

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

SKINNER'S "GENESIS."

THERE is perhaps no book in the Old Testament that has felt the quickening touch of the modern spirit more powerfully than Genesis. From the first it has remained in the centre of critical interest. The progressive solution of the problem of the Hexateuch has, in fact, consisted mainly in an increasing appreciation of the complex literary and religious characteristics of Genesis. And this has influenced our whole attitude to the book. The exegete no longer finds himself compelled in the interests of religion to declare war with Darwin, or to attempt impossible harmonies of the naïve tales of Genesis with the dry, clear records of archæological research. He gladly avails himself of the light that streams so richly from ethnic history and folklore; but he seeks above all to penetrate to the peculiar genius of these fascinating chapters, and to read them sympathetically as deposits from the earlier stages of revelation,—reflections of Israel's awakening thoughts on God and man, with dim memories of the childhood of the race, and glimmering foregleams of the perfect day that was to dawn.

From this point of view several notable studies of Genesis have recently appeared in Germany and England. But there still seemed to be room for a fresh handling of the subject in the light of the latest investigations. Dr. Skinner's volume in the "International Critical" Series aims at supplying this need. It must be said at once, the work is supremely well done. In every respect the new Commentary is worthy to stand alongside of the greatest of its rivals. It would be difficult, indeed, to overpraise either the minute, exact scholarship and comprehensive knowledge which are stamped on every page, or the keen psychological and religious insight, the transparent honesty of statement, and the admirable

balance and sanity of judgment that make the book so educative to the open-minded student of the Scriptures. As far as his path lies clear before him, Dr. Skinner leads onward with strong, sure step. But when he reaches the limits of certainty, he walks with characteristic caution, content to suggest the probable lines of future progress, and not allowing himself to be beguiled by any *ignis fatuus* into critical bogs and quicksands.

This caution comes into frequent evidence in the treatment of the text. Not that Dr. Skinner holds a brief for the Massoretic scholars, or attempts in any way to gloze over corruptions. He is frank even to a fault, and appreciative of every honest effort to get nearer to the original. But he has no love of change for change's sake. The general superiority of the Massoretic text he valiantly defends alike against the more radical criticism of the school of Budde, whose "ingenious transpositions and reconstructions of the text" seem to him "too subtle and arbitrary to satisfy any but a slavish disciple" (p. 3), and against the strangely perverse attempt of "the more recent opposition" represented by Dahse and Wiener to prove the Massoretic text "so unreliable that no analysis of documents can be based on its data" (p. xxxv.). In his most caustic vein he observes: "Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction; and, however surprising it may seem to some, we can reconcile our minds to the belief that the M.T. does reproduce with substantial accuracy the characteristics of the original autographs" (pp. xxxvi. f.). Alongside, therefore, of an unhesitating acceptance of much of the treasure-store of conjectural emendations accumulated by a century's criticism of the text, we meet with guarded phrases like: "The addition (of the Greek Septuagint) is adopted by Ball, and the plural proves at least that it rests on a Hebrew original" (p. 22), "one is tempted to substitute the rare נשׁתת , as in v. 11" (p. 24),

"the Greek inserts at this point," etc. (p. 25), where a less scrupulous critic would be inclined to alter without compunction.

This carefully judicial habit of mind lends all the greater weight to Dr. Skinner's pronouncements on the "higher critical" question. Here he shows no hesitation. "My own belief in the essential soundness of the prevalent hypothesis," he says in the Preface, "has been confirmed by the renewed examination of the text of Genesis which my present undertaking required" (p. viii.). In the course of the volume he finds occasion once and again to break a lance for this hypothesis, especially against the three most recent champions, whose appearance has been hailed so widely as having given the final *coup de grâce* to criticism. In two pages of piercing sword-play he exposes the fatal weakness of Dr. Orr's defence, showing how he really concedes the whole case against criticism, while seeking to save the situation by the "flimsy hypothesis" of "recensions" and "collaboration," and sweet-sounding phrases like "essential Mosaicism" and "relative antiquity" (pp. xl.-xlii.). We have already quoted one of the sardonic sentences in which he disposes of Wiener's attempt to evade the problem by a frank abandonment of the reliability of the Hebrew. His *critique* of Eerdmans' novel principle of analysis, and its results, is equally keen. "A more bewildering hypothesis it has never been our lot to examine, and we cannot pretend to believe that it contains the rudiments of a successful analysis. There is much to be learned from Eerdmans' work, which is full of acute observations and sound reasoning in detail; but as a theory of the composition of Genesis it seems to us utterly at fault" (p. xliii.). Having had occasion recently to subject Eerdmans' *Studien* to careful examination, the present writer can thoroughly endorse this judgment. So far from lightening the darkness that

