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

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

THE ELEPHANTINÊ PAPYRI AND THE OLD TESTAMENT.

THE Elephantinê papyri recently edited, and in most admirable fashion, by Professor Sachau, of Berlin, are the latest to find a place amid the fast accumulating stock of material at the disposal of the biblical student. How remarkable they are is sufficiently clear from the interesting articles in the EXPOSITOR by Professor Sayce (Nov., 1911) and Professor Margoliouth (Jan., 1912) which render it unnecessary for me to enlarge upon their contents. These writers raise two questions—their authenticity and their general bearing upon the Old Testament—and it is to these two points that I propose to devote my remarks. The reasons adduced by Professor Margoliouth for suspecting the genuineness of the papyri may or may not be valid, but it is a necessary task of criticism to undertake a strict examination of its sources. The bearing of the papyri (*if genuine*) upon the Old Testament is also the work of criticism, and a complex one, since, as every one knows, students of the Old Testament differ widely from one another in their attitude to its problems. It happens that both Professor Sayce and Professor Margoliouth handle this question from a standpoint which may fairly be called "conservative," and they find in the papyri support for their standpoint. Now it also happens that my standpoint might perhaps be called "radical," and I most certainly believe that I can find in them confirmation of some of my own little "heresies." This being so, it will be perceived that there is a vital difference

between objective data and the impression they make upon different individuals, and whether any of these individuals—myself included—should prove to be approximately correct or hopelessly incorrect, a clear recognition of this important difference is of the greatest assistance for the future of progressive criticism.

Now, the general principles of criticism are much the same whether daily life, politics, or some branch of research be concerned, and it may be taken for granted that glaring and avoidable contradictions are detrimental to whatever is at stake, and that whatever makes for their disappearance is for the general welfare of humanity. It is probable that at no other time has there been such a heterogeneity of opinion touching the Old Testament, and it is due very largely to the fact that different students view such evidence as they happen to utilize from very different standpoints. The same is doubtless true of the acute conflict of opinion which characterizes the widespread unrest at the present day. It is a period of transition and one of the most fascinating—though frequently disturbing—phenomena of the day is the remarkable conflict of intellects where similar problems are involved. In turning to the Elephantinê papyri, then, we may perhaps see how divergence of method readily accounts for a large and really unnecessary amount of divergence of conclusion, how easily in contesting the views of others we may expose the weakness of our own, and how the failure to recognise the complexity of problems may delay the cause for which one is working or writing.

Are the papyri genuine? Professor Margoliouth has expressed his suspicions so freely and plainly (Jan., pp. 69–72) that the ordinary reader might assume that, if they were seriously meant, the papyri must be relegated to the waste-paper basket and the rest of the article (pp. 74 *sqq.*) would be irrelevant. Since, however, he devotes several pages to

the bearing of the papyri upon the Old Testament it is to be inferred that he is not convinced of their worthlessness, and in this case notice must be taken of the *method* of criticism adopted. Let us suppose that Professor Margoliouth is correct and that the papyri are forgeries, or, rather, since it is not clear whether he condemns all, that some of them are fabricated. He points out that there is a papyrus-factory at Syracuse, and this implies a market ; this is a serious remark (p. 72), but since some of the papyri are palimpsests (see Prof. Sayce, p. 419), it is evident that the supposed forger has had access both to the factory and to some genuine "finds." Next, he observes that "the German expedition appears to have gone for the purpose of discovering Aramaic documents belonging to the old Jewish colony." There is more in this than meets the eye, and we must not forget that an eminent French scholar also journeyed to Elephantinê for the same purpose but met with relatively little success. Professor Margoliouth then proceeds to state that "the first papyrus edited by Dr. Sachau looked in facsimile as if it had been written very recently." But it goes without saying that the excavators, the editor, and all their colleagues were in the best position for determining such a point, and not only is it quite impossible to doubt their good faith, but even the assumption that the ground was "salted" is a very difficult one. Only the strongest reasons could allow even the surmise that they have been imposed upon, and so far no valid reason has been adduced.

