

THIRTY YEARS OF BIBLICAL STUDY

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The founding of the *Hebrew Student* in 1882 was one of several signs of a renewed interest in biblical scholarship in this country. William R. Harper showed both the discernment and the courage of a leader in that he early felt this interest, and in that he became one of the first to interpret it to itself. Of course we must not assume that there was no biblical scholarship in this country prior to 1880. In theory the American churches have always given a large place to Scripture study. They were obliged to do this because the Protestant creeds recognize the Bible in the original tongues as final arbiter in matters of faith and morals. A knowledge of Hebrew and Greek was required in many denominations before a candidate could be admitted to the ministry. There is reason to suppose however that the ambition of most theological students was satisfied when they had enough of these two languages to pass the not very difficult examination imposed by the ordaining body, and there is some evidence to show that a very large percentage of men in the pastorate speedily forgot even this limited amount. There were good Hebrew scholars in the chairs of the seminaries, but even they subordinated their teaching to that of the professor of dogmatic theology. The latter based his system on a rigid theory of inspiration, and the exegesis taught by his colleague was careful not to contradict that theory. The commentaries and Bible dictionaries most in favor were distinguished for orthodoxy rather than for originality.

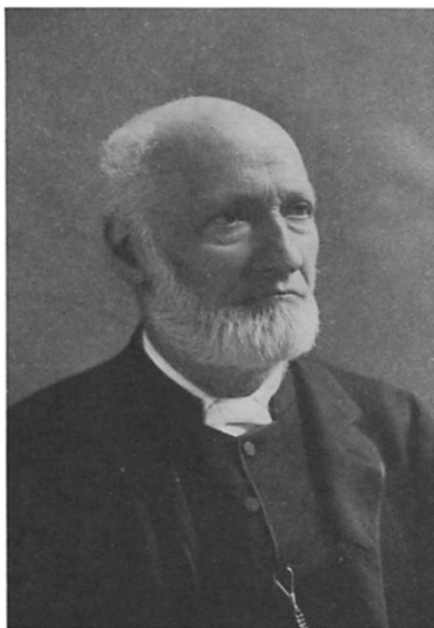
It was of course known that the Germans were distinguished for scholarly research in this as in other departments. Lyman Beecher is said to have remarked to his class:

Scholars of every denomination came to the Bible to find their own doctrines taught there, and each finds what he seeks. It is only when the Germans come to it without caring what it teaches, treating it like Homer or any other ancient book, that we begin to find out what it really means.

Whether Dr. Beecher knew the seventeenth-century epigram, he had caught the sense of the author who inscribed in a Bible:

Hic liber est in quo sua quaerit dogmata quisque,
Invenit et pariter dogmata quisque sua.

In fact Moses Stuart, the most distinguished Hebrew scholar in this country in the first half of the last century, received his impulse to more thorough scholarship from some German books which fell in his way. Edward Robinson studied in Germany, and after



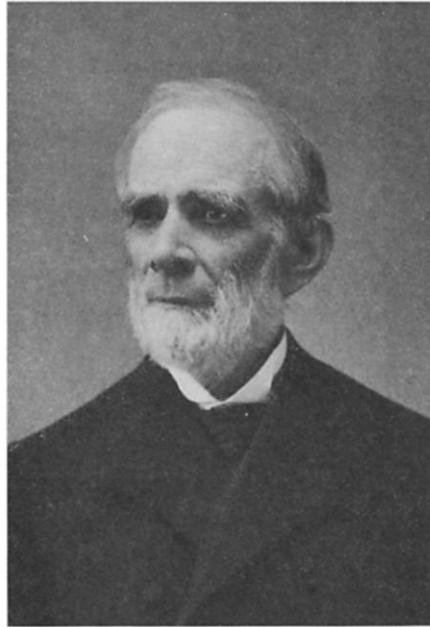
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his time many American students followed his example. But with the recognition of German scholarship went a horror of German rationalism which prevented the full appropriation of biblical science. Those students of theology who went to German universities usually chose evangelical teachers like Tholuck, whose interest in biblical criticism was subordinate. The considerable group of Americans who were in Leipzig in the seventies were attracted to Franz Delitzsch quite as much by his reputation for orthodoxy as by his undoubted scholarship.

