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THE  
BIBLIOTHECA SACRA.

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ARTICLE I.

THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT VER-  
SUS THEIR SOURCES.<sup>1</sup>

BY PROFESSOR WILLIS J. BEECHER, D.D.

THE scholars who are investigating the literary character of the Old Testament books are now arrayed in two hostile camps, the men of each camp defending a certain tradition, and attacking the tradition of the opposite camp. On the one hand, an immense majority of those who have done some independent study in the matter, provided we count pastors of churches, and persons who study in connection with the various organizations for Christian work, still hold in the main to the ancient tradition. They accept the testimony of the Scriptures concerning themselves as fact, and regard them as mainly the work of a series of well-known authors, extending from Moses to Nehemiah. On the other hand, a majority of the men who have reached the ear of the public through scholarly printed treatments of these subjects, together with their very influential and intelligent body of followers, make a large discount in their acceptance of the statements of fact found in

<sup>1</sup>This paper was read, November 14, 1898, before the Ministers' Association of Cleveland and vicinity. It has been deemed best to retain in print the marks of personal address that belonged to it as read.

the Old Testament, and attribute the books to a series of authors mostly unknown, beginning a good many hundred years later than Moses, and extending nearly to the Christian era. I am not here this morning to speak in the interest of either of these two encampments of men. My own position is emphatically with those who hold the older tradition, though with large variations from some of the views of some of its defenders. But I am not here to argue in favor of that older tradition as against those who reject it. I wish rather to present a matter in which I think we shall agree, provided we take pains to understand one another. If what I shall say is capable of an interpretation that favors one of the two camps rather than the other, I protest that such interpretation attributes to me a meaning that I do not intend.

As preliminary to the thing that I wish mainly to present, I hope that we shall agree on another thing, namely, that each of these camps is the defender of a tradition. In other words, the advocates of the newer set of opinions have reached a stage in which their position is just as truly traditional as is that of their opponents. This is to be understood, of course, without prejudice. Perhaps on the whole they are neither the better for it nor the worse. They have vindicated their claim to a recognized respectable place in the thought-movements of the world. They are no longer to be counted as sporadic, exceptional, revolutionary, with the presumption against them on that account; and, on the other hand, they have no right to claim that they differ from their opponents in that their views are based on investigation, while those of their opponents are based on tradition. On both sides there are some whose views are based on investigation. On both sides there are many who have simply accepted the results that others have handed to them. And on both sides there are large numbers who have investigated in part, and in part

have accepted what others told them was the correct thing to accept.

And now, to come nearer to the subject in hand, the advocates of the two traditions agree that large portions of our existing Old Testament books were made up by the process of incorporating writings that previously existed. Some of the defenders of the older tradition have shown a horror of the phrase "composite authorship," but none of them would object to the fact itself, when properly defined. It has for centuries been a staple element in traditional apologetics, that the narrative of the books of Kings, though written as late as the exile, was composed of earlier writings by prophets who were contemporaneous with the events narrated, and is for that reason the more trustworthy as history. Plenty of commentators in past generations have recognized the fact that the song of Lamech, and the blessings that Isaac pronounced on Jacob and on Esau, and the song of Miriam at the Red Sea, and the utterances of Balaam, and the "blessing" wherewith Moses the man of God blessed Israel, and a very large number of similar passages are poems or parts of poems which the writer of the scriptural book transcribed into his work. One may object to any particular theory of composite authorship, but no one doubts that composite authorship is a fact which entered very largely into the production of many parts of the Old Testament.

This brings it about that two entirely different objects of study are presented to the student of the literary problems of the Old Testament. One of these objects is the Old Testament books themselves. The other is the sources out of which they were composed. The proposition which I wish to present to you is, that the problems are of such a nature that no one can solve them properly without taking both these objects of study into account. That is to say, if one studies the books as they stand, ignoring the

questions as to their sources, he will reach very imperfect results; and he will reach results yet more imperfect if he confines his attention to the sources, ignoring the composite whole in which we now find them. He must constantly and fairly attend to both factors of the problem, or he will vitiate his solution.

All this is patent. There is no danger that any one will disagree with me. There is danger, rather, that some one will say, What is the use of discussing so one-sided a proposition? But the proposition is not frivolous or unimportant. As a matter of fact, most of the Old Testament study that was done up to the movement that culminated in such works as the Lange Commentaries, Smith's Bible Dictionary, and McClintock and Strong's Cyclopædia, was done without any adequate recognition of the problem of the sources of the books; and most of the critical study that has been done since, on one side and on the other, has been marked by a tendency to ignore everything except the problem of the sources. In opposition to both these tendencies, I lay down the proposition, that the study of the sources is important, but important chiefly as subsidiary to that of the books themselves.