The suggestions already noticed are enhanced by Professor Margoliouth's remark that the spelling *Kanbuzi* for Cambyses has "a savour of the German pronunciation of the name." This damning statement, if made at all, ought to have been made more complete. In Assyrian and Egyptian the name Cambyses appears as Kambuziya (Schrader, *C.O.T.*) and *Kambathet* (Petrie), and although I am unable to decide whether

Kanbuzi savours of the German, surely there is not the slightest necessity to bring in an insinuation of this character. "Savours" can hardly count in criticism, and it would be as reasonable to assert that the name Cambyses "savours" of the two ancient English universities—Camb-Isis! Nay, more, Professor Margoliouth notes that some of the papyri "appear to reckon value in modern Egyptian piastres, כרשן, on the supposition that the name is connected with *Cyrus*, whereas it is really the German *Groschen*; the error, which consists in substituting a K for a Q is a natural one." But although the modern piastre (*kirsh*) derives its name from the German, is it credible that a forger would introduce a modern term and mis-spell it in order to show a connexion with the name Cyrus? So far as I can recollect none of the scholars—who naturally regard the papyri as genuine—have thought of associating the term in the papyri with Cyrus, and the connexion seems extremely improbable. Elsewhere the papyri use terms of excellent reputation (e.g. shekel, stater).

Professor Margoliouth has taken the responsibility of a very serious suggestion which, however, brings difficulties that will occur to every reader. Of course, if he is correct, our genius of a forger, like most criminals, has "dropped a few bricks" over his Cambyses and "piastres," but is it not obvious that this theory raises immense difficulties? Besides, *if*—and it is a big "if"—these or some of these papyri are forgeries, we should not forget that the handwriting differs slightly—more than one forger is involved, unless, of course, he is exceedingly clever and crafty. Moreover, he must evidently be a linguist of the very first rank, seeing that he employs terms which are intelligible (and that often not with any certainty) only to experts in Assyrian, Armenian, ancient and modern Persian, etc. As a matter of fact, the character of the vocabulary (p. 71 *seq.*) is strong evidence in

favour of genuineness, since the mixture is a feature found in Biblical Aramaic, and to some extent in contemporary Assyrian tablets; and it is precisely in harmony with the historical conditions of the Persian age.

Professor Margoliouth also asserts that "it was not natural to find in Elephantinê a document sent from Elephantinê"; not until the seventh century A.D. did the Arabs begin to keep *state-documents* (the italics are his). The first statement is too subjective, the second is irrelevant—a great gap severs the rise of Arab culture from that of the Hebrews. Unless the old Jewish historians were familiar with the custom of keeping copies of documents, they would not quote (or profess to quote) letters sent from Solomon to Hiram, from Tattenai to Darius or from Rehum and Shimshai to Artaxerxes. Professor Margoliouth is here referring to the record wherein the Jews of Elephantinê, in sore distress at the overthrow of their holy temple, beg for permission to rebuild it. It is hardly just, therefore, to say: "a begging letter [*sic*!] is not a state-document, and we should still less expect a copy of it to be kept." We must not judge Oriental things from the scrupulosity of a modern European critic—as Professor Sayce would say (pp. 422, 425)—and it so happens that a *second* copy of this record was found at Elephantinê, and with several instructive and intelligible variants. Once more our forger, dangerously clever, though uncommonly stupid in the Cambyses-Groschen affair, has realised the value of giving an air of verisimilitude to his otherwise bald and unconvincing knaveries, or—the supposition of forgery is the height of hyper-scepticism.

The forger by his ingenuity *may* of course outwit the simple scholar, but as a general rule he is not anxious to be found out. Now, Professor Margoliouth has emphasised the fact that the papyri include fragments of the Behistun inscription of Darius and of the story of Ahikar. When there were

rumours of this some time ago the liveliest interest was aroused, because the former is romantically bound up with the rise of Assyriology, and the latter has become well known through recent editions of the Syriac and other versions, and through its points of contact with the book of Tobit and early popular and gnomic literature. Here, then, were two sources clearly calculated to attract the attention of a fairly considerable section of Semitic students. Professor Margoliouth, however, asserts : " it may be observed that a skilful forger who in these days wished to father documents on a community of the fifth century B.C. would almost certainly select the Behistun inscription and the story of Ahikar " (p. 71). No one would dream of saying this unless he was actuated by the belief that they *were* forgeries. But viewed critically this statement is absolutely valueless unless a reason be given, and we can find two. Here is one : Professor Margoliouth continues immediately : " for such persons are by no means anxious that a strong light should be shed on their works." But, in point of fact, the alleged forger has " selected " sources that could not fail to attract the attention of a great number of students of all kinds, sources that were already well known and indeed have appeared in recent editions, sources that can be tested and investigated much more readily than the other papyri, thanks to the existence of the other versions ! Far more intelligible would be the alternative reason : the forger " selected " them because they would be more interesting, valuable or marketable, and because he had Syriac, Assyrian and other soures which he, with his accomplished linguistic attainments, could readily translate into the Egyptian-Aramaic dialect. Anyone who had studied the question and who believed that the documents were forgeries would have given this and not the former reason. But even this, if it ever occurred to any one, would be inadequate, since

the papyri contain numerous variants, difficulties and other features which are not usually found in forgeries or in translations. Our forger is preternaturally clever or—scepticism has defeated itself.