Up to about the time when the *Hebrew Student* was founded, then, the interest in biblical study in this country was dogmatic rather than historical. As further evidence we may notice the character of the German works made accessible to English readers. In 1882 T. & T. Clark were publishing their foreign theological library, which was designed to make the best works of German authors accessible in English. In the department of exegesis they selected the conservative commentaries of Keil and Delitzsch.

And when Philip Schaff chose a German commentary to edit for the American public he found the conservative though somewhat erratic Lange best suited to his purpose. With Keil and Delitzsch in his hands, or with the successive volumes of Lange, the American dogmatician could go to sleep comfortably with the conviction that the rationalists had been triumphantly refuted, and that the theology handed down by the fathers was in possession of the field. This was the situation when in 1876 Robertson Smith boldly embodied the "long-refuted" critical views in some articles in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The attacks on him became so bitter that in 1876 he demanded a trial, and although not convicted of heresy, he was in 1881 removed from his chair.

This, it will be observed, was just before the foundation of the *Hebrew Student*. Attention had been called to biblical questions by the prosecution of Robertson Smith and by the publication of his lectures on *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*. Readers of this book saw at once that here



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was something more than a case of common rationalism. Robertson Smith was no infidel seeking to overthrow the faith of the Christian church. He was evidently sincere in claiming that he was within his rights in remaining in the Presbyterian church, and he was a man whom the General Assembly could not refute on this point, although it was willing to pronounce him an unsafe teacher.

We are not now concerned with Robertson Smith's views, except so far as they affected the attitude of men toward biblical

study. They did affect this attitude profoundly, for the first thought of the reader of his books was that the average minister was incompetent to pronounce on the questions now brought to the front. If the new criticism is wrong it must be shown to be wrong by men in full possession of all the facts. The standard commentaries of Thomas Scott and Mathew Henry were silent on the points now at issue. And the minimum of Hebrew possessed by the seminary graduate was almost ludicrously inadequate for one who would investigate the problems of the higher criticism.

It was this fact I suppose that most distinctly impressed Harper in his work. With the enthusiasm of his whole nature he had thrown himself into the study of Hebrew. He saw, perhaps more clearly than anyone at that time, that the current teaching was inadequate. It was not in his case any more than in that of his contemporaries an interest in new and revolutionary views that led him into the path of progress. What he saw was that if the church was to retain its influence among thinking men it must give its ministers a more thorough training in the language and literature of the Old Testament. Not only must the students in the schools have a better method; the ministers already at work must be enabled to enlarge their knowledge. This was the motive which led to the enormous activity of this born teacher; led to summer schools and correspondence schools; led to the founding of periodicals in which the problems of the Old Testament should be freely discussed.

At the time of which we now speak Chicago was a long way from New York, and the well-known provincialism of the eastern city probably prevented scholars there from recognizing the importance of Harper's work. Nor is it possible to discover how far Harper was conscious of taking part in a general movement. He was an independent thinker, and he went his way as that way opened before him. Yet as I have intimated he was one of the leaders in a widespread movement toward a better understanding of the Bible. It was in 1881 that the Revised Version of the New Testament appeared, followed by that of the Old Testament in 1885. The misapprehension of the average minister with reference to

the whole matter of biblical criticism was illustrated in connection with the publication of the Revised Version of the New Testament. On the floor of the Presbyterian General Assembly the revisers were denounced for "putting the stamp of doubt on some of the most precious passages of the Word of God." What sort of historical sense has a man (and a professed biblical scholar at that) when he can utter such a charge?

As evidence of this widespread renewal of interest in biblical study we may notice also the founding of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, whose first meeting was held in 1880. Although from the nature of the case the early members of this society were what would now be classed as conservatives, there is no reason to doubt that they were moved by the same considerations as those which were so powerful in Harper's mind—a sincere desire to promote thorough knowledge, and to foster free inquiry and discussion with reference to the whole field of biblical study. Among the influences at work in this period must be mentioned also the new science of Assyriology. In the same year in which the Society of Biblical Literature was founded Francis Brown began to offer courses in Assyrian at Union Seminary.

