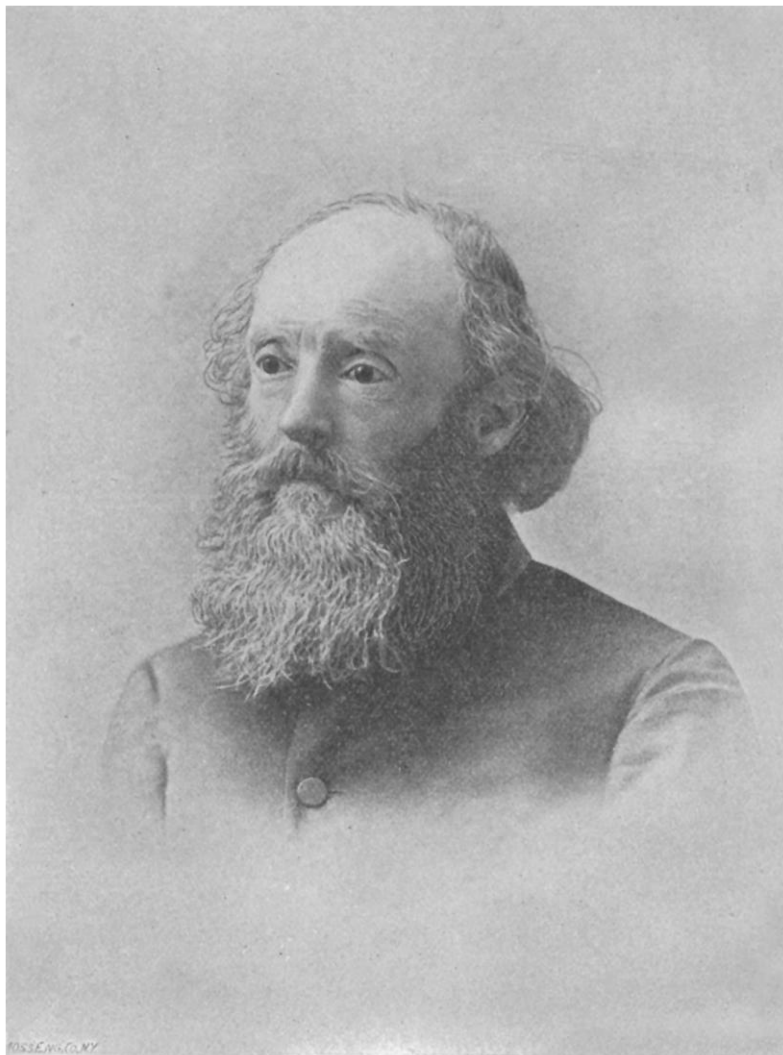


AMERICAN OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARS:
OAKMAN SPRAGUE STEARNS.

By Professor CHARLES RUFUS BROWN, Ph. D.,
Newton Theological Institution,
Newton Centre, Mass.

Oakman Sprague Stearns, D. D., (Colby University, 1863), Professor of Biblical Interpretation, Old Testament, in the Newton Theological Institution, was born in Bath, Maine, October 21, 1817. He inherited a love of Hebrew from his father, Rev. Silas Stearns, who, though he was unable to study the language in the schools, attained such proficiency in it, as to use his Hebrew Bible (without vowels) always at morning devotions and with as much facility as if the language had been English. Dr. Stearns relates that for some time after the death of his mother, he and his father, who, for a while, were the only members of the family, were in the habit of reading the Bible together at morning and evening, the father from the Hebrew or Greek text, and the son from the English; when, in the course of their reading, they came to the Aramaic portions of the Old Testament, the father was obliged to call on the son to assist him, so says the son, but in the other portions never. As a boy, Dr. Stearns, while a well-rounded student, acquired the classical languages with particular ease. His preparatory studies were taken in the town of Bath (where his father was ordained and died after a pastoral service of thirty years), and he graduated from Waterville college, now Colby University, in 1840. The class of which he was a member numbered also Professor M. B. Anderson, LL.D., and Dr. S. L. Caldwell was in the class preceding his.

In the fall succeeding his graduation, he went to Bedford, Westchester county, New York, and taught for one year each in two academies which then flourished in that town. In these, he taught practically all the branches he had pursued in his college course. The second of them, a fitting school representing Presbyterian interests, recently celebrated its centennial year. In the year 1842-43, he taught in the High School of his native town.



Prof. O. S. STEARNS, D. D., of Newton.

Dr. Stearns became a student in the Newton Theological Institution in the fall of 1843, and graduated there in 1846.* His teachers in the Institution were Professors Irah Chase, H. J. Ripley, Barnas Sears, and H. B. Hackett; and among his fellow-students were Drs. Kendall Brooks, S. L. Caldwell, Ebenezer Dodge, Heman Lincoln, and a member of his own class was the veteran missionary to the Telugus, Dr. Lyman Jewett. Dr. S. F. Smith was pastor of the Baptist churches in Waterville and in Newton Centre during the years of his college and seminary life respectively. In the school year 1846-47, he had a six months engagement as assistant to Dr. Hackett in the department of Biblical Interpretation at Newton, and taught the elements of Hebrew during that period. At its close, he was called to Southbridge, Mass., was ordained there, May 19, 1847, and continued pastor in the place for seven years.