I. We shall best understand the matter by using concrete examples.

1. Professor W. E. Addis, of Oxford, England, has published a handsome book entitled "The Documents of the Hexateuch." In this work he prints what he regards as JE by itself, distinguishing between J and E by the use of different kinds of type. Similarly, he prints D by itself and P by itself. In short, his work is intended to be a restoration of the four documents from which he believes the Hexateuch to have been compiled.

Whether Professor Addis is correct in these restorations is one of the questions in dispute between the defenders of the two traditions. But suppose there were no questions;

suppose, for the sake of the argument, that he is certainly known to be correct; suppose it to be a fact that we have here, approximately, four earlier documents (or so much of them as is now extant) which were at some time or times combined to make up our present six books; suppose this, and what follows? Does it follow that we are henceforth to lay our six books aside, and substitute for them the four recovered documents J, E, D, and P? Does it follow that the Scriptures of the future are no longer to contain the Pentateuch and Joshua, but in place of them the four digests of the original sources? Or does it follow that we are to retain the six books, indeed, but make them subsidiary to the four documents? Or, in opposition to all this, will the six books still constitute an integral part of the Scriptures, still be regarded as the object of principal interest, while the restored sources shall be thought of as mainly a help to the better understanding of the books themselves? These are the questions to which, as it seems to me, every reflecting man will give one answer, but to which our generation is, by default, giving the opposite answer.

The reason why the Old Testament is so absorbing an object of literary study is that it has a history back of it. It appealed to men in such a way that it was translated into Greek. In Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic it was widely circulated; so that everywhere it had its part in paving the way for the introduction of Christianity. The men of the Great Synagogue and their successors, the Tanaite scribes, did their work upon it. Jesus and his disciples and their opponents based their teachings and arguments upon it. It became the Bible of the church as well as of the synagogue, and is numbered among the sacred books of the followers of Mohammed. In these later centuries it has been translated into hundreds of languages, and has attracted the attention of those who study literary master-

pieces. Thus, before we at all reach the mention of its religious value, it has vindicated its claim to the possession of a unique interest. And beyond all these other claims, and in a measure underlying them, is the fact that it is a marvelous storage battery of spiritual power, and has been commonly regarded as miraculously inspired. It is these facts that constitute the reason why scholars take an interest in it. But for these things, it would not have been worth while for Professor Addis to take so much trouble to investigate the sources of the Hexateuch. He and other men of like mind have devoted, in the aggregate, thousands of years of skilled literary toil to these problems. But for the record which the Old Testament had made for itself, it would not have been worth their while to do this.

And what were the writings, so far as the Hexateuch is concerned, that have made this record for themselves? Was it the six books as such, or the four documents as such? Which of the two was it that attracted the attention of mankind so as to justify all this painstaking study? Which, therefore, is the principal object of study, and which the subordinate?

The Septuagint translators dealt with the six books, not with the four documents. The translator of Ecclesiasticus, and Philo and Josephus after him, were familiar with these writings in their present form, and not in the form of the sources whence they were derived. It was the Hexateuch, as distinguished from its sources, which molded Jewish thought during the Greek and Roman periods. It was in the form in which we now have them, and not in the form of certain earlier documents, that Jesus and his disciples and the scribes used them. The same is true of them at every stage of increasing influence since. Whatever guarantee of their inspiration any one recognizes, it is a guarantee that applies to them in the form in which Jesus knew them, and not in some earlier or different form.

Supposing the four documents to have existed as alleged, there is no reason to think that they would ever, had they remained in that form, have attracted the attention of mankind as they have done. It is the original sources as combined in the historically existing Hexateuch that have a supreme claim upon our attention, as distinguished from these sources in any other shape.

It was a commendable thing to try to trace out the sources, because any real discovery thereby made would certainly throw light on the six books. One who holds that the sources have actually been differentiated must regard that as an important point achieved, because it will help to the true understanding of the books themselves. But it still remains true that the reaching of results concerning the sources ought to be regarded as a means rather than an end; that the study of the sources does not supersede the necessity of studying the books as they stand; that the sources ought to be studied in the light thrown upon them by the composite whole; that the real end to be reached is the knowledge of the books rather than of their sources.

For twenty-three or more centuries these books have been establishing their claim upon the attention of mankind. Whether some restoration of the sources whence they were drawn can ever establish a similar claim is a matter for future centuries to determine. Meanwhile our study of the sources is for the sake of the books, and the books also present a large field for study in addition to all possible study of the sources.

