

Malcolm White

Professor Smith's Article
on
"Hebrew Language and Literature"

BS1171
.S663W5

CAVIT



B. 5. 11

58

1171
63W5

*Professor Smith's Article on "Hebrew
Language and Literature"*

BY THE

REV. MALCOLM ✓ WHITE, M.A.,

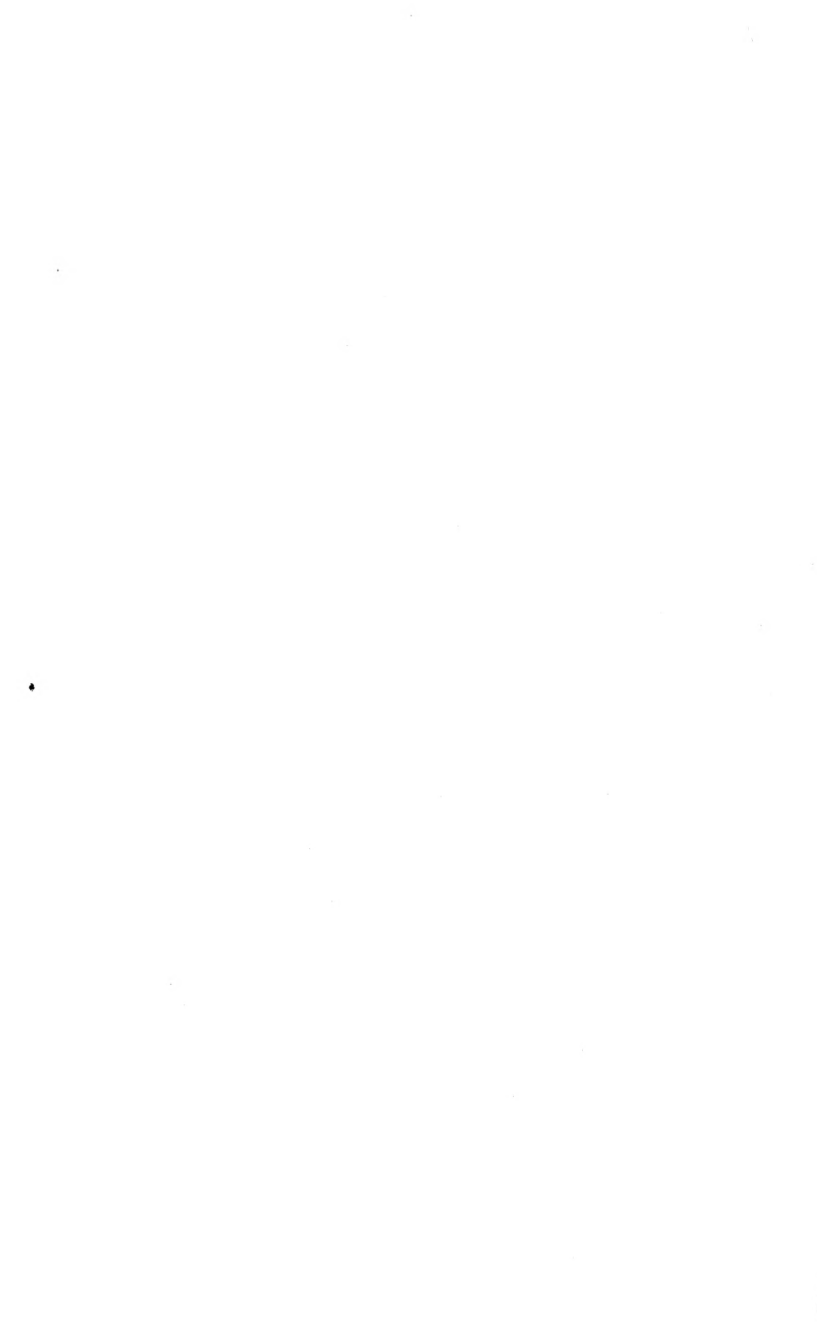
Free South Church, Blairgowrie,

Author of "The Symbolical Numbers of Scripture," &c.

SECOND EDITION.

PRICE FOURPENCE.

J. MACLAREN & SON, EDIN.



*Prof. W. R. Smith's Article on "Hebrew
Language and Literature"*

IN THE

ELEVENTH VOLUME OF THE
ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA.