In 1854, he became pastor at Newark, N. J., and remained there a year and a half. In 1855, after repeatedly resisting the approaches of the Newton Centre church, backed by all the influence of the Theological Institution, he succumbed, and became minister of the Newton Centre flock. At that time, the congregations were very small, but Dr. Stearns preferred to sacrifice in the size of them, for the sake of pastoral influence in the Institution, which, though numbering only about half as many professors and students as are now connected with it, contributed the largest share to the religious life of the church in the then sparsely settled town. Indeed, with the limited number of students then in attendance on its exercises, a larger number than now habitually attended the Baptist church; for there were in those days no Sunday trains to draw away suburban worshippers, and the present strong tendency on the part of theological students to regard metropolitan preaching as necessarily superior to suburban had not yet shown itself. Before the close of his pastorate, Dr. Stearns ministered to a much larger congregation, but, at the time of his coming, his thought was for the people on Insti-

* It is quite a striking coincidence that both Professor Green, the subject of the first sketch in this series, and Professor Stearns, graduated from college in 1840 and from Seminary in 1846, and for three years of the intervening period were employed in teaching.

tution hill, and during his entire settlement of thirteen years, his relation to the Institution was only less close than after his call to a professorship within its walls.

Upon the retirement of Dr. Hackett in 1868, Dr. Stearns was elected to the chair of Biblical Literature and Interpretation at Newton, with the understanding that Professor Gould, who was then appointed his assistant, should give his entire time to the New Testament. Two years afterward, the work was formally divided into two parts, and the departments of Biblical Interpretation, Old Testament, and Biblical Interpretation, New Testament, were regularly provided for; but the division was practically made in 1868. With this enlargement in the teaching force, however, Professor Stearns was far from satisfied; and while, for fifteen years, he continued to give all the instruction of the Old Testament department, he felt, year after year, that instruction in Hebrew could be maintained only at a great disadvantage, and, year after year, he longed and toiled for the appointment of another man in the department. In 1883, his desire was fulfilled, and, since that time, it has been possible for him to give his entire attention to Old Testament Introduction, Exegesis and Theology, leaving to another the linguistic instruction in Hebrew and in the cognate languages. This arrangement of the teaching has been very delightful to the incumbents of the Old Testament chairs and has worked not disadvantageously to the pupils who have received instruction. With this great advance Professor Stearns is far from content. In his plans for the Institution, he has shown himself farsighted to a remarkable degree.

From the beginning of his connection with the school, he has recognized the fact that no one department can be successfully maintained, unless all the others are in a flourishing condition. Having accomplished so much in manning his own department, his strong desire is now for two professors in the New Testament department; and his endeavor, even in old age, is unflagging in that direction. We grieve to say that he considers his career in the Institution as nearly ended. He has already felt compelled, on the score of health, to relinquish one-half his service and his delicate state forces

him to anticipate the relinquishment of the rest at no distant day.

With such successful results accomplished, the value of his service may perhaps be fairly estimated, although he has not published enough to reveal to the world his linguistic talent, intellectual acumen, and spiritual grasp of things. Indeed, his life has been passed almost without observation. His feebleness of body, and the demands made upon his energies by the engagements of his professorship, have made it absolutely impossible for him to appear before the world often with the products of his pen. Still there is enough of his thought in printed form to enable the public to gain some idea of his learning and scholarly taste, as well as of his wide sympathies and his just estimate of other men. His work as an author began with a translation, in the *Christian Review* for June, 1847, of Lücke on the "Prologue to the Gospel of John." This was followed in 1848 by a translation in book form of Sartorius on "The Person and Work of Christ." His first independent contribution was an article on Bishop Colenso which appeared in the *Christian Review* for July, 1863. Other notable articles have been "The Fourth Kingdom," *Baptist Quarterly*, July, 1876; "The Old Testament in the Jewish Church," *Baptist Review*, April, 1882; "Dr. Sears as a Theological Teacher," *Baptist Review*, Jan., 1883; not to mention his contributions to the religious newspapers, of which a series of articles on "Misquoted Texts," published some years since in the *Watchman*, are perhaps the most worthy of note. He has also prepared a volume called "Syllabus of the Messianic Passages in the Old Testament," which was printed in 1884; and an "Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament," which was published in 1888.