2. Let us take another instance. In the recently published volume of the "Polychrome Bible" on Isaiah, issued expressly for popular use, and designed to supersede most of the helps that have heretofore been found requisite, the distinguished Dr. Cheyne has analyzed the book of Isaiah into some hundreds of fragments, which he re-



gards as the product of several successive centuries, and which he has arranged in an order entirely different from that to which we have been accustomed. In times past the book of Isaiah has been regarded as including a good many distinctly marked discourses, each a literary unit by itself, with beginning and middle and end. In Dr. Cheyne's work scarcely one of these units remains. Many of them are taken apart and assigned to different authors belonging to different centuries.

As to the validity of this piece of work, I have nothing now to say. I am not taking up a brief either for or against Dr. Cheyne. But, assuming that his differentiation of the sources of Isaiah is approximately correct, what about the relation between the sources and the book? Is a scholar who accepts Dr. Cheyne's analysis henceforth excused from further study of our existing book of Isaiah, and bound to confine his attention to the fragments which Dr. Cheyne has differentiated?

Certainly, no one would answer this question in the affirmative. The book of Isaiah to which we are accustomed is the book that is quoted by the author of *Ecclesiasticus*, the book that the translators of the Septuagint knew, the book with which Josephus was familiar, the book that was in the hands of Jesus and his disciples and their opponents, the book on which the first preachers of Christianity based their teachings concerning the Messiah, the book which the synagogue and the church have regarded as inspired, the book whose literary and ethical beauty attracted Mr. Matthew Arnold. It is this book itself that has appealed to human minds and hearts as being so wonderfully well worth studying, and not the hundreds of beautiful bits into which Professor Cheyne has crumbled it. It is perfectly safe to say that these literary morsels, wonderful as many of them are, would never have touched mankind as the book of Isaiah has done. Pro-

essor Cheyne himself would not undertake to put them together again in some other form, with the expectation that the new Isaiah would reach the human race as the old Isaiah did. In fine, it is worth while to attempt to ascertain the sources of Isaiah for the sake of the light that such an investigation may throw on the book; it is intellectually suicidal to substitute the study of the sources for the study of the book.

II. I hope that I have succeeded by these two instances in placing my main contention intelligibly before you. Important as is the study of the sources of the Old Testament books, the study of the books themselves is more important. The force of the proposition will become still more apparent as we now proceed to examine some of its bearings.

1. First, its bearing on the matter of future revisions of our theories as to the sources.

Thus far I have argued on the hypothesis that the search of our generation for the sources has been successful, that the current theories as to the sources of the various books are correct. But this is a proposition that would be denied by the advocates of the older tradition. The different parts of the Old Testament here stand on different footings, and the men of the older tradition differ much in regard to particulars; but their verdict in regard to most of the restorations that have been proposed would range from "not proved" to "disproved." And very few even of the men who support the newer tradition regard the results thus far reached as positively final. I think that we are all agreed that the source-restorations of the newer tradition, as now generally accepted, are still open to a considerable degree of revision. And this constitutes a fresh reason for the study of the Old Testament books as distinguished from the study of their sources.

(1) Klostermann and others have called attention to the

fact, that the existing analyses of the sources of the Old Testament books are all premature, because they were not preceded by sufficiently careful processes of text-criticism. This point will seem unimportant to any one in proportion as he has confidence in the existing text, though it has importance enough to deserve attention. But it is a universally recognized fact, that Old Testament text-criticism depends in an unusual degree on the processes that are commonly described as conjectural. And no one is qualified for the conjectural criticism of a text, except upon the basis of a thorough acquaintance with the text as it stands.

(2) Much more important, in my judgment, so far as future revisions of the doctrine of the sources are concerned, is the fact that the current source-analyses have been made without sufficient regard to the proper literary analysis of the books as they stand. Forty years ago the process of the literary study of the books as their last authors left them was well under way, but it was mainly abandoned in favor of the processes of source-analysis, as these came into vogue. There is scarcely a long connected passage in the Old Testament, and scarcely a book, in which the final author has not left distinct marks, in the shape of peculiar syntax, peculiar strophic arrangement, recurring phrases, or other like phenomena, by which we might recover the outline of his theme as it lay in his own mind, provided we would give the requisite pains to the task. Obviously this needs to be done as preliminary to further revision of the existing schemes of source-analysis.

2. But, again, the proposition we are considering is important, because the scope of our studies of the Old Testament should be wider than that of our study of its sources.

The completed Old Testament book contains more than merely the extracts which the final authors have made from their sources. It gives us their judgment, either ex-

pressed or implied, in regard to the relations between the sources, and the proper interpretation of the sources.