BY THE

REV. MALCOLM ✓ WHITE, M.A.,

Free South Church, Blairgowrie,

AUTHOR OF "THE SYMBOLICAL NUMBERS OF SCRIPTURE," ETC.

SECOND EDITION.

EDINBURGH: JOHN MACLAREN & SON.

1880.

“HEBREW LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE.”

OUR Confession of Faith speaks of the “majesty of the style” of Scripture, the consent of all the parts, and its “many other incomparable excellencies,” as arguments whereby “it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.” It also speaks of the Old Testament and the New as being by “God’s singular care and providence kept pure in all ages,” so that in all controversies of religion the Church is finally to appeal unto them.

This reveals clearly enough the old ground on which our Church took its stand, while it gave to men a fair measure of liberty in the matter of critical research. But it immediately occurs to one, on reading the article on “Hebrew Language and Literature,” to ask whether the spirit of our Confessional teaching is not ignored in such utterances as the following :—

I.

1. Speaking of the Song of Solomon :—“This lyric drama has suffered much from interpolation, and presumably was not written down till a comparatively late date, and from imperfect recollection, so that its original shape is very much lost.

2. "The memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, the colourless narrative of the Chronicles, and even the Book of Esther, are singularly destitute of literary merit.

3. "The Chronicler," that is, the writer, or at least the last editor of the Books of Chronicles, "no longer thoroughly understood the old Hebrew sources from which he worked."

It may confidently be affirmed that, in the mode of handling Scripture adopted in this article, there is an utter and almost unaccountable contrariety in tone to that which the Confession of Faith would suggest, and which any Church desirous to keep in the lines of these standards will demand, in the utterances of its ministers and professors.

As to the so-called "Chronicler," may it not be right to ask how far the view presented of his ignorance of Hebrew has carried our professor in the dependence he puts on any of the historical statements, or on minute phrases with historical bearings, which the Chronicler may employ? That this is not asked without ground will be conceded by all who are familiar with recent discussions in our Church Courts; but, as there may be a natural wish to leave these in the past, let us pass at once to the consideration of a further topic.

II.

In the second place, then, reference may be made to the complete revolution which would be effected by this article in the case of many of the books of the Bible.

1. To begin with *Genesis*. Instead of the stories of

Joseph and Jacob coming to us confirmed by the name of Moses, they were not written till after the time of David.

2. Instead of *Exodus* being from the pen of Moses, "it may fairly be made a question whether Moses left in writing any other laws than the Commandments on the Tables of Stone."

3. *Leviticus* must belong, as a written book, to the time after Ezekiel, for *the lines on which the systematization of the law at length proceeded were first drawn by that prophet.*

4. Generally, as to the books known in our Lord's time and ever since as the books of Moses: "The best written and most brilliant part of the narrative of the Pentateuch—the combined history of the Jehovist and the non-Levitical Elohist—appears to be unquestionably earlier than the rise of prophetic literature in the 8th century B.C." That is, the narrative or historical portion of the Pentateuch can fairly be reckoned as written down earlier than the time of Hezekiah, but the rest of the Pentateuch was probably much later. No part of the Pentateuch, or of any other Bible history could apparently be written before the time of David; for "the story of the early fortunes of the nation down to the time of David often presents characteristics which point to oral tradition as its original source."

5. This disposes, of course, of *Joshua* and *Judges*.

6. *Ruth*—what is it? A "graceful prose idyll," *which has a natural affinity to the Psalms written after the days of Ezra.*

7. It is conceded regarding the Books of *Samuel* that the older parts must have been written not long after the time of David, and "are framed in a masterly style." One would gladly learn what the more modern parts of these historical books are, and how they deserve to be characterized; for it is the books, as they left the hands of the last inspired editor, in which the Church is peculiarly interested.

8. To the period also of literary power, as it is termed, between the time of David and Hosea, "may be assigned the most interesting and graphic histories in the Book of *Kings*, the splendid episode of Elijah, and other remains of Ephraïtic history." What the Church wants to know, and may feel in duty bound to discover from the Professor, is his estimate of the worth of the other parts of the Books of *Kings*, written presumably at a later date, and neither so interesting nor so graphic. It is the final result, as it left the pen of the last divinely authorised editor, with which the Church must concern itself; and, in this view, the praise of "the splendid episode of Elijah" is by no means assuring, unless the whole book is trustworthy in points of historical detail.