still broods over much of the problem, the new *Komposition der Genesis* makes confusion worse confounded.

While firmly persuaded that the main lines of progress have been well and truly laid, Dr. Skinner is far from the opinion that the last word has been said by criticism. Like most investigators since Wellhausen, he recognises that the documents J and E are not homogeneous products of a single mind and age, but composite narratives of diverse origin, that in fact "the symbols J and E must be taken to express, not two individual writers, but two *schools*, i.e., two series of narrators, animated by common conceptions, following a common literary method, and transmitting a common form of the tradition from one generation to another" (p. xliv.). This complexity is most apparent in the early chapters of Genesis, where recent commentators have pointed out various different strands in the narrative. But in so fine a region of analysis, the work is necessarily intricate, and the results hypothetical, in the extreme. Dr. Skinner follows mainly the lead of Gunkel in disentangling four broken threads of narrative: (a) an early nexus of crude tales scattered throughout the chapters, viz., the semi-polytheistic fragment of the Fall story preserved in iii. 20-22, 24, the older genealogical line of descent from Cain (iv. 17-24), the mythical tale of the *liaisons* of the angels (vi. 1-4), and the story of the Tower of Babel (xi. 1-9), which he assigns to the rough core of Yahwistic tradition (J¹); (b) a cycle embracing the more refined narrative of the Fall which covers the main part of chaps. ii. and iii., the torso of the line of Seth, with its attribution of the beginnings of Yahwe worship to Enosh (iv. 25 f.), the interposed notice of Noah's birth (v. 29), and the story of his vine-culture and accompanying drunkenness (ix. 20-27),—together representing a somewhat more advanced stage of moral and religious reflection (described as J², from the apparent use of the Divine

name *Elohim* at the beginning of the narrative); (c) the more consecutive history of the Flood, with its sequel in the dispersion of the race, and the Table of Nations, in the Yahwistic sections of chaps. vi. 5–viii. 22, ix. 18 f., and x. 1 ff. (i.e., in the main, Budde's J², which Dr. Skinner distinguishes by the more colourless label of J^d); and finally (d) in a place by itself, as a wandering element of tradition from another age and origin, although in its present literary form closely moulded after the exquisite narrative in chap. iii., the *saga* of Cain and Abel (iv. 1–16), described as J^r, apparently because introduced here by the Redactor of the completed Yahwistic document.

To this elaborate scheme Dr. Skinner appends the characteristic *caveat*: "Such constructions, it need hardly be added, are in the highest degree precarious and uncertain; and can only be regarded as tentative explanations of problems for which it is probable that no final solution will be found" (p. 4).

In his analysis of the patriarchal traditions, too, Dr. Skinner follows the clue given by Gunkel in his separation of Hebron and Beersheba elements in the Abrahamic narrative in J, the different sources being respectively described by the labels J^a and J^b. The former of these he finds linked by "certain affinities of thought and expression" with the J^o of the primitive history, as well as with the parallel traditions which the Yahwistic narrative has associated with the name of Isaac in chap. xxvi., suggesting that in these elements we have "fragments of a work whose theme was the history of the Yahwe-religion, from its commencement with Enosh to its establishment in the leading sanctuaries of Palestine by Abraham and Isaac" (p. 241). On the other hand, the Beersheba cycle (J^b) has its affinities with E, pointing to the following "tentative hypothesis" regarding the formation of the Abrahamic legend. "The tradition crystallised

mainly at two great religious centres, Beersheba and Hebron. The Beersheba narratives took shape in two recensions, a Yahwistic and an Elohist, of which (it may be added) the second is ethically and religiously on a higher level than the first. These were partly amalgamated, probably before the union of J^h and J^b. The Hebron tradition was naturally indifferent to the narratives which connected Abraham with the Negeb, or with its sanctuary Beersheba; hence the writer of J^h, who attaches himself to this tradition, excludes the Beersheba stories from his biography of Abraham, but finds a place for some of them in the history of Isaac (pp. 241 ff.).