To prove that the papyri are *not* forgeries is a task that cannot be performed with mathematical certainty. Clever forgeries constantly appear, the skill of the forger can deceive experts in any branch, and there might be a genius whose linguistic and other abilities far surpass the collective scholarship of to-day, whose less commendable abilities could deceive excavators and decipherers whose good faith is beyond dispute. The abstract possibility of forgery may be admitted, but since other suspicions could be readily expressed in order to cast doubt upon other material, the speedy result would be that scepticism would lead into a *cul-de-sac*. It is inevitable that suspicions should cross the mind when new material comes to light, but if criticism is to be undertaken with any intelligence and responsibility the suspicions must be tested and worked out, and it does not require "much varied knowledge" (p. 72) to determine whether the suspicions I have discussed convey anything to the reader. We have to make up our mind one way or the other. Professor Margoliouth's remarks point to a forgery and of German origin; and if this be true, it is futile to ask their bearing upon the Old Testament, and to use them to castigate the critics. This sort of criticism, in casting doubt upon the validity of certain sources, stops half-way and leaves the careful reader in a state of chaos; the ordinary reader, on the other hand, is apt to reach conclusions which may easily do the writer an injustice. You will often find this promiscuous criticism in anti-critical books; it leaves no room for development and synthesis, it is not potential, it is a sort of "hedging" which is inimical to the progress of research. But if we cannot

prove that the papyri are not forgeries, it is at least possible to show that the suspicions have no validity. They are tentative, incomplete, and extraordinarily subjective. I see no particle of evidence strong enough to make me question the authenticity of the papyri, although I cheerfully recognise that, as a matter of abstract possibility, I, in company with others, may be in the wrong. The papyri possess just those difficult features that are constantly found in other sources which we are wont to consider ancient and genuine, and to suspect them is to bring difficulties greater and graver. The supposition that there has been an outrageous fabrication proves on inspection to be so remote, so nebulous, so annihilistic of our conceptions of the human mind that it need not enter into our calculations.[1]

It is far from pleasant to have had to discuss this question, and it is a thousand pities that it has ever been raised. Suspicions may have been mooted, they have now been spread, and it is to be feared that they will be retailed by those who have not endeavoured to test the arguments for themselves. Quite apart from ethical considerations, and simply as a matter of scholarship, it is much to be hoped that others who may desire to express their doubts may consider the pros and cons more carefully, and may avoid remarks that could easily cause offence to those most intimately concerned. We have to remember, too, that the ordinary man will not carry in his head a nucleus of arguments and counter-arguments touching the genuineness of the Elephantinê papyri. He puts the conclusion in a nutshell. He may have gathered, and on high authority, that they are forgeries; he may conclude from these pages that the assumption is an

[1] I have left undiscussed other features (e.g., the character of the proper names) which bring us to the same conclusion—a forger of almost supernatural skill *or* documents, difficult enough, but reasonable when regarded as genuine.

impossible one; he may perhaps see that absolute truth is unattainable and that it is a question of the balance of probabilities, and in the last case he has learned the fundamental lesson of progressive criticism.

It is a relief to turn from a discussion of observations which would relegate the papyri to the flames to some brief remarks upon their bearing on the Old Testament. The most interesting feature, perhaps, in the articles of Professor Sayce and Professor Margoliouth is the emphasis which both rightly lay upon the difference between the Jewish religion at Elephantinê and ordinary conceptions of the worship of Yahweh. Professor Sayce points out that in Elephantinê the worship of other deities besides Yahweh was admitted, or at all events practised, the recognition of subordinate deities was not distasteful, and it is evident that the Jewish colony felt itself to be thoroughly orthodox (pp. 422–426). Professor Margoliouth, in turn, justly remarks that these Jews were entertaining "foreign cults to a degree which the stern prophets of monotheism would certainly have condemned" (p. 81), the triumph of monotheism appears to have been exceedingly late. Was this colony ignorant of or indifferent to the Law? Some may agree with Professor Margoliouth that the Sacred Books were preserved only among small and devoted circles; they were not yet generally known, the great majority of the people would have nothing to do with the ideals which make the Old Testament unique (pp. 80, 84). Others, perhaps, may agree with Professor Sayce, that though the Law was known, and although these Egyptian Jews were familiar with the Pentateuch "in substantially its present form," they believed that they were faithfully carrying out its injunctions, and if they differed from their brethren of Jerusalem, "it was a matter of interpretation only" (p. 426).

