

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 Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

Biblical Archaeology and the Higher Criticism.

BY A. H. SAYCE, LL.D., PROFESSOR OF ASSYRIOLOGY, OXFORD.

“Two truths cannot be contradictory.” So we are told, and in this abstract form the assertion is, doubtless, correct. But what is meant by a “truth” is generally the statement of what we believe to be the truth, and it will be easily seen that such statements may be either actually or apparently inconsistent with one another. We can never know all the facts connected with a given subject; indeed, the fact itself is but a generalisation from a limited series of phenomena. Hence it is quite possible for two statements to be each of them quite true in its own sphere,—an accurate representation of the facts with which it deals, so far as they are known,—and yet at the same time to be apparently irreconcilable. A certain group of facts, for instance, leads us to conclude that space is boundless; but there are other psychological facts which oblige us just as imperatively to maintain that the universe is finite.

When modern astronomy first began to find adherents, and again when geology began to take rank as a science, various attempts were made to “reconcile,” as it was termed, the records of the Bible with the new scientific teaching. Such attempts are even now made from time to time, though it has at last been recognised that the student of theology and the astronomer or geologist deal with different branches of research, with different sets of facts, and that consequently they must necessarily move in different spheres. Not until we know all the facts connected with astronomy or geology on the one hand, and with theology on the other, will it be time to form a science which shall embrace all alike. Then and then only will it be possible to solve the seeming contradictions which exist between the conclusions of the two lines of inquiry, and to construct a “harmony” which shall be a harmony indeed.

The controversy carried on between the advocates of science and the advocates of the traditional interpretation of the Bible has in these latter years shifted its ground. Theology has at last been content to leave science alone to work out its results in its own way and its own sphere; and science in its turn is ceasing to occupy itself with framing new theological systems. It is no longer the bearing of physical science upon the state-

ments of Scripture that arouses the war-cry of the controversialist, but the character and authenticity of those statements themselves. The “higher criticism” claims to sit in judgment on the traditions or beliefs of preceding centuries, and by the application of a more rigorous method of investigation, and of the principles of modern scientific thought to reverse or modify them.

The term “higher criticism” is an unfortunate one. It has the appearance of pretentiousness, and it may be feared that in some cases it has led to the unconscious assumption of a tone of superiority on the part of its professors and their followers. But in reality the word “higher” is used only in order to distinguish the form of criticism to which it is applied from textual criticism. Textual or “lower” criticism is mainly mechanical; the “higher” criticism requires a power of sifting and weighing evidence, and of balancing probabilities one against the other.

Its sphere of work is twofold. On the one hand, it investigates the age and composition of the documents with which it deals; on the other hand, the historical credibility of the narratives which these documents contain. In the one case, its object is literary analysis; in the other, historical criticism. But it is obvious that the two objects are closely connected with each other; the historical credibility of a narrative often depends largely on the age of the documents in which it is found, or the character of their authors; while the results of literary analysis can be best verified, in many instances, by an appeal to history. If, for instance, it could be shown by the historical critic that there are two inconsistent accounts of the geography of the Exodus, one placing the passage of the sea in the Gulf of Aqabah, and the other at the head of the Gulf of Suez, and further that the lines of division between the two accounts correspond with the lines of division in the composition of the Book of Exodus presupposed by the literary analyst, we should have an important verification of the accuracy of the literary analysis, at all events in this particular instance.

The general results of literary analysis have had much to do with the judgment passed on the earlier narratives of the Old Testament Scriptures.

As long as it was believed that the Pentateuch was written by Moses, it followed that the account of the Exodus and of the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert could be accepted without question. But the case is altered if we accept the conclusions of the most recent school of criticism, and not only regard the Hexateuch as a composite work, but also hold that it did not assume its present form until after the Exile. During the long centuries which intervened between the age of Moses and that of Ezra, the earlier history of the Israelitish people would have had time to be forgotten, and to be replaced by legendary tradition or even conscious fiction. Deprived of the support of contemporaneous testimony, the story of the legislation in the Wilderness, and the subsequent conquest of Canaan, could offer little resistance to the assaults of historical criticism. Criticism, consequently, had little difficulty in showing that it was improbable and self-contradictory, borrowing many of its details from a state of things that did not exist until the age of the Exile, and filled with that atmosphere of miracle which we find in the pre-literary traditions of most nations.

The conclusions of the "higher criticism" were supported by an assumption and a tendency. The assumption was that writing was unknown to the Israelites, or even to the Canaanites, in the age of the Exodus. At the most, it was believed, they could engrave inscriptions on wood or stone; books were the product of a later and more cultured time. The tendency was the extreme scepticism with which the early periods of secular history were regarded. The more exact method of investigating ancient history and demanding adequate evidence for its statements, which had been made popular by Niebuhr, had resulted in making Greek history a blank page before the epoch of Peisistratos, and in refusing credit to the history of Rome before its capture by the Gauls. In Sir George Cornwall Lewis this tendency reached its extreme point. For him the history of civilisation, and therefore of accurately known facts, begins with Herodotos and Thukydidês, and the counter-evidence of the monuments of Egypt and Assyria was got rid of by maintaining that they neither had been nor could be deciphered.

But Sir George Cornwall Lewis was scarcely dead before the reaction began. What the higher critics had so successfully demolished was again built up by the spade of the excavator and the

patient skill of the decipherer. Schliemann, strong in a belief which no amount of skilful dialectic could shake, dug up the ruins of Troy and Mykenæ and Tiryns, and demonstrated that the old tales about the splendour and culture of the Akhæan princes, and of their intercourse with the shores of Asia Minor, were, after all, not so very far from the truth. Undeterred by the *à priori* demonstrations of Sir George Cornwall Lewis and his reviewers, the decipherers pursued their labours among the inscriptions of Egypt and Assyria, and reconstructed the lost history of the ancient Oriental world. And what was even more important, they proved that the reading and writing of books was centuries older than the classical age of Greece; that ages before the time of Moses, or even of Abraham, libraries existed where scribes and readers were constantly at work, while literary intercourse was carried on from the banks of the Euphrates to those of the Nile.