We cannot follow the analytic process into further detail. Enough has been said, however, to indicate the general viewpoint. Dr. Skinner puts forth his hypothesis "with great reserve." In certain respects it may have to yield to closer criticism. But there can be little doubt that we are carried forward on helpful lines. For the new light it sheds on the religious complexion of the narratives, too, the advance movement is to be welcomed. It has become the fashion in many quarters to describe the documents JE as "prophetic" narratives. In so far as the name is employed to distinguish them from the priestly elements in the Hexateuch, it may be "sufficiently appropriate." But the implication so often drawn, that the narratives are influenced by the ideas of the literary prophets, or at least move in the same religious world, Dr. Skinner rejects as "entirely erroneous." The documents yield us the traditions handed down, generation after generation, in various circles of the people. And if both are "pervaded by ideas and convictions which they share in common with the writing prophets," this but supplies a fresh proof of the essential loyalty of the prophets to the pure faith as it came through Moses and the fathers. "The decisive fact is that the really distinctive ideas of

written prophecy—the polemic against foreign deities, the denunciation of prevalent oppression and social wrong, etc.—find no echo in those parts of J and E with which we have to do” (pp. li. f.). In this judgment we entirely concur, and feel that the misleading term “prophetic” ought now to give place to some other description more in harmony with the character of the narratives.

The sources of the traditions are manifold. In the early chapters we are mainly pointed back to Babylonia. The origins of the Creation narrative in chap. i., of the genealogical tree in chap. v., and of the Flood story in both its recensions, are clearly to be read on the Babylonian Tablets recently brought to light and deciphered by the self-denying labour of Assyriologists. And apart from these, numerous other reflections of Babylonian ideas are to be traced throughout the chapters. In various notes appended to the different sections Dr. Skinner discusses the relation of the Biblical narratives to their Babylonian analogues, and convincingly proves the dependence of the Israelite traditions on the far earlier records of the East. The question as to the probable date, or dates, and channels of Babylonian influence he dismisses somewhat curtly. The view which Gunkel has brought into such prominence, that the mass of Babylonian tradition entered the current of Palestinian life during the period of Babylonian supremacy prior to the Tell-Amarna epoch, and thence passed through Canaanite channels of influence to the conquering Israelites, at the beginning of their national development, he regards as inconclusively proved. But the opposite theory, which explains the phenomena as the result of a gradual process of assimilation, chiefly during the historical age, is equally open to objection. We are left, therefore, with a *non liquet*. “When we consider the innumerable channels through which myths may wander from one centre to another, we shall hardly expect

to be able to determine the precise channel, or the approximate date, of this infusion of Babylonian elements into the religious tradition of Israel" (p. x.). We confess we should like to have reached some more definite conclusion, and we trust that Dr. Skinner may yet help us to determine the broad lines of transmission. Meantime, we must express our warm appreciation of the noble words in which he vindicates the spiritual supremacy of Israel even in those regions of thought in which she stands most indebted to foreign influence (cf. pp. 6 f., 51 f., 178 f., etc.).

When we pass to the patriarchal stories of Genesis, we come at length into contact with the broad stream of Israel's own traditions, though even here there may be traced an admixture of Canaanite and Egyptian influence. This will be noted in due course.