9. This brings us to the *Chronicles*, of the inferior worth of which, unless in the way of showing priestly tendencies, we are not left in any great measure of doubt.

10. About *Ezra*, *Nehemiah*, and *Esther*, little need be said, seeing "they are singularly destitute of literary merit."

But, observe, in these few sentences all the so-called historical books of the Old Testament have been gone

over, and one can only ask, after this riddling process, what they seem to be worth? Are any of them reliable throughout? Do they, as they were when Christ and His apostles read out of them, convey the exact truth, either as to Judah's history, or the history of the ten tribes that revolted under Rehoboam? So far from this, there is a theory always appearing about "the political and *social* superiority of Ephraim before the conflict with Assyria," which throws discredit on the view of Israel's history given by Bible writers.

It is only what is due by the Church, to ascertain all that is involved under the ambiguous expression about the *social* superiority of the ten tribes over the tribe that remained faithful to David. The word seems part of a system which would change altogether the verdict Scripture writers pronounce upon the house and kingdom of Jeroboam. It belongs to a theory which makes the ten tribes the noblest, and most conservative, and most truly religious portion of the land. This theory it is which takes the Song of Solomon to reflect the faithfulness of the North to the God of truth, against the seductions of the Court and the temple worship at Jerusalem. Now, this utter overthrowing of the verdict of the final and inspired editors of Bible books is what savours to many of worse than presumption. The place assigned on this theory to the Song of Songs is to them only less abhorrent than the idea that there are in the poem impure suggestions. The possibility of such a charge being brought against the Song, and of such a purpose being assigned to it, is what no Church which is faithful to our

present Canon of Scripture is able to allow. Men may differ in their interpretation of the Song. So long as they hold it to be pure in all its suggestions, they may see in it the reflection of what is divine, and may, by different paths, arrive at the reverence which has been entertained for the book all through the Christian centuries, and earlier; but, when men begin to speak of the *tempted* bride in the Song, and to regard the book as upsetting alike traditional and inspired views regarding the sin of Jeroboam and his people, there is utmost danger of the shipwreck of more than one book of Scripture. It is not the place of Canticles in the Canon which alone is jeopardized; for, when the view which the historical books of the Bible present of the position of the ten tribes in regard to the law of God and His worship at Jerusalem is reckoned an utterly misleading and altogether false one, the claim which these books make to be admitted in their present form into the Canon is seriously impaired.

In reference to the other books of the Bible a few notes may suffice—

1. Solomon is left without the *Proverbs* or any other book being attributed to him. "The earliest distinct trace of literary cultivation of this (proverbial) philosophy, which, from its nature must at first have passed unwritten from mouth to mouth, is the collection of ancient proverbs by scholars in the service of Hezekiah."

2. *Ecclesiastes* was only written "at the close of the Old Testament period."

Now, on the mere ground of dogmatism, exception

might be taken to such sweeping assertions, which place the last editors of these Bible books in a position either so foolish or so false. Why the Proverbs should be reft away from the name of Israel's wise king, it might be hard to tell. In regard to *Ecclesiastes*, till reasons are assigned, it can only be said that those which hitherto have been reckoned by some as conclusive, appear to others singularly the reverse. Capital has lately been made out of the hesitating adhesion of the late Dr. Weir to the popular critical view. From his article in Fairbairn's *Dictionary*, however, it can be seen that the then powerful influence of Hengstenberg had persuaded him, against his better judgment, to yield to the critics. Turning to Hengstenberg himself, it will be found that the point he could not get over was the attributing to Solomon of the following sentiment :—Eccl. iv. 1, "So I considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun : and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter ; and on the side of the oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter." These words are reckoned inapplicable to Israel in the glorious reign of Solomon. But, might they not describe the state of the world at large, seeing Solomon ruled to the Euphrates ? Before such arguments, it is shameful that at home men should yield, although there may be all sympathy with believing theologians on the Continent, who find the tide so strong against them, and must often be tempted, by the very sympathy of scholarship, to make concessions which at the moment look to be of little consequence.

