

# The Bible in the Theological Seminary.

## THE ENGLISH BIBLE IN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES.

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Rabbi Gottheil once made the laughing remark that "theologians are proverbially behind the times." Without affirming what the rabbi jestingly asserted, it is the purpose of this article to enquire whether, at least in one respect, the theory upon which the education of candidates for the ministry is conducted is fully abreast of the times. To reach a conclusion we have to traverse certain facts.

(1) First among these we must notice the changing condition of things which the academic degree of B. A. represents. A generation ago the graduate who was a "Bachelor of Arts" was, more or less, a scholar in Greek and Latin. Probably no college in the country, certainly no influential one, bestowed its degree upon a man ignorant of the classics. That was not culture which was ignorant of Plato and Xenophon and Cicero and Horace. A knowledge of the writings of those masters was considered as essential as of the propositions of Euclid. The conditions are now greatly changed. Some of the leading colleges require neither Latin nor Greek for entrance or graduating examinations. The baccalaureate degree at present carries with it no guarantee of proficiency in either of the classical languages. And from those very colleges men are knocking for entrance into the theological seminaries and are seeking for admission to the ranks of the ministry.

Our seminaries are as yet unresponsive to this change in educational theory and practice. The curriculum now in force, the requirements yet demanded, are the same as under the old regime, or, if anything, are even more rigorous than ever before. The basis of theological education is the same to-day as it was fifty years ago. It must also be remembered that men who have perhaps had a collegiate education and have gone into business, and later have desired to enter the ministry, are also barred by the necessity for proficiency in Greek and ability to master Hebrew. It is likewise the fact that men of splendid promise, apart from linguistic ability, are turned back from the ministry by the bugbears of Hebrew and Greek.

This is the first set of facts to be looked at.

(2) We have next to call attention to the fact that for probably seventy-five per cent. of the so-called educated ministry, the English Bible is the Bible not only of the pulpit but *also of the study*. By this we mean that

sooner or later, and generally it is sooner, the majority of ministers drop first their Hebrew and afterward their Greek texts for the English version.

The writer had an experience of several years as examiner in the original languages in one of our largest presbyteries. In his service with the examining committees, it was his experience that hardly any of his associates admitted any proficiency in Hebrew, and some not even proficiency in Greek.

The common testimony of experienced pastors was that the exactions of busy pastorates made impossible maintenance of acquaintance with the ancient languages. The young minister found his time for the first year fully occupied in hammering out his two sermons a week, in making preparations for the prayer-meeting, and in getting acquainted with his parishioners. And by the time the first year had passed, his academic habit of referring to the original Hebrew and Greek had passed away, to be resumed in very few instances.

A statistical verification of this is possible. Indeed since the idea of writing this article occurred to the writer, out of thirty-seven ministers of average parishes met and questioned by him, *only one* made any claim to habitual reference to and study of the Bible in the original. Some even regretted the time spent in learning Hebrew and Greek.

(3) We wish to put over against this last fact another set which thus becomes significant. During the first year, indeed we may say the first year and a half, the energies of theological students are devoted to mastering the elements and gaining a vocabulary of the languages of the Bible. Of course this applies with special force to the Hebrew. The time for exegesis in the seminary is therefore necessarily limited. And even after the first year, a large portion of the time allotted to exegesis is necessary for "getting out," *i. e.*, translating the lesson. In the light of this fact it is seen that the greater portion of the seminary drill is devoted to the rudiments of the languages. And when we remember that in many of our seminaries work on Hebrew and Greek stops with the first half of senior year, how little exegesis proper comes into the work becomes at once evident. With the hardest work it is not possible to get much more than an introduction to scientific and practical exegesis.

While the above applies particularly to Hebrew, it is to some extent true of Greek. The professors of New Testament Literature and Exegesis constantly complain of the inadequacy of knowledge of Greek on the part of the students.

Of course the writer is aware that a remedy is proposed by demanding of students who enter the seminary a more extended knowledge of Greek and at least an elementary knowledge of Hebrew, with the idea of saving time in the seminary course. That would be well were it practicable. But do not the proposers of such a course forget a very important fact? The college curriculum is becoming each year more and more crowded and the standard more advanced. The age of graduating students is yearly advancing. Knowledge

is becoming more complex. So that while a few students find time to take preliminary drill in Hebrew during the college course, the rank and file of theological candidates have to postpone the study of Hebrew to the seminary course. And these conditions are likely to continue rather than to cease.