On the question of the historical value of the narratives Dr. Skinner speaks with no uncertain voice. In Genesis we have the old legends of Israel, with a distinct vein of myth in the early chapters, and considerable evidence of mythical colouring even in the patriarchal traditions. But to apply such terms to the narratives is by no means to dismiss them as insubstantial dreams. Legend is the deposit of popular tradition "working freely on dim reminiscences of the great events and personalities of the past, producing an amalgam in which tradition and phantasy are inseparably mingled" (p. iv.). Myths are properly "stories of the gods, originating in an impression produced on the primitive mind by the more imposing phenomena of nature" (p. viii.). Both of them are thus invaluable as revelations of the soul of the people, their early thoughts of God and man, and the types of character which represent their moral aspirations. But legend also enshrines the memory of real historical personages and events which made an impact on the nation's inner life (pp. iv. ff.). In his classification of legendary motives, Dr.

Skinner again follows the lead of Gunkel. The more recent ethnological theories, which find in the legends distinct reflections of tribal movements, he handles with great caution. There is a true principle at the root of the method. But legend necessarily contains so large an element of idealisation that it is most unsafe to build exclusively on this source. The various traditions which relate the patriarchs to Mesopotamia most probably bear witness to early migrations of Hebrew tribes from thence. And "if there be any truth in the description of legend as a form of narrative conserving the impression of a great personality on his age, we may venture, in spite of the lack of decisive evidence, to regard Abraham as a historic personage, however dim the surroundings of his life may be." But for more authentic historical records of the primitive age we must patiently abide the slowly accumulating testimony of archaeological discovery (pp. xi. ff.).

From the detailed exposition of Genesis a few salient features may be singled out for further remarks.

Of the three possible constructions of the opening verses of chap. i., Dr. Skinner prefers the least favoured by commentators, that, namely, which treats v. 1 as the time notice to the following, and finds in v. 3 the proper sequel: thus, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was waste and void, etc. Then God said, Let there be light." In any case, "creation" does not imply the calling forth of the raw material of the Universe "ex nihilo," but the "creative" process unfolded in the chapter. Dr. Skinner deals quite frankly with the various unscientific ideas to be met with throughout, a feature which we might reasonably expect in a product of the pre-scientific age. But he lays just emphasis on the unique religious character of the cosmogony,—the classical expression it gives to the monotheistic principle, and the lofty dignity with which it invests

man as "the crown and goal of creation,"—entitling it "to rank among the most important documents of revealed religion" (pp. 5 ff.).

In the story of Paradise, and the "immortal allegory" of the Fall, he finds equally profound religious ideas. In his interpretation of the "knowledge of good and evil" he combines the views of Wellhausen—that the knowledge here regarded as evil is that "which is the principle of human civilisation," viz., "insight into the secrets of nature, and intelligence to manipulate them for human ends"—and Gunkel—that it is simply "the enlargement of capacity and experience which belongs to mature age," of which the instinct of sex is a typical illustration" (pp. 95 f.). We must confess that even the reference to Christ's idea of childhood does not reconcile us to the latter view. Nor does the undertone of sadness which runs through much of these early chapters appear to us to rise from a "condemnation of the cultural achievements of humanity" in themselves (p. 96). The grave mood which the narrative assumes in such sections as the story of the Flood, for example, seems to be the direct outcome of ethical considerations. And the moral interpretation still impresses us as the most adequate here. But after all the difference is one of detail. For in the next page Dr. Skinner strikes as high a note as the most zealous defender of the distinctively ethical view, when he describes the God of Genesis iii. as "a Being infinitely exalted above the world, stern in His displeasure at sin, and terrible in His justice; yet benignant and compassionate, slow to anger and 'repenting him of the evil.' Through an intensely anthropomorphic medium we discern the features of the God of the prophets and the Old Testament; nay, in the analogy of human fatherhood which underlies the description, we can trace the lineaments of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. That is the real *Protevangelium* which lies in

the passage: the fact that God tempers judgment with mercy, the faith that man, though he has forfeited innocence and happiness, is not cut off from fellowship with his Creator" (p. 97).

