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BIBLICAL HEBREW WORDS*

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There are still some to be found who hold the mediaeval conceit that Hebrew was the language of Paradise. Whether the language spoken by Adam and Eve in the time of their innocency is still spoken by the lips of living men I do not know, but it certainly was not Hebrew as we know it.

The early chapters of Genesis bear embedded in them the traces of two older languages Sumerian and Akkadian, the latter being the language of both Babylon and Assyria. If we can infer anything from the language of Abraham's great-nephew Laban, Abraham will have spoken Aramaic before he came to Canaan. In Gen. 31:47 Jacob calls the mound of stones Galeed, which is Hebrew, but Laban calls it by its Aramaic equivalent, Jegar-sahadutha. In any case Hebrew is only a form of Canaanite. It is so called by Isaiah in ch. 19:18, and the excavations at Ras Shamra have shown this to be the case. Most probably Abraham adopted the language of the land which God had promised him, as an act of faith.

Anyone familiar with comparative Semitic linguistic studies knows that Hebrew must have had a long history of development before it was fixed for centuries by Moses by his writing of the Pentateuch, but once fixed it remained virtually unchanged until near the end of the Old Testament period, when Ecclesiastes bears witness to the beginnings of the transition to what we call Rabbinic or Mishnaic Hebrew. That a language should remain virtually static for round a thousand years is remarkable, specially when we

* This is the first article of Mr. Ellison's series on 'Hebrew Words': and we are sure readers look forward with pleasure to the help and instruction provided by our esteemed contributor.

remember that archaeology has shown through writings like the Siloam inscription and the Lachish ostraka, that the language of the Old Testament was the living language of the people. Though we cannot rule out the work of editors smoothing out archaisms, the real reason will be the effect of the law of Moses on the thought and language of the people.

Some may feel hurt at the suggestion that God should use a form of Canaanite for the revelation of Himself, but a study of the revelation may suggest that God has never conformed to what man considered fitting. Actually Hebrew is a peculiarly suitable language for the purpose for which God chose it.

Hebrew is a peculiarly simple and concrete language and therefore lends itself more readily than the Greek of the New Testament to a translation which is at the same time idiomatic and close to the original. As a result a little knowledge of Hebrew is of much less benefit to its possessor than an equivalent knowledge of New Testament Greek, and he is very little better off than the user of the RV or RSV—though the AV is sufficient for the general study of the Old Testament, and for the discovery of its main doctrines, it is quite inadequate for the closer study of the text, especially in the poetic and prophetic books.

Though Hebrew is easy to translate, it is also easy to misunderstand. For this there are a number of too little realized reasons:

(1) Taken by and large *koine* Greek, the language of the New Testament, was the language of a civilization and outlook on the world, which though not those of modern Europe, yet played a major part in creating modern Europe. On the whole, therefore, the real meaning of the New Testament is seldom lost in translation, though the finer shades of meaning may be obscured. But the world of the Old Testament is only linked to us by religion. So there are scores of concepts in the Old Testament which are seriously misunderstood by the Western reader. Either there is no real equivalent in English, and our rendering reproduces only part of the connotation of the Hebrew, or in fact we give the idea, though correctly translated, a different value.

(2) Closely related to the above is our difficulty in grasping the shift in values of many things and actions owing to the great changes made by the technical skills of our civilization. The loyalties of clan and covenant are hard to call back to life in an urban society in which even the family is rapidly dissolving. The

needs of a society ever threatened by drought and enemy are subtly other than in one that can draw its food from the ends of the earth and that defends itself by alliances covering half the globe.

(3) In Hebrew the chief stress is on the verb, not the noun. As a result in the vast majority of cases we have alongside a verb a word to express the person who does it, and where necessary the thing done. In English, where the substantial stress is greater, such families of words are very often incomplete, and this often involves the loss of finer shades of meaning in translation.

(4) English is a mixed language. It has drawn so widely from Teutonic, from Latin, direct and through Norman-French, and from many other sources, that the sense of root-meanings has been completely lost by the bulk of the population. Not only have many words lost much of their original connotation, but there has been a tendency for some to develop along lines contradictory to their original meaning. This is seldom, if ever, the case in Hebrew. The number of borrowed words is in the Old Testament small, and mostly from cognate Semitic languages. As a result the Israelite was always keenly aware of the root meaning of the words he used and of the link between words from the same root. Though some of the developments of meaning are unexpected to the Western mind, they are never contradictory of the root-meaning of the word.