(4) This brings us to consider what is the real state of Bible study in the seminaries. It shows us how small a proportion of the total seminary work is spent upon the *content* of the Scriptures. To this we have already made incidental reference. But the difficulty has not been adequately set forth.

For the first year in most seminaries the study of Hebrew usually occupies four or five hours a week. During the second year about three hours is devoted to that study, and generally two hours during the *first half* of the third year. Now remembering that during the first year all the time is devoted to the language in itself, that is, to grammatical drill and to the acquirement of a vocabulary, and that in the second and third years a large portion of the time devoted to this branch must still be given to the work of translating, we see that all of exegesis that is gotten is *a part* of three hours a week for a year and of two hours a week for half a year. Also, keeping in mind that, at a low estimate, seventy-five per cent. of ministers seldom or never use their Hebrew text, we find ourselves face to face with the question, Is all this study worth while? Does it pay? A still more pregnant question is: do the men in this way gain familiarity with the Bible which they are to use, which will give their teaching authority? Can they by this method become saturated with it, steeped in it, as is necessary for a preacher of the Word? Does it become a tool the use of which is to them second nature?

Here lies what we consider the real strength of the position we take. It is by the lack of familiarity with the English Bible, by the absence of the power of accurate quotation and ready reference that some of our young pastors are characterized.

Is it proposed, then, to abandon the study of Hebrew and Greek in the seminaries? Do we advocate refusal to give the opportunity to learn Hebrew and to study Hellenistic Greek in the seminaries? By no means! But what is proposed is *to introduce the English Bible into the theological course of study*, alongside of the Hebrew and Greek.

We advocate making the English Bible an elective and the Hebrew and Greek Bible equally an elective. We propose that time equal to that given to the study of Hebrew and Greek be given in the English course to exegesis on the basis of the Revised Version; and, *pari passu* throughout the course, for every hour given to the Bible in the original let an hour be given to the English Scriptures, to exegesis, introduction, history of the canon, etc. And at the end of the course and at any time thereafter we have no fear that the teachers of the English Bible will have cause to blush for their pupils, and no apprehension that those pupils will fail to do effective work for the Master.

If it be objected that there are topics to be treated, questions to be raised,

which cannot be adequately discussed on the basis of the English version, the answer is that such questions are exceedingly few and comparatively unimportant. There is no important question within the range of preparation for the gospel ministry which cannot be treated in the study of the English Bible. Even the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch can be luminously discussed by the teacher and apprehended by the class. Experience has proved the truth of this statement.

If, again, the objection be raised that contact with the originals is worth much to the preacher, the answer is—granted! But alongside of that we put the actual status, the almost absolute neglect of the original tongues by the average minister. In the light of this the objection carries but little weight.

Once more, we hear the plea that many commentaries are closed books to the student ignorant of Hebrew and Greek. To this the reply is, this is true of some commentaries. But in these days of multiplication of aids to Scripture study, when the best scholarship of the world is speedily made available in English, for the work of the Christian ministry the helps on the basis of the English Bible are so numerous and so excellent that no real damage or loss need result.

We appeal then for the introduction into the seminaries of the English Bible as the basis of study. Let there be two courses, one founded on English, one on the original tongues. And to carry this out successfully there must be no discrimination between the two courses. To discriminate in favor of either is to prejudice in the other both the class of students who will enter and the work they will do. Let the graduating certificate or degree be on a par as to value, equal application having been required. *Also let separate teachers be appointed for this department.* It will not do to call upon the teachers of Hebrew and Greek to teach English also. To ask them to do this is to kill one course or the other. This has been done in one of our seminaries. Inevitably, unless the departments are distinct, no matter how conscientious the teachers may be, one of the courses will feel neglect.

We believe that this movement, which is already in practical working, is founded not only on common sense, but on a deep-seated need of the times. It will work well. It will produce an educated ministry, for there is to be no letting down in requirements, only a substitution. And the result will be a ministry whose familiarity with the Bible of the masses will not have to be gained after graduation.