
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

The Historical Method and the Preacher.

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I.

The historical method has come to stay. It is the method which sets a book or a passage against its historical background and determines its meaning by its relation to that background. Its real meaning is the meaning it bore for the man who wrote it and within the circumstances under which it was written. The better we know the writer and his times, the closer shall we come to his meaning; and conversely, if the passage be unambiguous, it will contribute to our knowledge of him and of them. The true meaning of a passage can never be decided by individual caprice or intuition, and just as little by the pronouncements of Popes or ecclesiastical councils; it can only be determined by first securing an accurate version of the original text and then by interpreting it in accordance with the laws of grammar and psychology and in the light of its historical origin.

Unfortunately, however, the exact historical background is often difficult to determine. Considered as a literature reflecting the experience of the Hebrew people for over thirteen hundred years, the Bible is of pathetically meagre proportions. With the scanty means at our disposal the most scientific study, conducted by the most competent and conscientious scholars, leaves many problems both of major and minor importance unsolved. Minor problems of text, authorship, and historical origin, about which no sort of unanimity has yet been reached, could be numbered by the score. But an equally radical difference of opinion prevails even on problems of fundamental importance for a true appreciation of the development of Hebrew religious thought.

Is Criticism Bankrupt?

The Decalogue.

No one will question, for example, the importance of the Decalogue as one of the most significant expressions of Israel's faith. But a long and fierce battle has been waged—and it is by no means over—both as to its real teaching and its historical origin. Some scholars maintain that, in its emphasis on the moral aspect of religion and its indifference, if not hostility, to the cult, it is a compendious expression of the spirit and teaching of pre-exilic prophecy. But here a multitude of questions arises. Is it true that the prophets were implacably hostile to the cult? Many scholars answer this question with a confident affirmative, to others such a religious attitude on the part of any ancient man seems inconceivable. But granted that the prophets were hostile to the cult, is the Decalogue equally so? Does it imply that the only true expression of man's regard for God is within the sphere of social ethics? This interpretation of the Decalogue is felt by many scholars to be inadequate: they believe that, while its glory is that it lays supreme emphasis upon the moral expression of religion, it not only does not condemn the cult, but, in the first four commandments, even presupposes it. If, however, we may regard it as, in its moral emphasis at any rate, a true expression of prophetic teaching, is it an anticipation or a summary of that teaching? On our answer to that question will depend our whole view of the development of Hebrew religion, for, put in another way, the question is whether it was Moses or the eighth-century prophets who, under God, created what we know as the prophetic type of religion. Are the prophets innovators, or are their feet treading in the ancient paths made centuries before by Moses? Meinhold has recently poured scorn on the view that the Decalogue can be of Mosaic origin. Barton conjectures that 'the impetus to its compilation was given by Elijah and that it was compiled among his disciples,' some of its features being possibly suggested by the trial and execution of Naboth and the confiscation of his property by Ahab and Jezebel. Steuernagel believes it to be an 'exilic catechism,' answering the question how Jahweh was to be served in the strange land. Mowinckel, who believes that it shows prophetic influence but that, if it had been drawn up during the Exile, it would in all probability have enjoined circumcision as well as Sabbath observance, argues for an origin among the disciples of Isaiah within the period between that prophet and Deuteronomy. He goes, indeed, so far as to say that 'considered as the work of the Mosaic period, the Decalogue would be quite inexplicable, and, were such an hypothesis to be admitted, the

whole subsequent history would become incomprehensible.' And yet there are many admirable scholars who, working by equally critical methods, strenuously defend its Mosaic origin. Here, then, is a sufficiently bewildering variety of conjectural origins—1225 (or possibly two centuries earlier), 850, 650, 550—each believed by different scholars to be the only reasonable date for a document, on the historical origin of which our whole conception of the development of Hebrew religion turns.

Deuteronomy.

Another question of incalculable importance for our appreciation of the literary and religious development of Israel is the date of Deuteronomy. Sir George Adam Smith has happily characterized this book as the pivot of Pentateuchal criticism. It is that, but it is more: it is the pivot of Old Testament criticism generally. To understand why it has been lifted out of the Mosaic period and placed in the seventh century between Isaiah and Jeremiah is to begin to have an intelligent understanding not only of the literary process which issued in the Pentateuch, but of the literary influence of Deuteronomy on Ezekiel and on the historical books from Joshua to Kings, and of the religious influence of its ideas upon the whole subsequent history of Judaism. If anything in Old Testament criticism has till recently been held to be certain, it is that Deuteronomy belongs to the seventh century, that it was the basis and inspiration of the reformation of Josiah in 621, and that its chief demand was for the abolition of the local sanctuaries scattered throughout the land and the celebration of the worship at the Jerusalem temple.

