ART. VII.—A FEW WORDS ON HEBREW TENSES.

AS there are still, it is to be hoped, some of us who feel that it will take a great deal of argument to convince us that all the old grammarians were in error about the Hebrew tenses, it may be allowable to devote a short space in the CHURCHMAN to the consideration of some questions connected with this subject, in the hope that some help may be rendered to students.

The doctrine that "the ancient Hebrews never thought of an action as past, present, or future, but simply as *perfect*, *i.e.*, complete, or *imperfect*, *i.e.*, as in course of development," is so startling that its advocates themselves can hardly expect it to be admitted as soon as stated. And, in point of fact, they have no such expectation. They write elaborately to prove it. And what they write has an interest, and, in its way, a value. There is, moreover, an element of truth in their view. Naturally, that which is *past* wears a character of "completeness" to the human mind, which that which is *future* lacks. And when we have made that admission, we have probably said the utmost that can be said in support of the current theory. For the statement just quoted challenges examination at once by its strangeness and its comprehensiveness. It seems to argue so extraordinary a difference between the constitution of the Hebrew mind and that of the minds with which we are best acquainted that it *compels* doubt as to its truth—even, it may be added, as to its possibility. Whether it be really possible for the human mind to conceive of a historic past, or of an anticipated future, without specific ideas of time is, to say no more, exceedingly doubtful. This is a difficulty which, on merely ordinary grounds, presents itself at the threshold. But when we come to deal with the Bible we have a further difficulty. We have to ask whether it be likely that He who has given us the Bible, He who "knoweth our frame," our mental no less than our bodily frame (having made both), and who, in the New Testament, uses the Greek tenses with such unfailing precision, should have given us three parts (or more) of His Word in a form in which, to use the familar terms, *order* of time is disregarded, and only *kind* of time is observed? Considerations such as this make the question, serious enough otherwise, more serious still.

Indeed, to come to close quarters, a doubt forces itself upon the mind, Would so desperate an expedient as the new theory ever have been thought of but for one peculiarity of Hebrew which is constantly in evidence, that of the Vau Conversive? For my own part, I very much doubt whether we should ever

have heard of the expedient if it had not been for this striking and confessed difficulty. It is, accordingly, to this difficulty that the following observations will be particularly, though not solely, addressed. They shall be very respectfully offered; yet, as being the result of years of study, and prayerful study too, not without a certain measure of confidence.

Let me begin by owning my indebtedness to one whose name is now not often heard, but who has laid Greek as well as Hebrew students under no small obligations, the late Mr. Granville Sharp. A rule of his (the rule itself being, as he informs us, the carrying further of a rule already laid down by Elias Levita) did much to put me on the track. That rule is, always look for the verb in the *past* tense, on which the subsequent verbs depend, and then remember that *every* future with Vau in the whole succeeding series is "converted." By systematically observing this rule, then, I have been led to the following conclusion—namely, that the relation between the verb with Vau Conversive (whether conversive at past or future) and its antecedent is parallel to that between the construct state in the *noun* and its antecedent. In other words, these converted futures—for it is with converted *futures* that I have mainly dealt in my investigations—regularly refer to actions or conditions which *sprang from*, or, if you like to put it so, were *the children of*, the act, state, or condition expressed by the verb *in the past tense* on which they all, however long the series, depend. It will be seen how well all this agrees with the familiar sayings, "The future is the child of the past," and "The child is the father of the man."[1]

My first lengthy experiment was made upon the history of Joseph. Here, I thought, we have a connected story in which the marks of time are plain. The results were eminently satisfactory and deeply interesting. That experiment was made years ago. Much more recently I have gone through *the whole Book of Genesis* on the same plan. I met with the same results; and so regular is the process that if, in the course of a connected series, something is introduced *independently* (by way, for instance, of *collateral information*), the succession is interrupted, by some specific *change of form*, to be resumed when the interruption is over.