3. The latter portion of *Isaiah*, as was to be expected, is attributed to another pen from that which wrote the first part. Not only so, but we are left in utter uncertainty as to the consistency of the first part in the form in which it has come down through the ages. For it is said: "There are other short prophecies of the Babylonian age, as *Isaiah* xiii. and xiv., which seem to have been first published as anonymous broadsides." How many more such broadsides may be incorporated in the so-called writings of *Isaiah* is not said. Only, the Professor has already proclaimed the principle which must guide us in all such cases, even this, that the prophet spoke directly to his own time. This, however, does not help, as it is capable of a double meaning, and on this point it is of vital importance that the Church should satisfy itself as to what is really maintained. Is the foresight of prophecy, or the utterance specifically of what reflects to the future, impossible, except in regard to what reflects general Messianic hopes? It has of late been maintained that the question of the unity of *Isaiah* is one merely of fact, not of faith. At any moment it may become a question of faith. If the partition of *Isaiah* is grounded on a special theory of prophecy which is to dominate the Word of God, then at once the domain of faith is assailed.

The question is, Could *Isaiah*, in Hezekiah's time, utter the predictions found in his book as to Babylon? Two answers, neither of them complete without the other, may be returned. (1.) The position of Babylon in Hezekiah's days, as evidenced by Scripture and profane

history, may well have been such as to render the denunciations of the prophet quite intelligible to the men of his own generation, and applicable to their spiritual wants. (2.) Such parts of these denunciations as are predictive are quite covered by Old Testament and New Testament views as to the possibility of God, through His prophets, revealing the future.

The former answer may admit of fair controversy among believing men. Is the second at liberty to be denied in our Evangelical Churches?

4. *Daniel* is assigned to the time of the Maccabees. In this case it is hard to enter into controversy without uttering what may give offence. How can the form of Daniel's prophecies be justified, if they were all written after the event? What worth attaches to that book, which yet our Lord quotes in circumstances of such solemnity, as the prophet Daniel? Our Lord's testimony and the testimony of His apostles, is that about which men are really concerned, in the midst of the ruins created by present Hebrew criticism. Did St. John base his Apocalypse on a book which ought rather to have been discredited, if he knew the false conceptions it had tended to create? Did our Redeemer refer to guidance which might be derived from the study of Daniel's predictions, when a fuller knowledge of critical opinions would have led Him to question whether any predictions proper had ever been uttered by the sage? Or, was our Lord merely conforming to the prejudices abroad in His time? Such questions as these imperatively demand an answer, before we can have confidence in minister or

professor who seems willing to raise them. The divine knowledge of Christ as our Teacher is involved.

5. Even in the matter of *Ezekiel*, no church which is aware of all underlying the hypothesis, will lend itself to the supposition that the prophet merely presented a programme of what the returning exiles should carry out in Jerusalem. The River of Life of which he speaks is no earthly Siloam, and the divisions of the good land on which his eye rests are hardly meant for mere engineers and surveyors. The spiritual aspects of Ezekiel's writings, which Dr. Fairbairn taught us to conserve, will not lightly be laid aside in favour of another Free Church writer in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, who makes the prophet discover, in seventeen years, that his predictions had not been verified in the way he anticipated, so that he had to amend their form and change their primary significance.

6. It would seem absolutely necessary still further, before allowing the professor to continue his work in the Church, that his own view about *Jonah* should be ascertained. The following is what he chooses to throw out:—

“Along with this (the Midrash, or sermonizing treatment of the old history) came the beginnings of Haggada, the formation of parables and tales attached to historical names, of which the Book of Jonah is generally taken as an early example, and which attains much greater dimensions in the apocryphal additions to the Hagiographa.”

Will it be said that a minister or professor can with

impunity declare that the Book of Jonah is a parable or tale attached to a historical name? This view of Jonah is, we are told, the general opinion, without a word to guard against the supposition that it is Professor Smith's own opinion. And this, after all that had come and gone before October 1879! One need not speak of the apparent unfairness to the Church which might be discovered here; but surely no one will deny that now, at all events, the Church is entitled to know what the Professor maintains, before Presbyteries be required to express their confidence, by allowing students to attend the Aberdeen Hall.