Within recent years, however, every one of these positions has been roundly denied. Hölscher, believing the book to be saturated with an impracticable idealism which has no relation to historical realities, regards it as the law which was to regulate the life of the new community in Palestine after the return from Babylon, and sets it about the year 500 B.C. The reformation of Josiah, he holds, consisted not in the abolition of the high places but only in the purification of the worship at Jerusalem, and with that reformation Deuteronomy, which was not then in existence, had nothing whatever to do. Dr. Welch, on the other hand, who also believes that the book had little or nothing to do with the reformation, argues that some of the Deuteronomic laws go back to a period from three to four hundred years before the reformation, that except for 12^{1-7} Dt contains no unambiguous demand for the centralization of the worship at Jerusalem, that it recognizes the legitimacy of the numerous Jahweh sanctuaries with which the land was dotted, and demands only that Hebrew worship be restricted to those sanctuaries, regulated there according to the true Jahweh tradition, and so preserved from the infection of the Baalism which held sway at the Canaanite sanctuaries. However reassuring it may be to know that other scholars, such as König, Gressmann, and Budde, who differ in so much else, agree in the commonly accepted view of the purpose and date of Deuteronomy, it is undoubtedly disconcerting to find that views which differ so radically not only from this but from one another, can be sincerely held and skilfully defended.

The Servant of Jahweh.

Another important question on which opinions differ widely is the identity of the Servant in the so-called 'Servant of Jahweh songs' in Is 40–55, of which the longest and most familiar is 52^{13}–53^{12}. Popular opinion has long regarded the subject of these poems as an individual: the elaborate personal detail seems to it to render any other interpretation inconceivable. The collective interpretation, however, has never lacked supporters. They believe that the Servant of the songs is the same as in the body of the prophecy, where beyond any question the Servant is Israel, the people (cf. 41^{8}), and there is a natural presumption in favour of this identity, as it is reasonable to interpret the ambiguous by the unambiguous. There is at the moment a perceptible reaction in favour of the individual interpretation, but the figures suggested range all the way from the sixth century to the second—Jehoiachin, Zerubbabel, the martyr Eleazar of 2 Mac 6. The two most recent conjectures of this type are those of Mowinckel and Sellin, the former identifying the Servant with the prophet himself, the latter with the martyred Moses come to life again. Is 53 does not necessarily lose on the collective interpretation, it might even be held to gain; as the penitent confession of the nations for the wrong done to Israel, it would be the crowning proof that Israel's task of winning the world for Jehovah had been triumphantly accomplished. But who is to decide among these competing possibilities?

Habakkuk.

Another problem on which within recent years there has been a notable change in critical opinion is the date and historical background of Habakkuk.

The sequence of its various sections has always been a source of perplexity, which some scholars have attempted to remove by transposition. Generally speaking, however, the book is supposed to fall a little before or a little after the battle of Carchemish in 605; Habakkuk would in that case be a contemporary of Jeremiah. At first he welcomes the Chaldeans, *i.e.* the Babylonians, as ministers appointed to execute the wrath of God for wrongs perpetrated within or upon Judah, but, as he views their ruthlessness at closer quarters, he repudiates them with horror and seeks refuge from his despair in a new vision of the purpose of God. Duhm, however, and other scholars following him, argue that the devastating horde of ch. 1 is not the Babylonian army of the seventh century, but the Greek army of the fourth, and that the world-conqueror so sternly denounced in ch. 2 is not Nebuchadrezzar, but Alexander the Great. This interpretation, while it has the disadvantage of resting upon an emendation,[1] does certainly meet some serious difficulties which attach to the common interpretation—for example, the inapplicability of the description in 1^{5-11} to the Babylonian army and its peculiar appropriateness to the army of Alexander. An allusion to that great conqueror and to the problem created for faith by his world-conquest would be as natural as it would be welcome on the pages of Old Testament prophecy; but if we are right in seeing him in the Book of Habakkuk, we have been wrong for centuries in postulating a Babylonian background for the book.

Job.

A problem of interpretation—this time psychological rather than historical—is raised by the Book of Job. Does that magnificent discussion solve, or even attempt to solve, the problem with which it deals of the meaning of suffering? Those who believe that it does appeal to the speech of the Almighty in chs. 38 and 39, which brings before the eyes of the perplexed and desperate patriarch the amazing panorama of the universe. Certainly in those chapters, if anywhere, we may look for a solution, and it is not impossible to find in them a few faint hints of the wisdom and the love with which the world is governed, but it must be confessed that in the Divine speech the power and the mystery behind the world are more obvious than the love, and Hans Schmidt may be right in suggesting that that speech is but a brilliant expansion of a single majestic word (40^{2}), in which the Almighty does not condescend to give even a hint to the tortured hero of the principles on which He governs His world at all. In that case the book offers no solution: the spirit of it, though nobly reverent, is essentially agnostic. The conclusion of the whole matter is, 'Behold, we know not anything,' and all we can do is bow before the inscrutable.