As we have noted, the Biblical story of the Flood is traced to a Babylonian original, the most natural explanation of which "is after all that it is based on the vague reminiscence of some memorable and devastating flood in the Euphrates valley." But the real value of the story again lies, not in the modicum of historical fact that may be extracted from it, but in the moral and religious ideas that shine through the whole,—the clear recognition of the ethical motive, and the pervasive influence of the monotheistic idea, as contrasted with the vague morality and the "picturesque" but vindictive and capricious polytheism of the Babylonian version (pp. 178 ff.).

The old poem of national curse and blessings (ix. 25-27) is read by Dr. Skinner, as by practically all modern commentators, in the ethnographic sense. Shem is undoubtedly the representative of the family to which Israel belonged, and Canaan as clearly the *eponymus* of the pre-Israelitish inhabitants of Palestine. The problem thickens, however, when we pass beyond these elements of certainty. Who is Japheth? And what historical situation is reflected in the poem? Dr. Skinner has a clear eye for the difficulties involved in Wellhausen's identification of Japheth with the Philistines, and Budde's suggestion of the Phœnicians. He commits himself to no definite theory on the subject. We are pleased, however, to observe that his inclinations tend towards the Amarna epoch as the most appropriate background for the poem. He is dubious about the identification of Japheth with the Hittites, suggesting rather the Suti or Amurri. But all such surmises must necessarily remain

in the air, until the monuments throw more definite light on this whole period (pp. 186 f.).

We have already dealt with Dr. Skinner's analysis of the Abrahamic legend, and indicated his personal views regarding the historical reality of Abraham. These have been reached, not as the result of archæological research, for the monuments have so far yielded us nothing directly bearing on the personality of the patriarchs, but simply from the outstanding impression the heroic figure of Abraham makes on the mind. "It is difficult to think that so powerful a conception has grown out of nothing. As we read the story, we may well trust the instinct which tells us that here we are face to face with a decisive act of the living God in history, and an act whose essential significance was never lost in Israelite tradition" (p. xxvii.). The remaining patriarchs are vaguer figures. Isaac is but a feebler reflection of his great father. Jacob's history is mainly an amalgam of tribal movements,—though Dr. Skinner leaves open the question of his historical existence. With the figures of Lot and Esau the traditions of Israel are enriched by a blend of Moabite and Edomite folk-lore. The fathers of the twelve tribes are evidently eponyms. To what extent their adventures preserve the memory of real historical events may always remain obscure. In the case of Joseph the old national tradition has been intermixed with elements of Egyptian story, and worked up by popular imagination into the first and finest example in the Old Testament of what may be called "novelistic" narrative, the adventures of this "ideal character" being bound together "by the dramatic unity of a clearly conceived plot, the unfolding of which exhibits the conflict between character and circumstances, and the triumph of moral and personal forces amidst the chances and vicissitudes of human affairs" (p. 440). In his elucidation of these entrancing chapters, Dr. Skinner's psychological

insight and literary appreciation are seen at their best. Students of Genesis will long turn to his illuminating expositions with delight.

We are conscious that we have but touched the surface of a great work. We trust, however, that we have been able to give some idea of the consummate ability, judgment and sympathy with which it has been done.

ALEX. R. GORDON.

THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL.

XII. SOME OBJECTIONS TO THE HISTORICITY OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL CONSIDERED.

THERE can be no question about the independence of the Fourth Evangelist. His account of the visits of Jesus to Jerusalem is certainly not derived from the Synoptists, and even in regard to his subject matter on ground common to the Synoptic narratives and himself, a careful study shows that he did not merely repeat what the Synoptists say. He tells the story his own way and tacitly corrects them. The most striking correction of all concerns the date of the crucifixion. Whereas the Synoptists make the Last Supper a passover, and put the crucifixion on the 15th of Nisan, St. John says that the Supper was *before* the feast of the passover and he puts the crucifixion on the 14th of Nisan. Schmiedel allows that if the Fourth Evangelist is right in this, then his Gospel is to be regarded as correct all through, so crucial does this point seem to him to be. Schmiedel, however, thinks the Evangelist is wrong, and he refuses to regard this Gospel as history in any true sense of the word.

Professor Burkitt is also strongly opposed to the historicity of the Fourth Gospel, but it is a remarkable fact that he