III.

For, in the third place, it is necessary to speak more definitely about the bearing of these speculations on the Gospels, and the general authority of New Testament Scripture.

1. That our Lord, as man, did believe in the Book of Jonah as a veritable history, few who would deal honestly with Scripture will be prepared to deny. Such, I understand, is the position even of Dr. Samuel Davidson. He holds that the version given of our Lord's words in Matthew makes Jesus responsible for the view that there was the miraculous in Jonah's history, and that there was a real and historical repentance occasioned by his preaching in Nineveh. Only, since common sense apparently would question the strange story as found in the page of Old Testament Scripture, so common sense should lead us to the conclusion that the error is in

Matthew's report of our Lord's words. If we knew exactly what Jesus said, it might be found that He expressed no belief in the actuality of the marvellous incidents, which, indeed, have given but little trouble to those who have firmly held by the miraculous in the "episode of Elijah," and the other histories on which our Lord based His whole teaching.

Is it an improper question to ask whether this, or some similar view, is adopted by the Professor, in relation to the words of Jesus? Does he regard the report of Matthew, in the form of the gospel possessed by us, as final and authoritative? If so, does he reckon the words of Jesus as binding us to believe that the Book of Jonah is no mere tale or parable? Will it be said in this case, as in that of Moses, that the words of our Lord do not fairly bear the stress laid on them when brought into opposition with a certain drift and current of modern criticism. We may be warned that this involves the subject of the Incarnation. Our answer is, that the divinity of our Lord seems to be necessarily involved in these discussions; and, so long as this is the case, conscience cannot be at rest, and confidence cannot be yielded. It is impossible to hold that the authority of New Testament Scripture is independent of these forms of criticism.

The boldness of the question put may be pardoned, if not justified, by what Professor Smith has himself written. When warding off attacks on his well-known view regarding a section of Deuteronomy, in his "Additional Answer to the Libel," p. 88, he says—"The last main argument which is used against the critical view is

that derived from the testimony of our Lord. In Matt. xix. 8, and Mark x. 5, the Old Testament law of divorce is called Mosaic. The words, ‘Moses *wrote this precept*’ occur in Mark, but not in Matthew; which shows that the evangelists are not reporting our Lord’s words verbally, and that nothing can be based on mere verbal points.” This, it must be acknowledged, is one of those unsatisfactory sentences which may mean much or little, and which, occurring so frequently in Professor Smith’s writings, have not fostered the confidence his friends so lavishly express, and with which strangers find it hard fully to sympathise. Are the references to Jonah such as to show that the evangelist is *not reporting our Lord’s words verbally, and that nothing can be based on mere verbal points?* Without apprehending for a moment that such an answer will be returned, it is surely not beyond the province of the Church Courts, in the whole circumstances of our Free Church at present, to insist on some account being rendered of the apparent ease with which the history of Jonah can be sacrificed.

2. This, however, leads to another point, which crowns the difficulty many formerly felt about the relation of New Testament Scripture to the writings of Moses. It was with the utmost difficulty many accepted the most modified of all Professor Smith’s statements about the legislative part of Deuteronomy. Such men are staggered now to find that their decision reads as if it covered the whole of the Professor’s critical opinions, and they are quite as much confounded to discover that, instead of a few notes in a few chapters of Deuteronomy being the

whole subject in debate, which might leave our Lord's references to Moses untouched, "it may fairly be made a question whether Moses left in writing any other laws than the Commandments on the Tables of Stone." As these were written, according to the narrative, by the special finger of God, it follows that it may fairly be questioned whether Moses ever wrote one single word of the books which, with marvellous uniformity, have been attributed to him. The books are one great misnomer.

Even this, however, does not affect faith so directly as the words which immediately follow :—

"Even Ex. xxiv. 4, and xxxiv. 27, may in the original context have referred to the ten words alone."

Implicitly it is allowed that these verses in their present context do attribute to Moses' pen more than the words on the two Tables of Stone. This may have been an error which crept in with the change of the context, but, if so, the last divinely inspired editor knew nothing of the mistake, and left all men afterwards under a delusion till certain parties arose who were abler than he to sift the true from the false.

