evidence of the life, mental and spiritual, that has gone to the making of the Old Testament. They arise chiefly from the attempt to trace living movements to their

¹ The President's Annual Address, delivered at the meeting of the Society in New Haven, June 4, 1896.

source. In proportion to the strength and vitality and freedom of those movements are the intricacies of the problems. A real historical product is never a simple product. It may have simple elements, it may make a direct impression, but even these cannot be understood and felt in all their verity, unless we understand something of the combination, and trace in some degree the play of forces behind.

Problems give the Old Testament its mental fascination. I could never believe that Lessing was quite sincere in his preference of search for truth over truth itself. It is the demand for truth that puts life into search for truth. A mere gymnastic search for truth would be neither dignified nor commanding. But that our longing for truth can be satisfied, if at all, only through the search, gives special attractiveness to the field where all is not yet known,—invests the problems of a science with magnetic power.

I. The first set of problems which naturally occur to us relate to the O.T. text itself. Speaking strictly, we cannot have sound exegesis while the text interpreted is unsound. Every careful exegete must be a textual critic. The difficulties of the text-criticism of the O.T. are well known. There is as yet no attempt to cope with them on a scale proportioned to their difficulty. We are still far from having, or from seeing on the near horizon, adequate critical editions, with complete apparatus, of the Septuagint, the Peshiṭtā, and the Vulgate. We all hope for much from the Cambridge Septuagint, *ed. major*. But the preliminary studies of the critical apparatus are still very imperfect. There is need of men who are willing and able to toil patiently, out of sight, to sink themselves in their work, and let their names be forgotten, like the old cathedral builders. I do not, of course, say that we can do nothing with the Hebrew text, until this auxiliary work is complete; but certainly the auxiliary work must be thorough and final before the Hebrew text revision can be thorough and final.

I may be allowed here to refer to that "critical edition of the Hebrew text" in the *Sacred Books of the Old Testament*, edited by Professor Haupt, to which many of us are contributors. It is already proving a very useful work, and will serve for years to come to familiarize the student with the fact of large uncertainty in the O.T. text, and with some of the best suggestions which have been made, up to the present time, for the relief of obvious difficulties, and for the awarding to the text of the Versions, at points where it seems relatively sound, a proper voice in determining, with some approxi-

mation, the form of that Hebrew text which antedated them. But the plan of such a work permits it to be little more than a register of results attained, and the variety of its workmanship, the lack of common canons of judgment, the absence of the foundation-laying which the completed preliminary studies will, let us hope, sometime supply, and the very limited space that can be given to critical apparatus or textual argument, all make its character, in this regard, of necessity provisional.

Meantime there is a large field still for special works, monographs, in this department. I confess to some surprise that Cornill's *Ezekiel* (Leipzig, 1886) has remained ten years without a successor from some hand. With all that may be said in criticism, with all that may be granted to differing judgments in matters of detail, the courage with which that book laid hold of the difficulties of the task, the breadth of its plan, its recognition of the Hebrew text as only one recension of the original, its honest endeavor to give each available recension its full weight, and the large degree of success it attained, all combined to make it a noteworthy and honorable landmark in the domain of textual studies. Certainly no book has done more to awaken the new generation of students to the difficulties and the duties of the situation.

What may be done within the limits of a Commentary has become clear through Professor Moore's recent work on Judges, in which thorough examination of the facts and mastery of their details, delicate perception and discrimination in using the facts, and sober, cautious judgment are as manifest in the critical remarks on the text as they are in the exegetical matter.

Before leaving this topic, I cannot help alluding to the extreme tenuousness of the line which, in a certain region, divides textual from literary criticism. In a collection where compiler and editor have played so large a part as seems to be the case in our O.T., it is not always possible to decide whether a particular case of criticism should be classed as transmissional or redactional, — whether we have to do, in certain cases, with copyists' weaknesses, or with the purposes of a literary workman. We cannot fix the point at which the thing to be handed down became complete, and the handing-down process began, in any such way as to distinguish sharply between the lower and the higher criticism. This is particularly the case where earlier documents have been combined, where prophetic words have been passed from mouth to mouth and hand to hand, and where modifications, interpolations, or omissions of considerable extent are noted.