Schliemann has been followed by many rivals in the field of excavation, and the small band of Orientalists who ventured to explore the unknown regions of Egyptian and Assyrian research at the risk of being accused of charlatanism, or neglect of exact philology, have now become a goodly company. Discovery has crowded upon discovery, each more marvellous than the last, until the student has come to believe, that as in physical science, so too in Oriental archæology, all things are possible.

Naturally, the "higher criticism" is disinclined to see its assumptions swept away along with the conclusions which are based upon them, and to sit humbly at the feet of the newer science. At first, the results of Egyptian or Assyrian research were ignored; then they were reluctantly admitted, so far as they did not clash with the preconceived opinions of the "higher" critics. It was urged, unfortunately with too much justice, that the decipherers were not, as a rule, trained critics, and that in the enthusiasm of research they often announced discoveries which proved to be false or only partially correct. But it must be remembered, on the other side, that this charge applies with equal force to all progressive studies, not excluding the "higher criticism" itself.

The time is now come for confronting the conclusions of the "higher criticism," so far as it applies to the books of the Old Testament, with the ascertained results of modern Oriental research. The amount of certain knowledge now possessed

by the Egyptologist and Assyriologist would be surprising to those who are not specialists in their branches of study, while the discovery of the Tel-el-Amarna tablets has poured a flood of light upon the ancient world, which is at once startling and revolutionary. As in the case of Greek history, so too in that of Israelitish history, the period of critical demolition is at an end, and it is time for the archæologist to reconstruct the fallen edifice.

But the very word "reconstruct" implies that what is built again will not be exactly that which existed before. It implies that the work of the "higher criticism" has not been in vain; on the contrary, the work it has performed has been a very

needful and important one, and in its own sphere has helped us to the discovery of the truth. Egyptian or Assyrian research has not corroborated every historical statement which we find in the Old Testament any more than classical archæology has corroborated every statement which we find in the Greek writers; what it has done has been to show that the extreme scepticism of modern criticism is not justified, that the materials on which the history of Israel has been based may, and probably do, go back to an early date, and that much which the "higher" critics have declared to be mythical and impossible was really possible and true. The justification of these assertions must be deferred to another article.

Christ's Appeal to the Old Testament.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR S. R. DRIVER, D.D., OXFORD.

From the Preface to *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 1891.

It is objected that some of the conclusions of critics respecting the Old Testament are incompatible with the authority of our blessed Lord, and that in loyalty to Him we are precluded from accepting them. That our Lord appealed to the Old Testament as the record of a revelation in the past, and as pointing forward to Himself, is undoubted; but these aspects of the Old Testament are perfectly consistent with a critical view of its structure and growth. That our Lord in so appealing to it designed to pronounce a verdict on the authorship and age of its different parts, and to foreclose all future inquiry into these subjects, is an assumption for which no sufficient ground can be alleged. Had such been His aim, it would have been out of harmony with the entire method and tenor of His teaching. In no single instance (so far as we are aware) did He anticipate the results of scientific inquiry or historical research. The aim of His teaching was a religious one; it was to set before men the pattern of a perfect life, to move them to imitate it, to bring them to Himself. He accepted, as the basis of His teaching, the opinions respecting the Old Testament current around Him; He assumed, in His allusions to it, the premises which His opponents recognised, and which could not have been questioned (even had it been necessary to question them) without raising issues for which the time was not yet ripe, and which, had they been raised, would have interfered seriously with the paramount purpose of His life.¹

¹ See especially the discussion of our Lord's reference to Ps. cx. in the seventh of Mr. Gore's "Bampton Lectures." It does not seem requisite for the present purpose, as, indeed, within the limits of a Preface it would not be possible, to

There is no record of the question, whether a particular portion of the Old Testament was written by Moses, or David, or Isaiah having been ever submitted to Him; and had it been so submitted, we have no means of knowing what His answer would have been. The purposes for which our Lord appealed to the Old Testament, its prophetic significance, and the spiritual lessons deducible from it, are not, as has been already remarked above, affected by critical inquiries. Criticism in the hands of Christian scholars does not banish or destroy the inspiration of the Old Testament; it *presupposes* it; it seeks only to determine the conditions under which it operates, and the literary forms through which it manifests itself; and it thus helps us to frame truer conceptions of the methods which it has pleased God to employ in revealing Himself to His ancient people of Israel, and in preparing the way for the fuller manifestation of Himself in Christ Jesus.

consider whether our Lord, as man, possessed all knowledge, or whether a limitation in this, as in other respects—though not, of course, of such a kind as to render Him fallible as a teacher—was involved in that gracious act of condescension, in virtue of which He was willing "in all things to be made like unto His brethren" (Heb. ii. 17). On this subject a reference to the sixth of the lectures just mentioned must suffice. The questions touched upon in the latter part of the preceding Preface are also thoughtfully handled by Bishop Moorhouse in his volume, entitled *The Teaching of Christ* (1891), Sermons I. and II. And since this note was in type, there have appeared two essays, one by A. Plummer, D.D., in the *Expositor* for July 1891, on "The Advance of Christ in *Σοφία*," the other, *An Inquiry into the Nature of our Lord's Knowledge as Man*, by the Rev. W. S. Swayne, with a Preface by the Bishop of Salisbury, each meriting calm and serious consideration.