Admittedly the context in these two places is the same as it was in Jesus' days; and probably it will be admitted that the final editor of the Pentateuchal laws left the context in the state we find it, conveying thus a false impression, though conveying the impression he himself had.

Hitherto controversy within our Church on the subject has taken very much the following form :—

It has been argued that no consequence attaches to the

authorship of the Pentateuch. If the last editor of the collection of floating traditions and of Israelitish common law was divinely inspired, everything must be reckoned safe which the Church accounts dear. That divinely guided man would be kept, according to the usual thought of inspiration, from error. Here, however, a test case is brought under our notice by Professor Smith; and it appears that inspiration, according to the new view, does not preserve from error, or, at least, from such error as that Moses did not write certain things which are attributed to him in Scripture. The possibility of error in the page of Scripture as it left the very pens of inspired men, is the true subject of controversy. Have we a Canon of Scripture on which we can rely; and was there ever an inspiration on whose product we are able implicitly to depend?

That our Lord accepted the commonly received opinion about Moses having had some hand personally in the books bearing his name, is what an impartial reader of the gospels will readily admit. Did our Lord deem the matter to be of no great importance, and therefore a point not to be raised by Him as a moral teacher; or did He lay aside divine knowledge when He became man, so that His Word, or the indications He has given, are of no authority on these critical questions? Such matters press for solution; for few indeed will be satisfied with the assertion that, in every case where Isaiah is mentioned in Scripture, the mere book known by that name is to be thought of, and when Moses is appealed to, the man is invariably sunk out of view, and

the strange compilation known as the Pentateuch is meant.

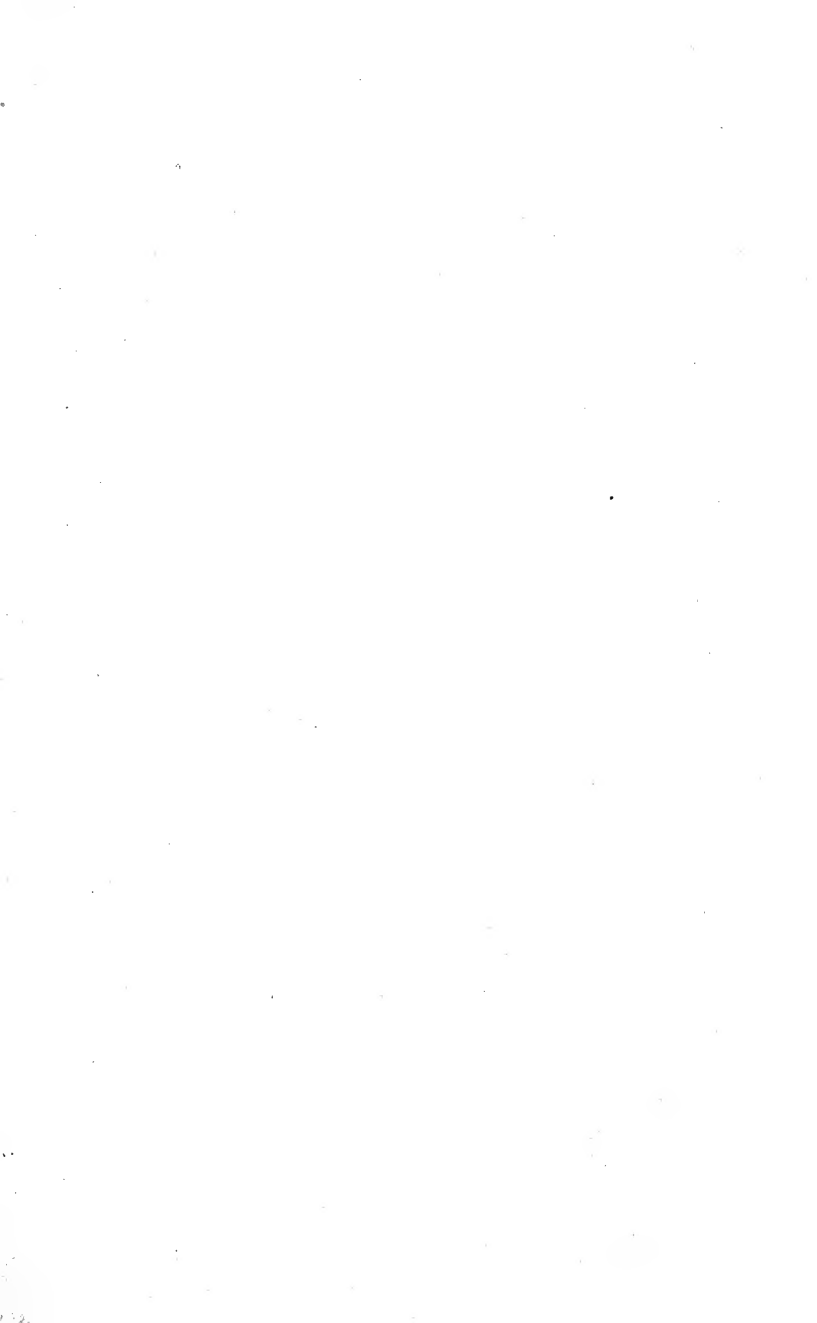
The full force of this argument is not felt when the mere quotations are treated which mention the authors of Old Testament Scripture by name. It must further be considered that the different writers of the New Testament deal with the Old as veracious in the most minute particulars. They accept historical names and incidents exactly as they lie before us in the sacred page. It is not simply on matters affecting faith or morals this holds good, but on points to which conscience can hardly be said to bear any very direct testimony. The story found in the Old Testament books is never treated as if allied to myth or fiction. Literary forms and devices seem to have no allowance made for them in the teaching of the apostles. What is in these days of ours turned upside down lay out square and straight before them. Hence at innumerable points they expose themselves to the risk of being found in collision with what is termed the higher criticism. One instance may suggest many:—