This shading off of literary criticism into textual is not without its practical importance. It is certain that we shall not understand the full importance of textual criticism, until we distinctly perceive how it reaches up into the literary questions, and at times even merges itself in them, and brings therefore into play, of necessity, a much larger element of internal evidence than would otherwise be legitimate. It is of small consequence, except for the sake of being clearly understood, and wasting no time on false issues, what the process is called; but the remarks made form a suitable transition to the next branch of the subject, by bringing us directly to the question, What then is it of which textual criticism proposes to seek the original form? When, if all conditions were favorable, could the O.T. text be said to be established? At what period in the history of the O.T., or of its several books, shall we then find ourselves? The mere asking of these questions may perhaps suggest food for thought.

II. The next set of problems with which the O.T. student just now has to deal are literary problems. Over these theological warfare has raged in late years, and is, in some quarters, raging still. This does not, however, particularly concern us at present. On the inside, O.T. men are not much debating the questions that inflame theological zeal. It has more than once happened that science has learned to regard as a necessary postulate, what defenders of the faith are just beginning to take alarm at, as a suggestion of the Evil One.

(1) I desire to refer to only one phase of this conflict,—the recalcitrance of religious zeal against the conclusions of O.T. science,—that which is marked by the so-called appeal to Archæology, an appeal whose clamor is increased by the voice of some archæologists who might be better employed.

For my part I am willing to allow the name "Archæology," which figures so largely in the debate, to retain the loose application which has been given to it; namely, to all the knowledge of ancient history and life that is gained by excavation, or other discovery of contemporary monuments. I am willing to allow this, for convenience' sake. But we must never forget that this convenient nomenclature does not change the real character of the evidence to which it is applied. It makes no essential difference whether the historical testimony is handed down in a book, or dug up out of the soil, provided it be trustworthy historical testimony. So far as the testimony of the monuments is early, even contemporary, so far it is of especial con-

sequence, but its antiquity is often matched by increased difficulty in its interpretation. The sum of the matter is that it is still historical testimony, to be used with discrimination, critically sifted, and adjusted to other evidence, just as much as any historical testimony must be. It is often supposed by the unlearned that the witness of archæology is simple, pronounced, unmistakable ; and the misapprehension is fostered—I do not say with intention—by some who know quite well its fallacy. This witness is, on the contrary, usually involved, indirect, ambiguous, or vague, and the employment of it requires the utmost care, patience, insight, and cool judgment, just as would be the case with any other mass of evidence, from a new and independent source, suddenly volunteered. It is in a high degree trustworthy, but often in a high degree unintelligible, or of doubtful meaning.

But one of the crudest of mistakes in using Archæology as a conservative ally is made when it is employed to win a battle in literary criticism. It is not equipped for that kind of fighting. It has its proper place in the determination of *historical* facts, but a very subordinate place, or none at all, in the determination of *literary* facts. To attempt to prove by Archæology that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, is simply grotesque. The question is not whether Moses could write, it is whether he did write certain books which there is strong internal and historical ground for holding he did not write ; and on this point Archæology has nothing to say, nor is it likely that she will have anything to say. We only discredit a most useful, often surprisingly useful, handmaid of truth, when we set her at a task for which she is in no way prepared.

(2) Coming to other questions, raised in a more scientific spirit : the inquiry as to traces of the documents of the Hexateuch in Judges, Samuel, and Kings. It is J and E, of course, that come into the account. The influence of the Deuteronomic school is abundantly evident in the early redaction, and that of P in subsequent redactions. The concurrent testimony of those who have made investigations on this topic seems to point to a continuity, of some degree, between J and E of the Hexateuch, and certain sources of the books which follow it in our Canon. What modifications these sources have undergone, and by what process, and exactly where it is that they cease to flow, are matters not yet fully determined. But even in the present situation of somewhat tentative opinion on this point, we can see how large the interest is which attaches to the inquiry. If there were two works, tracing history from the earliest ages, which

later hands combined with each other and with still other material to produce what we now have as the history of pre-exilic times, and if these underlying works themselves date from periods well down in the time of the monarchy, and each originally brought the narrative to a point nearly or quite contemporaneous with the life of its author, then the origin of these sources becomes more and more intelligible, the later portions of their narrative grow more and more trustworthy, and the value of Judges, Samuel, and Kings, rightly used as genuine documents of history, is more and more assured.