[1] Of *Chaldeans* into *Kittim* in 1^{6}.

The New Testament.

It will be enough here to remind ourselves that in the New Testament no less than in the Old there are problems of origin and historical background on which scholars are far enough yet from achieving unanimity. Not to speak of the Book of Revelation or the Epistle to the Hebrews, who can tell us for certain where to place the Fourth Gospel or how much weight is to be given to its record of the deeds and words of Jesus? Is it a late reminiscence of Him, coloured by long and loving reflection—a discussion of problems that faced the Early Church but that had not in that form been raised in the lifetime of Jesus? Or are Garvie and Burney right when they reach, along very different roads, the conclusion that much of the Gospel is early and may well have practically contemporary value?

The Psalms.

The perplexity attaching to these larger problems is often not one whit less when we restrict ourselves to a smaller area. Nowhere is the difficulty of discovering an exact historical background more exasperating than in the Book of Psalms. The day is past when scholars expend their ingenuity in the attempt to discover in the life of David appropriate occasions for individual psalms, but the most sympathetic study of the psalms themselves usually fails to disclose their historical secret, if they have one. We say 'if they have one'; for the late J. P. Peters maintained that the psalms are not 'occasional poems to celebrate some historic event,' but 'hymns composed or used for liturgical purposes.' The 46th Psalm has frequently been associated with Sennacherib's fruitless blockade of Jerusalem, and a vivid sermon can be preached from it by one who keeps this incident before his imagination. But the stimulus to this homiletic treatment of it is withdrawn, if Peters is right in believing that the psalm was written not for the Jerusalem temple but for the sanctuary of Dan, to which alone is applicable the phrase 'the streams that make glad the city of God,' recalling as it does the springs of the Jordan; or if Gunkel is right in

interpreting the psalm eschatologically as Jerusalem's song of hope and faith in contemplation of the day when Paradise in all its wonder and glory will again appear upon the world, in which case the river that gladdens the city will be the river of Paradise. With the 46th Psalm is usually associated the 48th, as celebrating the deliverance from Sennacherib. 'In spite of scorn and sensuous promise from Rabshaḳeh to Renan,' says Sir George Adam Smith,[1] 'let us lift the hymn which these silent Jews at last lifted from the walls of their delivered city.' And he proceeds to quote the last three verses of the psalm. But Duhm treats it as a pilgrim psalm, sung by pilgrims who had travelled to Jerusalem to take part in one of the great feasts; on this view the appeal in the verses quoted to walk round the city and mark well her bulwarks is not the poet's appeal to mark how completely the city had been preserved from destruction, but the pilgrim's appeal to his fellow-pilgrims to mark the city's glories, that they may be able to recount them on their return and pass on the tale to posterity.

The endeavour to discover a historical background for particular psalms has fastened with alacrity on the words 'enemies' and 'adversaries.' If in any given psalm we can discover who these are, we might be supposed to hold the secret of its origin in our hands. But in view of the meagreness of our knowledge of practically every period of Hebrew history, this discovery is no easy matter, and conjectures range all the way from pre-exilic to Maccabean times. The case is rendered still more complicated by the precarious condition of the text and by the ever-present possibility, in some cases amounting to a certainty, that an older text has been adapted to a later situation. The *proud* oppressors, for example (זדים), who would be aristocratic and possibly renegade Jews, appear to have been sometimes transformed into גוים (the nations, heathen); this has the effect of setting the persecutions upon a larger stage, on which Judah and the faith she stands for are faced by a hostile heathen world. But the historical interpretation of such psalms is affected to the core by the view recently advocated by Mowinckel and supported by Nicolsky that the enemy in many cases, *e.g.* in Pss 58 and 59, are no other than magicians or the evil spirits whose servants and instruments they are. On this view these psalms might belong to almost any age, some of them may even be extremely early, and in any case the search for their historical origin is vain and futile.

[1] *Isaiah* (revised edition), vol. i. p. 366.

Homiletics and History.

Doubtful History.