Allusion has been made to the physical weakness of Dr. Stearns during the years of his professorship. He has always been feeble in physical constitution, as was his father before him. When thirty years of age, he did not expect to attain his fortieth year, and all the way along, his friends have feared that the least disarrangement of the machinery might cost him his life. He is of small stature, thin and frail, never

having exceeded one hundred and twenty pounds in weight, and has retained courage to carry the heavy engagements of his position, on account of the triumph of the sturdy soul within, sustained by the strong and faithful prop he has possessed in the companion of his life.

It remains, in this brief sketch, briefly to characterize Dr. Stearns as a pastor, as a teacher, as an officer in the Theological Institution, and as a man:—

As a pastor he has few equals within his own communion. Endowed by Providence with intense sympathies and spiritual affinities, and having an intimate acquaintance with the Word of God, he was able to give instruction and consolation, rebuke and commendation, advice and warning, each in its season, and each so as to bind the parishioner to his minister more closely than before; so that, if in any kind of trouble, or in need of counsel about the affairs of life, his people were always ready and willing to come to him, assured of the kindest and yet most judicious reception at his hands. His warm-hearted and consolatory services at funerals will be remembered by the friends of the departed as long as their own memory is maintained to them, and his timely and tender words have been frequently sought for such occasions by those who have had no claim upon him except that of our common brotherhood, a claim which he has been especially ready to recognize.

As a teacher, he is distinguished for his modesty and unusual deference to the opinion of others; and, since his own teachers, Dr. Sears in *Systematic Theology*, and Dr. Hackett in *Exegesis* were not dogmatic in the presentation of their opinions, their influence served to emphasize his natural bent in this direction; so that he is perhaps even too ready to keep his own interpretations in the background and to content himself with giving the conflicting opinions of his fellow laborers in their stead. Of one thing he has an intense dread—that of sending out his students as mere repeaters of his or indeed of any one's opinions; his work on “*Introduction*” has been criticised, and criticised, as the present writer thinks, unjustly, because he fails so often to give his own conclusion on controverted questions which, in his judgment,

are not yet settled. His grasp of truth is almost intuitive; and this fact, coupled with the possession of a tolerant spirit in an unusual degree, perhaps combines with it to render him more distrustful of his own conclusions than we could wish; but he has somehow had the power of sending his pupils from the class room, if not invariably with settled notions *about* the Bible, at any rate, with renewed confidence *in* the Bible. His knowledge of the Scriptures is only exceeded by his love for them, and word-studies with him are of profound interest and profit. In the presentation of papers to his classes, as well as before the biblical clubs of which he has been a member, his style abounds in imagery and in poetic fervor. The same qualities appear in his sermons. The older residents in Newton Centre, recall frequently the pleasure and spiritual advantage with which they listened to the chaste and beautiful and imaginative language with which he clothed the profoundest truths of our religion. The study of Hebrew has never injured his English style, but has only imparted an elevated dignity and measure to it.

As an officer in the Institution, Professor Stearns has served it well. Personally unobtrusive of his opinions as we have seen him to be, he has carefully refrained from any encroachment upon the functions of others. Under the influence of a settled desire to do this, he is sometimes silent when some of us think he ought to speak; but his keen penetration and his ethical sense, almost abnormally developed, combine to make his counsel of the first importance to a theological faculty; and the readiness with which he sees the ethical bearing of any meditated action and anticipates the consequences of it, has served to make Faculty meetings a real Training School to his younger colleagues in the Newton Faculty. As for the students, every one, who has ever really known Professor Stearns has been made his friend, and has felt that the chief aim of the life of this man was to make himself of value to the Institution, and of service to those committed to his charge.

As an old pupil and present associate of Professor Stearns, the writer gladly welcomes the opportunity to speak of the personal characteristics for which this Old Testament scholar

and educator is conspicuous. The purpose for which his words are to be used forbids him from speaking as he feels of his personal regard for the man whom he has known for fifteen years, been familiar with for twelve of them, and known with peculiar intimacy for the past seven; and, indeed, the poverty of language renders such a statement impossible; but the qualities which he values in Dr. Stearns have been observed also by many others. They are honesty, humility, sympathy, loyalty to truth and to friends, a loyalty that endures the test, even when friends are to be opposed in the interests of truth, and yet a loyalty which will not permit him to give up a friend, or suspect a friend, unless compelled in honor to do so, a loyalty combined with a nervous disposition and a sensitive nature, which, in weaker men, would occasion a predisposition to suspicion and disloyalty. His personal power over the men about him is very great. Without any appearance or thought in him, of art, a simple question has been sufficient frequently, to turn the whole trend of argument and opinion in bodies of men, larger and smaller, as well as in the individuals who have had the benefit of his society and friendship. In short he possesses, in an extraordinary degree, those sterling virtues which prevent a man from having weak points, morally, and serve to inspire great respect, in all communities, for the men possessed of them, and some of the strongest and most judicious pastors who have gone forth from Newton still look to him for counsel in times of special need. His name is held in grateful remembrance by the present generation, and will go down in honor to future friends of the Newton Theological Institution.