(3) With reference to questions of date, there is manifest an increased recognition of the force of arguments diminishing the amount of pre-exilic Hebrew literature that has come down to us, and increasing proportionately the exilic and the post-exilic, particularly the latter. Several discussions of grammatical and lexical detail have been made which yield important results, and in some cases surprising ones. I instance only Wilhelm Diehl's little treatise, on *Das Pronomen personale suffixum 2 und 3 pers. plur. des Hebräischen* (Giessen, 1895). Studies like this suggest the possibility of a rich harvest from similar well-known but neglected fields. Observation of details, and a growing historical and literary sense, combine to produce the evident result, that national disaster gave the greatest impulse to the crystallization of literature, and that most of our O.T. in its present form, as well as a much larger original part of it than was supposed even by free critics a few years ago, is of date subsequent to the fall of Jerusalem. Of Hexateuchal material, I refer only to the descent of Ex. xv. and Deut. xxxii.; in the prophetic literature, to that of Joel, parts of Micah and of 1 Isaiah, and of Deutero-Zechariah,—although this question is complicated; in the poetic literature, to discussions of Job and the Proverbs.

It is possible that there may be something of a reaction from this present movement of critical opinion. The evidence may in certain cases have not been correctly understood. We are all liable to error. But it is extremely improbable that any reaction will occur which will not leave the great mass of the historical and poetical, and a very large share of the prophetical literature found in the O.T., at a date after 586 for its first composition, or for the redactional treatment which has brought it to its present form. General considerations support and confirm the views primarily based on specific investigation. The pre-exilic time was a time of action more than of reflection. What reflection there was, was of a relatively simple kind. The pre-exilic prophets, of course, were men of thought, and they have left

unquestioned records of their thinking. But apart from this small group, and a few other exceptional men, among whom the historical tradition includes Solomon, the literary products of the pre-exilic time, certainly until very near the close of the monarchy,—those products, I mean, that are definitely fixed as to date, show a comparative simplicity of thought. There is sometimes, as in Judges v., a high degree of creative power; but the thought is largely objective, and the range of it easily defined. If this—with many exceptions and modifications—is a general characteristic of the pre-exilic time, it is not strange that we should find positive indications of a more varied and absorbing literary activity in periods when the nation was thrown in upon itself, or came under the external influence of a more subjective type of thinking.

It does not seem to me likely, therefore, that the general tendency to set the Hebrew literary products later than they used to be set, while it may be checked here and there, will be reversed.—I am aware that uninspired prediction is a most dangerous thing!

(4) Attention has been called already to the amount of editorial work evident in many parts of the Old Testament. That it exists becomes apparent in proportion to one's broad and candid study. The precise limits of it are less easily determined, and the recognition of it in particular cases may be beset with difficulties, or at least difficult to impart to others. I find the conviction growing that very little, if any, of our Old Testament has not passed through the hands of editors, annotators, correctors, and expanders, and that in many cases the process has been often repeated. Probably we shall never know the full and precise truth in this regard. But one of our problems is to determine this editorial element as well as we can, and it is an element the existence of which we cannot wisely lose sight of in any difficult passage.

(5) The analysis of the Book of Isaiah, both in its earlier and in its later part, has with reason attracted much attention of late. The work of Duhm and Hackmann and especially Cheyne is marked by great acuteness and an observation of minute differences. In the degree to which this analysis has been carried, and notably in its application to Is. xl.-lxvi., there is need of active attention on the part of a greater number of scholars than those who have as yet published on the matter. Of necessity, in delicate investigations of the kind, there is exposure to undue subjective influence. The greater the number of inquirers, the more sure is the personal equation to be eliminated from the result. We know that Is. i.-xxxix., although

largely Isaian, is made up of pieces of different date and authorship, combined on principles which we can only in part understand. We are coming to the position that Is. xl.-lxvi. is of similar structure from later generations. To verify this position, and to determine more closely the number and the limits of the various portions, as well as the period when they were written, are tasks that still remain.