The general issue is that a converted future commonly represents one of two things—a result or a process. And the history of Joseph is specially helpful, as a study, in this

[1] Do we not find something akin to this in the Greek? Not only is the first Aorist, active and middle, intimately related to the first future, but the sound "s" (perhaps the representative of the "substantive verb") is the regular sign of the *genitive* singular of *nouns* and of the *future* of *verbs*.

respect: that as you read you constantly find yourself perceiving, in step after step, "This, then, is exactly the process, or result, which Joseph (or whoever was the chief actor) had contemplated." That this is the case when He is the Doer to whom "all His works are known from the beginning of the world" is only what one would expect. And Scripture, always correct, begins with past tenses, and gives us its first converted future in connection with a Divine utterance.[1]

Now, no proof is needed to show that, to our finite capacities, a process, or result, springing from, or born of, a certain act or state *must*, in relation to that act or state, be *future*.

It may be noted, too, that the actual *forms* of the two Hebrew tenses point to their characters. So also does their *formation*. For what we call the imperative mood is formed from the construct (not from the absolute) form of the infinitive mood; and from this imperative is formed the future tense. While, as to personal aspects, the past tense has the affixes *at the end*, intimating that the action is *behind* you, so to speak; whereas the future has them *at the beginning*, intimating that the action is *before* you. (Hyman Hurwitz, at all events, has drawn attention to the position of these affixes, if he has not made all he might of it. See his Grammar, a very simple and useful one: "Etymology and Syntax," § 246, p. 216; ed. London, 1841.)

Unless I mistake, we have in Genesis alone more than 2,000 instances of the converted future, all which I have examined and registered. I hope, accordingly, that I have shown no undue haste, even had I confined myself to this book, in submitting my conclusions to such as they may concern. And they ought to concern people. The consequences of adopting the proposed modern view are no trifles. That view vitally modifies the whole case. It tends to throw all the Scripture history into confusion. I have, however, carefully noted the tenses in other books, too. And, whether in Genesis or elsewhere, I find myself guided, not only to the conclusions above stated, but to certain others. One of these is that the *position of words* is a most important factor in determining the sense. The value of this rule will be very specially manifest in the Psalms. Take one instructive case: The position of the nominative, before or after the verb, will guide us to judge whether an expression be a command, a prayer, a wish, or simply a prediction. If the nominative

[1] And here the remark may be permitted that, for light upon the meaning of אוֹת, first found in Gen. i. 1, we should look to Gen. v. There we find it again and again; meaning, it seems, "[So-and-so begat] *what developed into* [So-and-so]."

precede, we expect prediction; if it follow, command, prayer, or wish. I do not, as yet, venture to say this rule is quite universal. There may occasionally be circumstances to modify it. That most important principle, correspondence, may be one such. But generally I find the rule holds, and the consequences are highly valuable. Another is that ellipses, in which Hebrew abounds, are not to be filled up at random. The context will commonly teach, or suggest, the right complement. As to this matter of ellipses, Bernard's edition of Job (with that keen scholar Chance's notes, so far as they are available) is very useful. Bernard's tendency, indeed, is to carry the doctrine of ellipsis to excess; but, for all that, he is of great service.

Here I pause. Some of the points to which I have alluded well deserve ample treatment. Notably, the whole subject of correspondence is itself of an importance which it is difficult to overestimate. Its witness to inspiration is such that the neglect of it deprives such as do neglect it of a most powerful weapon. But this at present I only hint at. Enough, however, I hope, has been said to stimulate study, and *prayful* study; for, let us never forget, "the secret of the Lord *is with them that fear Him.*"

Art. VIII.—THE MONTH.

THE past month has brought into singular prominence and juxtaposition the varied problems with which the Church is at present confronted. They are illustrated by some striking observations made the other day in the *Guardian* (June 22): "It is difficult to define the exact point at which comprehension ends and incoherence begins, but hostile critics of the Church of England have not been slow to take advantage of the strange contrasts presented by the various meetings which were being held simultaneously at the Church House last Thursday afternoon. In a room on the ground-floor there was a sitting of the Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline; overhead was assembled the annual meeting of the English Church Union, listening to Lord Halifax's strongly-worded criticisms of the genesis of the Commission, and his denunciations of a timid and invertebrate episcopal bench; in another room Dr. Cheyne was exhorting the members of the Churchmen's Union to pin their faith to Jerahmeel and the *Encyclopædia Biblica*, and was casting fresh doubt upon doctrines which Christians have always felt to form a vital part of the central truth of the Incarna-