If, as I trust, I have been successful in apprehending the

views of these writers, it seems evident that the ordinary reader must revise his conceptions of biblical religion. The Jewish colony saw nothing wrong in possessing a sanctuary of their own and in recognising subordinate deities; if they cherished the Pentateuch they were able to reconcile it with their practices by a process of "interpretation" which was evidently as elastic as that which enables some modern writers to find sober history in Genesis i.–xi. But if so, we can place little reliance upon the plain meaning of a biblical source, and the Old Testament cannot be safely used as evidence for the character of the ordinary religion even of the orthodox. And this is true, also, if the sacred writings were not disseminated, if they represented only the ideals of a few, so that—to quote Professor Margoliouth—"The Law, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa therefore belonged to a small minority of the nation" (p. 84). This then is an instructive result, when we view the papyri in the light of the Old Testament *as it stands*: the Old Testament cannot be used as it stands for the religion of the Jews, even of those who might claim to be orthodox, and should we desire to go below the surface and gain some idea of what the religion was and how it developed we must employ internal criticism.

Next, the papyri make more urgent than ever an exhaustive and comprehensive criticism of the development of Jewish religion and thought. If we agree with Professor Sayce that the Mosaic legislation was known to the Jews of Elephantinê, what becomes of the theory of the post-exilic date of the "Priestly Code"? He himself draws attention to the ordinary critical view, that the post-exilic date of the literary form of these Laws is not to be confused with the date of the Laws themselves, and that some of them may doubtless have been of great antiquity (p. 432). He objects: "This is, of course, to beg the question"; but on what grounds is not clear.

He seems to confuse the attitude of the apologist with that of the inquirer. The critical theory has arisen to explain certain difficult features in the traditional view, and it will fall into the waste-paper basket as soon as another is found to offer a more adequate explanation. But none as yet has been suggested. The antiquity of the Priestly Code is no more proved by the antiquity of certain laws than is that of the Talmud by the close relationship between some of *its* features and the Laws of Hammurabi. From the critical standpoint, if the Pentateuchal legislation is of Mosaic date there are intolerable difficulties throughout the Old Testament—the Book is unintelligible; the only explanation at present is afforded by the Wellhausen literary theory, and only through it can one at present approach the investigation of these difficulties. As in the case of forgeries, the critics *may*—in the abstract—be hopelessly misled, but their opponents are under an obligation to produce something that will settle those preliminary difficulties, the existence of which has given birth to modern criticism. To suppose that these difficulties have been invented or manufactured is as incorrect as to suppose that the problems in other fields of life, now crying for simplification, are equally non-existent, or, at least, exist only in the minds of those who recognise them. The fact is that they *force* themselves, and—so far as regards the Old Testament—it is for us to determine whether to ignore them, obscure them, or to work them out with the aid of all the gifts and material with which we are endowed.

Let us return to Professor Sayce's view of the antiquity of the Mosaic legislation which, he argues, was known at Elephantinê. What is its relationship to the Law, the promulgation of which is ascribed to Ezra? He points out *à propos* of the critical view above mentioned, that the Jews sent their petition to Palestine some time after the promul-

gation of Ezra's law, and he says, " if their ceremonial usages really rested upon an older tradition and sanction than the newly introduced Law-book of the priests at Jerusalem they are not likely to have been silent about it " (p. 433). It is not easy to deal with an argument based upon what is or is not "likely," but in point of fact these Jews refer neither to the Pentateuch (which on Professor Sayce's theory they already knew) nor to any other source which a critical theory might expect, and it is very hard to understand how this argument from silence can be used. The old difficulties still remain and are as obvious as ever. It may, no doubt, seem simple to argue that the Jews of Elephantinê had the Pentateuch but saw no inconsistency between it and their position, and this appears to be Professor Sayce's standpoint (see p. 422). The Jews must have believed themselves to be thoroughly orthodox, and this will apply also to those of Judah. Various reforms are ascribed to certain of the Judaean kings, but Josiah is the first who is said to have made the central sanctuary an accomplished fact. Kings so highly praised as Jehoash, Amaziah, Uzziah and Hezekiah tolerated the high-places, whereas in the time of Josiah they are found to be unorthodox. This can only mean that the ordinary interpretation of Deuteronomy was not realised until many centuries after the time of Moses, and it is precisely this which combines with many other features to make the problems of the Old Testament so perplexing. The more new discoveries *appear* to confirm the ordinary traditional attitude to the Old Testament the more necessary it is to examine patiently and thoroughly whether the problems that have exercised some generations of students are or are not simplified or solved—merely to shelve them does not augur well for the furtherance of biblical research, but this is what is constantly done by those who are blinded by " the Light from the East."