(6) Another field in which the questions are by no means all answered is that of the Psalms. Some time ago the possibility of vindicating Davidic authorship for any large number of the poems in our Psalter vanished away. Whether there are any such is an inquiry now freely made and usually answered in the negative. That there are any such can at least not be clearly proven. But the moment we abandon tradition, as untrustworthy, that moment we perceive how slender, in the great number of instances, are the proofs of *any* particular date for the particular Psalms. Often the utmost we can do is to name a school, or a set of influences, under which a given Psalm seems to have been produced, as, for example, in case of the Psalms and Psalm-fragments in praise of the Law. This specific indication supplies us, presumably, with a *terminus a quo*, but leaves us with a very vague *terminus ad quem*. Sometimes what has been thought a clear evidence of date proves to be sadly ambiguous, as when in interpreting the reference to a king we are offered the whole range between Solomon and Ptolemy Philadelphus, and even Simon the Maccabee. In fact the chronological disposition of the Psalms is one of the most perplexing of all the problems before us. The evidences for any date are often so slight, the points of historical attachment so few and so doubtful, the probabilities so conflicting, or so evenly balanced, that confident assertion seems as yet out of place. And when we consider what the collecting process must have been, and what a history each of the partial collections must have had before they were combined into the Psalter which has come down to us, and how, like all such hymns, they have been subject to the dressing, and alteration, and harmonizing of many hands, we are almost in despair of any solid conclusions as to their original occasion and date. When we have more fully tested the evidence from language, and have added to it the evidence from theological and ethical ideas, we may gradually reach firmer ground. We all await eagerly Prof. Briggs' treatment of the Psalms, in which the theological and ethical element may be expected to play its due part.

Meantime the general trend of large masses of the O.T. literature

toward a relatively late date is nowhere more perceptible than in the Psalms. Baethgen is still somewhat conservative, but Baethgen puts three-fourths of the Psalms not earlier than the beginning of the 6th century. What Cheyne does we all know. I am constrained to believe that this general trend is right, and that when we get all the evidence fairly before us we shall find that the pre-exilic Psalms are in a very small minority, and that most of these few are probably no longer in their original form.

(7) Radical views are propounded and vigorously sustained with regard to another kind of post-exilic literature, — I mean that which has passed through the hands of the Chronicler. You will remember our regret that at our winter meeting Dr. Torrey was not able to present in full his important paper on Ezra and Nehemiah, in which he sought to show that the memoirs of Nehemiah are the only original historical source underlying these books, that we have no memoirs of Ezra, and that all else is Chronicler. One cannot venture to discuss so careful a paper on such imperfect knowledge of its contents. It is to be hoped that it will soon be accessible to scholars. The inquiry is certainly one of immense interest, and the result to which it has led Dr. Torrey emphasizes, with emphasis new and exceeding, the necessity of submitting to the most minute and searching scrutiny every particle of the old Hebrew collection which has reached us. If the genuine results are novel, they will enrich us ; if we abide by former opinions, these will be stronger and more intelligent. I hazard nothing in saying that the study of the years 500 to 100 B.C., which has hitherto been very fragmentary, will, when thoroughly accomplished, yield returns both abundant and surprising to the O.T. scholar. This I shall have occasion to notice once more in a few moments.

III. The *historical* problems of the Old Testament are by no means all solved yet. Let me recall to you one or two :

(1) The 14th chapter of Genesis is still a battleground of the critics. By training and temper my own attitude to the question of its historical character has been conservative. I do not yet see any sufficient reason for abandoning its essential historicity. But the recent arguments adduced to support this view are not all such as to strengthen one's conviction.² The most serious difficulty does not lie

² With regard to the proper mode of using what we are allowing ourselves to call archaeological evidence, with reference to this chapter, I wish to refer particularly to two recent articles by Canon Driver in *The Guardian*, March 11 and April 8, 1896.

where the archæological champions of orthodoxy seem to suppose. The Babylonian elements in the narrative are not, it appears to me, such as any Israelite, in any period, would be likely to invent. In the absence of conclusive proof to the contrary, I am prepared to find them substantially true. The uncertainty attaches to the Abrahamic episode, which for the Hebrew writer is plainly the kernel of the whole matter ; and on this part of the story no new light has been thrown.