Rightly to appreciate the progress made in the last thirty years we should have to review the series of essays which have appeared in the *Hebrew Student*, the *Old Testament Student*, the *Biblical World*, *Hebraica*, and the *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*. To these add the *Journal of Biblical Literature* and the many articles which have appeared in the various theological reviews. To do this in the space at my command is obviously impossible. Let me briefly give what I think to be the marks of progress. First among them I should say the present apprehension is historic rather than dogmatic. This is true in matters of criticism both textual and literary. Textual criticism of the Old Testament was almost entirely ignored in this country thirty years ago. Scholars assumed the accuracy of the Massoretic text. Even the Revised Version suffered because the revisers esteemed this text too highly. But in all recent publications we find the criticism of the text treated as an essential part of exegesis. The illustrations may be found in any of the recent commentaries,

in Haupt's *Polychrome Bible*, and in many articles and discussions in the reviews.

The conception of biblical theology as a distinct branch of science, independent of dogmatic theology, is now firmly established in this country, whereas thirty years ago this was a new and strange idea. The settlement of this point is due to Professor Briggs more than to any one man. He had published as early as 1870 an article on the subject, which, however, attracted little attention because it was too far ahead of the times. In 1880, however, this scholar opened up the whole subject of biblical science in the *Presbyterian Review* of which he was joint editor with Dr. Patton. The series began with an article on "Inspiration" by Professors Hodge and Warfield. This article defended the most rigid theory of verbal inspiration but with an important modification in the interest of textual criticism. The inspiration of the original autographs, afterward so strenuously defended, was their formula. This was followed by an article from Dr. Briggs's pen on "Critical Theories of the Sacred Scriptures" in relation to their inspiration, and the next year by one on "Biblical Theology." These articles, it need hardly be said, defended the right and inculcated the duty of criticism, adducing precedents from the Puritan divines of the seventeenth century as well as from the Protestant reformers, and showing how their logic culminated in establishing biblical theology as a purely historical science.

The so-called higher criticism was defended in the same series of articles in the *Presbyterian Review*. Professor Briggs was supported by myself in a paper in which I may claim to have given the American public the first adequate statement of the then novel theories of Wellhausen. Samuel Ives Curtiss contributed an article on Franz Delitzsch which surprised the readers in that it showed the concessions which this eminently conservative scholar was compelled to make to the critics. This series of studies was useful to many seriously minded readers by showing the true state of the Old Testament investigation. That it produced alarm and dissatisfaction in many minds is only what might have been expected.

Meanwhile Harper was pursuing his way, teaching and writing

with little direct reference to what the rest of us were doing. The majority of articles which appeared in the *Hebrew Student* and the *Old Testament Student* would now be classed as extremely conservative. Harper himself makes the impression of a man feeling his way—an inquirer rather than a dogmatist. He would in no case commit himself hastily. This is the impression made also by his discussion with Professor Green. Nevertheless the discussion did good, because it showed that there are two sides to the question. The conservatives congratulated themselves that their side made the better showing. But they might reflect that the other side had its heroes also. In fact one of the achievements of our science in the thirty years has been this: we have learned to decide historical questions by historical arguments, and not to suppose we have settled everything when we have labeled a man a heretic.

Someone may reply that after all is said the official voice of the church has pronounced against all modernist views of the Bible. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian church suspended Dr. Briggs from the ministry because he taught that Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch, and that Isaiah did not write the second half of the book that bears his name. The Papal Biblical Commission has corroborated the judgment of the General Assembly on these two points, and scarcely a year passes without a deliverance from some Christian body of divines stoutly affirming the adherence of their church to the traditional views of Scripture. But while this is true,



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and as sad as it is true, the fact remains that the literature on biblical science published since the foundation of the *Hebrew Student* is a better guide to the present state of that science than is the declaration of any official body, however august. I have already said something about this literature as embodied in the periodicals established by Dr. Harper. To these we should have to add the *Polychrome Bible* which is as significant for the higher criticism as for the text. Kent's *Student's Old Testament* and his other books deserve mention. The whole series of theological treatises known as the "International Theological Library" and the "International Critical Commentary" belong here. The list might be enlarged. But what has been cited is enough to show the nature of our progress in the last thirty years. Within this period American biblical scholarship has become more scholarly, more independent, and more tolerant.