The vocabulary of Biblical Hebrew is no very extensive one and it would be no undue task to pass at least all the extant Hebrew roots under review sparing a word of comment for those derivatives which are not self-evident, once the meaning of the root is understood. It is, however, doubtful whether much benefit would be derived by anyone from such a study. We intend, if God prospers our efforts, to choose words and groups of words which, for the reasons already enumerated, create difficulty for the reader, and to throw light on them in whatever way may seem most profitable. Chief stress will be laid on words of theological importance, and so in this issue we deal with the 'names' of God.

One word of warning must be given to those who know a little Hebrew. The first modern Hebrew dictionary, that of Gesenius, appeared in 1815, when Hebrew studies were really in their infancy and wider Semitic studies had hardly begun. Gesenius

died in 1842, and his last lexical work was completed by an editor in 1858. With the exception of the Hebrew lexicon by Brown, Driver and Briggs completed in 1907 and a small pocket dictionary published in Germany the only Hebrew dictionaries available for the English reader are based on the earlier or later work of Gesenius. It should come, therefore, as no surprise to those who are only familiar with these older works that many of the meanings and etymologies proposed by Gesenius have been shown to be faulty. Indeed the new edition of Brown, Driver and Briggs published in 1952 and the still incomplete Lexicon by Koehler and Baumgartner, largely used for these studies show that in these matters our knowledge never stands still.

The Writing of Hebrew Words

Any who have had to learn a foreign language know how misleading even the use of the common Latin alphabet may be before the rudiments of the language have been mastered. To reproduce an entirely different form of writing by the nearest equivalents offered by our alphabet can be even more misleading. That is why the usual system of reproducing Hebrew, or indeed any other Semitic language, in Latin characters is impossibly involved for the ordinary reader and involves a number of special signs. As we have no intention of offering even the first steps in Hebrew, we use a system which is both misleading and inaccurate but which will allow the reader to understand what is intended. Anyone knowing a little Hebrew will not be put out at all.

The chief feature distinguishing Hebrew words from those in the main European languages is that the main role is played by the consonants, which were originally the only part of the word written. Even in modern Hebrew most vowels are only inserted when genuine misunderstanding might exist. The various derivatives from the same root are distinguished by different prefixes and suffixes and changing vowels, but with the exception of certain weak consonants, the consonants of the root remain unchanged. The vast majority of roots have three consonants, though there are a few with two (most of the apparent cases are due to the second and third being the same and falling together in many forms) and still fewer with four.

All this means that we shall be content with a purely approximate rendering of the vowels, but we have to face the fact that

some of the consonants have no adequate parallel in the Latin alphabet.

We make no effort to distinguish between the two *t* sounds, *tet* and *tav*, or between the two *s* sounds, *samek* and *sin*.

We follow a long-standing popular transcription *ts* for *tsade*, though the sound is actually a sharp *s* sound.

Chet is always reproduced by *ch*, which should always be pronounced as a guttural as in the Scotch loch, never as in church.

The two *k* sounds *kaf* and *qof* are rendered by *k*, *q*, the latter not to be confounded with the English *qu*.

Six consonants have, at least theoretically, a double pronunciation, but this will never be indicated.

Yod, when a consonant, has generally been rendered by *j* in proper names in the English Bible, but we render *y*, for this is not only more accurate as to pronunciation, but it makes it easier to see how it can often pass over into a vowel.

There are two guttural sounds in Hebrew, 'alep and 'ayin, the former of which is not pronounced by modern Jews—it is not a vowel, though adopted as such in the Greek and later European alphabets—and the latter is only pronounced by a few. As they are consonants and so part of many roots they must be reproduced, which we do with ' and ' respectively.

The 'Names' of God

It would seem that the fundamental Semitic name for God was 'el—it being understood that the vowel might vary in different dialects. Though there can be no absolute certainty as to its derivation, there can be no reasonable doubt that it meant, or had come to mean, The Strong One. If scholars are right in postulating that the Semites passed through a stage of animism in their religion, 'el, plural 'elim, may have been applied to the dimly realized but powerful spirits believed to animate nature, but by the time of the Patriarchs it had become a personal name.