(2) The lessons of the Tel-el-Amarna tablets have not been yet sufficiently acquired and assimilated. We have no fresh intelligence as to the relation between the Palestinian tribes which these tablets inform us of, and the Hebrew settlement in Egypt. Even the "earliest Egyptian mention of Israel,"⁸ which we just hear proclaimed, does not clear up very much. It seems to show that the tribal name "Israel" was alive in Palestine at a time when the Hebrew settlement in Egypt existed, but we are not at present certain how much, or how little, this may mean.

The antiquity of Jerusalem, both city and name, is one of the interesting definite results of recent discovery. But all these results of the spade, mostly extra-Palestinian, only make one more eager to see the spade more thoroughly employed on Palestinian soil itself, and ensure one's sympathy for every wise effort to make more complete excavation possible.

(3) I allude to only one more historical problem,—that of the return from the exile. Ever since Kosters published his pamphlet on this subject, two years ago, the question has been examined and re-examined by all those whose studies led them into this portion of the O.T. field, with, I think, an increasing recognition of the force of argument by which Kosters supports his main thesis. Certainly the attempts to refute that thesis have been unconvincing. It has been perceived that if the most familiar statements about the return in Cyrus' time cannot be traced farther back than the Chronicler, and if there is little or nothing in the contemporary prophets to prove such a return, while their silence is opposed to it, the position that no such return took place is one that cannot be disregarded,—one that has very much in its favor. At the very least, the theory calls attention to the too much neglected fact that the exile did not depopulate Judea, and that the hands that built the temple and the wall must have been very largely hands that had never handled brick

⁸ W. Flinders Petrie, *Academy*, April 11, 1896; *Contemporary Review*, May, 1896. [Add. *Century*, August, 1896.]

made of Euphrates clay. I do not myself feel that the rise of the belief in a return under Cyrus has been yet satisfactorily explained, on Kosters' theory, nor that the presumption, arising from the attitude of Cyrus to subject-peoples and their worship, known from contemporary records, has received full justice ; but I am not prepared to say that the view which Kosters proposes, on this main point, however revolutionary it may appear, will not prove to contain a large element of truth. This, certainly, is one of the problems at which we still have to work.

IV. Under the general head of Interpretation, and particularly in the department of Biblical Theology, including religious practices as well as religious opinions, there is much that might be said. There are problems here on every side. I do not now feel able to consider or even present them to your notice, in any considerable number. A reference to two must suffice, for illustration.

(1) Our knowledge of the relation between the Hebrew religion and the religion of the other Semitic peoples is still in its infancy. Robertson Smith's Burnett Lectures promised to do much for us here, but Robertson Smith delivered only two courses ; only one was published, or can be published ; he left Babylonia and Assyria out of the account,—and he is dead. Wellhausen and Robertson Smith have done much for the elucidation of early Arabian religion ; but even the materials for a like service in the Assyrian field are still to a large degree unedited, although Zimmern and Craig have both taken the matter in hand. In the matter of early Hebrew religion we must therefore be content to wait, or at least go very slowly.

(2) Another branch of this subject is the one to whose study Cheyne has given such an impulse,—the relation between Zoroastrianism and the later Hebrew theology. I can only allude to it. I am not competent to treat it in full.

Apart from these, there is an abundant harvest for the diligent laborer in the whole field of Biblical Theology and Ethics, and here, too, we have constant proofs of the often repeated experience, that the vision of him who is willing to use both his eyes, and understands what it is he sees, is a far different thing from the opinion derived from the imperfect and casual glance of even the most venerable among the Fathers.

It is probable that this very partial and hasty catalogue of O.T. problems has been to most of you dry and tedious, and I am sorry for it. I should have been glad to inspire the Old Testament men

among us with a more enthusiastic interest in our chosen studies and a greater courage for grappling with their difficulties, and to increase intelligent sympathy for us in our work on the part of the men whose studies lie in other fields. Certainly Old Testament work never looked to me more inviting,—its toil never more rewarding. I hope that the members of this society may do their full share in changing into exclamation-marks of surprise and joy at real discovery those countless interrogation-points that thrust themselves up from the pages of our Hebrew Bibles, and I am sure that each genuine discovery, each patient contribution to the sum of real Old Testament scholarship, will ensure fructifying truth, and increase the Book's uplifting power,—to the glory of God our Father.