In view of these enormous divergencies of critical opinion on every area of Old Testament literature, the preacher might well be excused for raising the question whether the critical method is not bankrupt. In point of fact the divergencies do not discredit the method. They are entirely explained by the paucity of our data: if we knew more, the margin of uncertainty would be correspondingly less. But these divergencies do certainly raise in an acute form the question of the relation of homiletics to history. Is the conscientious preacher bound to consider his text in the light of its historical setting? And if that setting is thoroughly ambiguous, as we have seen it frequently to be, is he to expound it in the light of the setting which seems to him most probable? If the probability be in his own mind a very long way from certainty, will the confidence and conviction of his utterance not be impeded? Or is he justified in leaping across the chasm to what seems to be the vital religious truth of the passage, without making any attempt to build across it the bridge of historical interpretation? Is preaching upon a historical incident invalidated, the moment the historicity of that incident falls under suspicion—still more, if the preacher has reasons for regarding it as definitely unhistorical? Suppose, for example, he doubts or disbelieves the story of the combat of David and Goliath and regards it merely as a 'midrash' or edifying tale, can he with a good conscience build his sermon on the incident, knowing as he does that most of his hearers believe the story and believe that he believes it? He may have reasons satisfactory to himself for doubting it. He may note that the David of the story is a shepherd boy, while the David to whom we are introduced in an earlier part of the narrative is already a man of war (1 S 16^{18}); or he may note that the David of the story is an entire stranger to Saul, whereas not only has he already been at Saul's court, but Saul, we are told, loved him greatly (16^{21}); or—more serious still—he may have noted that another narrative assigns the honour of slaying Goliath not to David but to another, Elḥanan (2 S 21^{19}). Is the preacher debarred from using quasi-historical narrative as the basis of his lessons and appeals, if the facts recorded be not facts? A less familiar illustration of this difficulty occurs in the story of Jehoshaphat's encounter with a large hostile army (2 Ch 20). Before the battle he offers an earnest prayer which concludes with a confession and an appeal: 'O God . . . we have no might

against this great company that cometh against us, neither know we what to do; but our eyes are upon Thee' (v.[12]). Every born preacher would instinctively fasten upon so promising a text, but he might pause if he remembered that, according to 17[14-19], this king, who has 'no might,' is master of no less than 1,160,000 men. If he has any instinct for historical probability, he must ask himself if this is a likely prayer to be offered by a king who had so colossal a force at his disposal; and he will ask it all the more readily that in the far earlier Book of Kings there is no support for this prayer. The Chronicler's invention, if it be an invention, of such a prayer at such a point in the narrative, does credit to his piety and incidentally illustrates the growing importance of prayer. But the point we are raising now is whether a preacher, who doubts the historicity of this prayer, can conscientiously use it in its present historical setting.

(*To be continued.*)

On Rereading Bunyan.

By Eleanor Anglin Johnson, Guiseley, Leeds.

The minds attracted by Bunyan and the paths of approach to him are so various that this year's articles could be most diverting if only each writer could forget all that has been written previously about the great dreamer and would concentrate on the ways he, as an individual, has been regaled. For not many writers can claim the universality of appeal that this man can claim. Perhaps England can boast of only two books which the innocent and sophisticated alike can enjoy with equal, though diverse, relish—Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. For almost three centuries now children and old folk, learned and unlearned, believers and unbelievers, strong minds and weak, have drunk the fresh waters of the *Pilgrim's Progress* in hearty draughts. This water has not grown insipid nor stagnant in the light of modern theology, nor does the man who has loved the book's giants and adventures as a child find them messageless to him at a later stage, for it is one of the book's remarkable virtues that it provides food for every stage of our growth. I found many changes—changes in my own spiritual and mental perspective—as I re-read this book lately. Let no one say, 'Oh yes, I know the *Pilgrim's Progress*; I read it years ago.' That is not enough; we must read and re-read it or we shall be out of date with our own selves. Bunyan discovered long before Mark Twain that 'there is a deal of human nature everywhere'; he was an acute psychologist long before psychology had its now stale nomenclature. He is a rich mine for the imaginative novelist, and still more, a clear mirror for every man, if each would stay to look earnestly, remembering what manner of man he is. It is said, 'Parts of Bunyan are fine, but most of those long dialogues on theological questions are long since out of date. They have neither interest nor message for to-day.' But because of recent experience I dare not acquiesce: for just lately as I reread the book sentences here and there in those long dialogues 'stabbed my spirit broad awake'; thoughts there, couched perhaps in quaint language, came fresh and attractive to my twentieth-century mind. I made companions, too, of people I overlooked some little time ago; with some I found myself in humiliating kinship, with others I was fain to walk because of a beauty in them I had not noticed before. I found myself often with Ignorance—he had a strange fascination for me—and 'the way to hell even from the gates of Heaven' did not seem so impossible a bypath as it did some years ago. The fatal sin of Ignorance was the sin of arrogance, and I rather fancy he is the unacknowledged comrade of most people over twenty-five. Our cry is that of Ignorance, 'I will never believe that my heart is thus bad.' Like him, we have failed to see a vision of holiness; we compare our ways, with futile complacency, with those of our fellows instead of with a higher Righteousness. Bunyan knew his Ignorance well, and long before Tennyson wrote:

> Forgive what seem'd my sin in me,
> *What seem'd my worth since I began,*

the old Puritan makes Christian say, 'God knows us better than we know ourselves, and can see sin in us when and where we can see none ourselves; . . . all our righteousness stinks in His nostrils, and He cannot abide to see us stand before Him in any confidence, even in our best performances.' The final abandonment of Ignorance is subtly given.