The object of progressive criticism is not merely to defend a

position but to strengthen and improve it, or to replace it by a better. At the present day there is a noticeable twofold tendency towards a position more "radical" and towards one more "conservative." Should the latter leave the numerous *internal* difficulties in the Old Testament untouched, the position will be a decadence, inimical to the study of the Bible. Should the alternative tendency succeed in placing it in a form that will make it appeal both to the masses and to the more intellectual—and the needs of both *must* be kept in view—the possibility of increasing its influence will be obvious.

And this, I believe, will result. In the meanwhile, whatever be our standpoints, it is clear from the Elephantinê papyri that Hebrew religion cannot be estimated from the plain statement of the Old Testament. For some years we have known that the Jews of Elephantinê worshipped Yahweh, we now know that they recognised other deities; even in Palestine itself it is probable that religion was much more in touch with the ideas that prevailed over the old Oriental area than could be gathered from that evidence which makes the Old Testament unique. It is possible that some may lament that Elephantinê has not disclosed any of the sacred writings, but perhaps it is just as well. Should we recover some fragments, if they were identical with the Old Testament, the internal problems would still demand an explanation; if they were different, the work of criticism would be more intricate than it is now. Old Testament criticism is not ripe for sensational discoveries, and so far from considering that the papyri are "most disappointing" (Prof. Margoliouth, p. 69) we should perhaps be thankful that no portions of the biblical books have come to light to embarrass a criticism already sufficiently hampered by a promiscuity of method and by a too frequent superficial acquaintance with the relevant data. Perhaps it is as well

that we should first assimilate the significance of extant material for the development of Hebrew history and religion, and that we should be preparing ourselves for a more serious disturbance of current conceptions. So far as I can see there can be only one sequel to the great mass of material bearing upon ancient Palestine, only one sequel to the tendencies of studies in anthropology, archæology, history and the comparative study of religions ; and the converging lines warn us to refrain from insisting upon the Old Testament as an accurate or trustworthy record of the development of Hebrew history and religion. And the more we may be compelled to look upon the Bible primarily as the outcome of varieties of ancient religious experience the more easily shall we be able to make it once more the greatest book in the world. This is the object of progressive criticism, and I rejoice that the Elephantinê papyri provide another link in the chain of objective evidence.

In conclusion, those who are at all disturbed by any "radical" tendencies of criticism must perceive that they arise out of the keen consciousness of a gap between the Old Testament and individual experience (knowledge, etc.). Most people, I suppose, are "conservative" as regards some aspects of thought and action, and "radical" as regards others ; and if "criticism" is to be employed in all the problems of life, we have to realise that, though our opponents are actuated by the best of motives according to their own lights, the general welfare of us all depends upon the employment of the best weapons. The failure of the "conservative" position is due to its inability to propose a constructive policy ; that of its opponents may be wrong, but it must be proved to be so by means of these weapons. This has not been done, and partly because *its* opponents do not understand it. So long as "conservative" criticism fails to cover the relevant field of evidence,

is unable to produce an alternative position for research, and indulges in that promiscuity of method to which I have referred in these pages, so long can it hardly claim to be of any *direct* assistance to biblical studies. This is not to say that the "critical" position is perfect or beyond reproach. Far from it. But it realises its own difficulties—and far more clearly than do its opponents—it is aware of the imperfections of its tools, and seeks to improve them; while in dealing with certain real difficulties, which are intimately connected with the present unrest in this age of transition, it would endeavour to do in one of the many aspects of life what its opponents are doubtless doing in others—to solve or at least to simplify grave problems.

STANLEY A. COOK.

ACHIKAR AND THE ELEPHANTINÊ PAPYRI.

(*To the Editor of the* EXPOSITOR.)

DEAR SIR,—

I cannot pretend to have formed any opinion about the problems which have been raised by the wonderful discovery of the Elephantinê papyri, or about the way in which these affect Old Testament history; but as co-editor (with Dr Rendel Harris) of the Story of Achikar, I feel constrained to reply to some of my esteemed friend Professor Margoliouth's remarks in your January number, and in the *Expository Times* for February, and specially to his doubts about their genuineness. In these doubts I cannot follow him.

I have many reasons for being sincerely grateful to the very learned Oxford professor for his many acts of kindness to my sister and to myself. And none of his many friends has a greater admiration for his brilliant gifts than I. But