In proportion as the book is held to differ from the original sources, in just that proportion does the study of an Old Testament book include much that is not included in the original sources. The men who put the sources together had a very important part in the authorship of the books. To ignore their part by paying exclusive attention to the sources is contrary to all laws of scientific procedure. This is equally true, whether we look at the matter from the point of view of inspiration, or from that of mere literary work.

(1) From the point of view of inspiration, we must hold that whatever divine authority these parts of the Scriptures may have comes in part through the men who put the sources together. Not a few writers have assumed that divine authority resides exclusively in the original sources. A single instance is sufficient to destroy that assumption. Into the fourth chapter of the book of Ezra is copied the letter that Bishlam and his companions wrote to the Persian court, slandering the Jews who were building the temple. This letter is one of the original sources of the scriptural book. It is not a holy source, but an unholy. It was copied into the book of Ezra not because it tells the truth and utters the mind of God, but expressly because it tells falsehoods, and is contrary to the mind of God. To assume that the original sources of the Old Testament books are the nucleus within which inspiration is confined is contrary to all the evidence. The holy men that spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost were as often the secondary as the primary authors of the books. To neglect the book as a whole, confining attention to the supposed original sources, is, from the point of view of the doctrine of inspiration, to neglect a part of the revealed mind of the Spirit.

(2) The case is similar from the merely literary point of view. Some of our contemporaries are accustomed to stigmatize the men who put the Old Testament sources together as "uncritical." But these men, whoever they were, critical or uncritical, constructed literary products that have attracted more attention than any other literature for from twenty-two to thirty-three centuries. How many living men are there, highly gifted critically, whose work upon other men's writings will command world-wide attention twenty-three centuries hence? These secondary authors of the Old Testament books did their work, twenty-two centuries and more ago, in such a way that hundreds of scholars now living, including the very men who count them uncritical, find it worth while to devote thousands of years of skilled study to the examination of the work they did. In view of this, it is idle to say that their judgment in literary and historical matters is not worth considering. However they may have lacked nineteenth-century culture, the fact that their work is still so thoroughly alive is conclusive proof that they were men of gifts and of sound mind. They had fountains of information which we have not. In particular, they had the whole of certain sources of which we have only the parts which they transcribed. Whatever any one may think as to the question whether they were by inspiration guarded from mistakes, or as to the degree of their trustworthiness, the statements that such men have left on record are at least worthy a deliberate examination. We owe a respectful study to the books as they left them, and not merely to the sources as they found them.

Two years ago I published some of these things in a brief article, and received some responses. On the conservative side it was asked, "Why do you find fault? Is not the kind of study you call for exactly that in which con-

servative scholars are engaged? What do you want that is different?" Well, I am glad to recognize the fact that good work of the kind advocated in this paper is actually being done, both by conservative scholars and others. The need is that this kind of study be made ten times as prominent as it has been, relatively to other forms of study. A thorough restudy of the Old Testament as it stands is a different thing from the polemical reaffirmation of traditional views and interpretations; and such a thorough restudy is the only adequate apologetic for conservative scholars.

From the other direction it was said, "No, we do not want to study the Old Testament as it stands. What we want is the winnowed Old Testament, with the chaff blown away. Now that we have separated the original sources from the later additions, we have no further use for the composite work. Out upon the man who would forbid us to sift the evidence that has come to our hands!" But I for one would not lay down any rule for Old Testament study that should forbid the student to sift the testimony. And he must sift the testimony according to his own criteria, and not according to mine. But no one as yet claims that he has discovered the sources more than approximately. And even if he had discovered them completely, he might still need the composite work. If the secondary authors had the sources entire and he has them only in part, he cannot get along without their help. He knows the sources only as parts of a whole; it is as unreasonable to refuse to interpret the parts in the light of the whole as to refuse to interpret the whole by the aid of the parts. And, finally, one ought not to forget that this is a case in which the whole has a value of its own, over and above the value of the separate parts.

Let me add, in conclusion, that I should not like to be understood as finding fault with the scholarship of the

present generation, because it has to such an extent been monopolized by the problem of the sources, to the exclusion of other study of the books themselves. Certainly, the men of the hour should attend to the problems of the hour. But we ought to take cognizance of the fact, that we have been concentrating ourselves on the problem of the hour, rather than on the problems that are perpetual. We ought to note that many of our recent works on Old Testament Introduction, the History of Israel, the History of Religions, Apologetics, Old Testament Criticism, are mainly not proper treatments of these subjects, but discussions as to the readjustments required in them in view of the opinions that have become current concerning the sources of the Old Testament. I do not know that we have any reason to be ashamed of this one-sidedness. But we ought to take account of it, and adjust our thinking accordingly. We ought to be aware that there are large and fertile fields of Old Testament study which have for some decades mainly lain fallow. And some of us ought to try to raise crops from some of these fields.