The excavations at Ugarit (Ras Shamra) have shown that in the 15th century B.C. 'el was the supreme god of the Canaanites, and father of most of the other gods and goddesses whom they worshipped. The mythology is such that it is clear that he had occupied that position for a long time.

That is probably the reason why 'el is comparatively rare in the Old Testament; it had personal associations which made it un-

acceptable. It is mostly found either in age-old popular expressions or in stereotyped expressions like 'el *channun* a gracious God. Its commonest use is as a component in proper names.

We find the name used in combination in Gen. 14 (cf. Ps. 78: 35), viz. 'el 'elyon, God Most High. Speculation about Melchizedek is hazardous, but it seems to us that he was probably one who worshipped the supreme god of the land in a form and manner as to be virtually monotheistic. As a result Abraham seeking to give public expression to his gratitude to God for victory was able to link it to this exceptional form of 'el worship. As a result 'elyon (Most High) became a regular title for God, especially in the psalms.

For most readers of the Bible who have gone further than the bare text of the AV the most familiar use of 'el is in the compound name 'el *shaddai*, which is regularly translated God Almighty (Gen. 17:1; Ex. 6:3, etc.). This is in itself a faulty translation of the Greek *Theos Pantokrator*, i.e. God All-sovereign, which definitely carries a different connotation. But we may not assume that the LXX necessarily translated the Hebrew *shaddai* correctly.

The Rabbis, adopting an etymology which can hardly be correct, because it seems too complicated for the time of Abraham, render the title God the Self-sufficient One. An etymology which was very popular in some circles not long ago linked *shaddai* with *shad*, a breast. But while the conception is attractive—the Patriarchs were to realize that while the nations worshipped both gods and goddesses, their God possessed within Himself all the attributes which the heathen had spread among many gods of both sexes—yet it seems hard to accept. There seems no reason why the real meaning of the title should have become lost. Then too we have seen that 'el, just because of its associations, never become a popular 'name' for God. It seems hardly likely that there should have been added a title so closely linked with the great mother-goddess.

The two most likely etymologies would both bring out the power of God and so justify the Greek rendering. The simplest would link it with *shadad*, to devastate, and so lay stress on the irresistible power of God. The most popular today, one going back to Hommel and strongly supported by Albright, would link it with a word not found in Hebrew, but extant in Akkadian, *shadu*, mountain, i.e. He of the Mountains. When we remember

that the mountains are frequently referred to as the most stable and permanent feature of the world, it is easy to see that the Creator of the mountains must be most-excellent in power.

We have arrived then at the conclusion that while 'el shaddai stresses the sovereign power of God, we are no longer in a position to know the precise ideas which the name will have summoned up for the Patriarchs.

We also have the combination 'el 'olam, the Everlasting God, in Gen. 21:33, with the resultant use of ha-'o lam, the Eternal in Dan. 12:7.

(To be continued)

AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL

F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

(1. Prologue, Ch 1: 1-18)

Ch. 1, v. 3.—*All things were made by Him*;—Here it is concisely affirmed that the Word was the agent of God in creation. This sums up the teaching of Gen. 1, where the record of each creative day is introduced by the clause 'And God said.' In Ps. 33:6 this is interpreted to mean that God accomplished His work of creation by means of His Word; in the Wisdom literature it is interpreted to mean that He did so by means of His Wisdom (*cf.* Prov. 3:19; 8:30; also Ps. 104:24). In the N.T. the creative Word or Wisdom of God is identified with Christ not only here but also in Col. 1:16 f. ('in Him were all things created . . . in Him all things consist') and Heb. 1:2 ('His Son, . . . through whom also He made the worlds').

And without Him was not anything made that hath been made.—This repeats in a negative and still more emphatic form the statement of the preceding clause: not even one thing (Greek *oude hen*) came into being apart from the Word. The emphasis may be intended to refute some incipient forms of Gnosticism which ascribed creative activity to other spiritual beings.

v. 4.—*In Him was life*;—This clause is sometimes taken closely with the preceding in such a way that second half of v. 3 and the opening words of v. 4 run (as in R.V. margin): 'and without him