In Heb. vii. 28, it is incidentally asserted, that the "Word of the Oath" was *after* (meta ton nomon) "the Law." The context makes it plain that by the Word of the Oath the 110th Psalm is meant: "The Lord hath *sworn*, Thou art a Priest for ever." Further, the special law in view of the writer to the Hebrews at the moment, is the law pertaining to the full-orbed ritual of the day of atonement, in Lev. xvi. According to the obvious reading of Scripture history, the statement in Hebrews

is exactly as it should be. The Word of the Oath came long after the law. David was after Moses, and the 110th Psalm, a Psalm of David's, was after the development of the Levitical laws in the wilderness. But these are precisely the kind of topics which certain critics think they can handle as they list. Even the testimony of our Lord to the Davidic authorship of the 110th Psalm is most reluctantly acknowledged. Then, as to the day of atonement, whose services were the very *acme* of the priestly rites in Israel, or, if you will, marked the most advanced point of the development of Levitical ordinances, its various offerings, we are told, could not have been instituted till after the time of Ezekiel. How then could it be said that David's Psalm was after the legislation of the day of atonement? It was, in all likelihood, long centuries before; or, at least, the matter is one of utmost doubt in the self-styled school of European criticism. Both the date of the Psalm and the date of the Levitical legislation are to them matters of considerable uncertainty. May not the Church leave both points, or at least the one about the law, for the future calmly to determine? Meanwhile, however, the writer to the Hebrews dogmatizes in a way which modern criticism would hardly justify. Perhaps it may be said that, on historical themes, he adopts the language of the vulgar, or that the point in question does not affect faith, and may have been one on which he himself had no information above his fellows. Yet the author of the Hebrews chooses to bring the relation between the law and the oath thereafter to David, right into the heart of

his great argument ; and the force of the inspired argument, and, consequently, the virtue of our Christian as opposed to the Jewish position is seriously imperilled, if the writer had no warrant for saying that the ritual of Israel came first, and that its abolition and the setting up of a higher, even an eternal priesthood, were denoted by the oath of God afterwards.

What the Church must for its own safety accept, and demand from its accredited teachers, is the acknowledgment continually of the words of Jesus and His inspired ambassadors as of divine authority. Where these take to do with the domain of biblical criticism, there must be no neutrality of tone adopted, to serve any interest whatever. To leave such points open questions appears to be impossible. Faith will ever accept the words of Scripture as the very words of the God of truth.



BS1171 .S663W5
Prof. W.R. Smith's article on "Hebrew

Princeton Theological Seminary-Speer Library



1 1012 00047 7630