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Prove all things; hold fast that which is good

# The Bible Student and Teacher

Continuing "The Bible Student" formerly published in Columbia, S. C.—Old Series, Volume IX, No. 3.

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**The American Bible League**

82 Bible House  
New York

Entered as Second-Class Matter, January 30, 1904, at the Post-Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of Congress of March 3, 1879.

Subscription \$1.00 a year in advance ( Foreign \$2.00 in advance. ) 15 Cents a Copy

# The Bible Student and Teacher

Continuing The Bible Student

Volume I. New Series

MARCH, 1904

Number 3

## Editorial Notes

**"What Is Truth?"** Pilate's skeptical question is in the air to-day as probably never before since he sneeringly, or despairingly, put it to Jesus. And perhaps the man who is the readiest to say, "Oh yes, of course there is such a thing as truth!" is as ready to quote the philological dictum of Horne Tooke as if it were an axiom, "Truth is what one troweth" (or thinketh), thereby making it a mere matter of individual opinion. And if further pressed with some concrete case that brings home the inconsistency of such a view, he is ready to go further and add the assertion, "One man's opinion is just as good as another's." To this the retort discourteous may be necessary: "You are right, for no man's opinion is worth anything if it be a mere opinion." If the response come, as it is pretty sure to come: "Every man has a right to his opinion!" To this again, acknowledging the man's right of eminent domain in the premises, it may be said: "Yes, that is true; the idiot has a right to his idiocy, but that does not make it a valuable or marketable asset."

Just here is the logical pit—made bottomless by knocking out all basis for settled truth on any subject—into which the so-called "thought" of the present time is plunging the so-called "thinkers." As a consequence most of the "thinking" sent out to the world in printed form—shall we say ninety-nine hundredths of it?—is valueless or, worse than that, positively vicious.

### Autonomy of the Mind.

That is the principle that underlies the "new thinking." That brilliant and fascinating writer, Auguste Sabatier, late Dean of the Protestant Faculty of Theology in the University of Paris, formulated and advocated it in his early work, "Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion based upon Psychology and History." In his later work, "Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit"—the preface to which he affixed his name August, 1899, just before his death, and which has just been given to the American public, in a translation, through the press of McClure, Phillips & Co.—he applied the principle in an elaborate attempt to sweep away all other basis of authority for Christianity as a religion. At his hands Romanism and Protestantism, infallible Church and infallible Bible, fare alike, neither furnishing any secure foundation on which to rest. In Sabatier's view, a deadly conflict is on, between the experimental method which belongs to science and the method of authority which is followed in the traditional religion, and the absolute discomfiture of the latter is assured. He tells us how "this infantile method was vanquished on the day when Galileo and Bacon opposed to it in the realm of physics the method of observation and experiment, and when Descartes, in philosophy," subjected all traditional ideas to a provisional doubt. And this is his further utterance, in which he unfolds his view of the autonomy of mind:

### Taking The Wider Outlook.

The same method should be carried out with the other books of the Bible. Probably in such study it is best to take up the remainder of the Gospels first, as these are so closely related and reciprocally cast so much light on one another.

There is barely room to suggest that, at the same time with the study already proposed, the investigation of the plans of the Old Testament and the New should be entered upon and prosecuted, in order to arrive at the larger schemes or unities in which the particular books all fall into place. It will greatly aid in retaining the results of the general study to note them on the interleaves of the Bible in daily use.

### III. THE TRUE METHOD OF BIBLE STUDY IS CUMULATIVE.

One can not afford to pursue any method of Bible Study that requires him to be always gathering, but never accumulating. The method of study that has been outlined promises cumulative results, ever-increasing to the end. Upon this there is not time to dwell.

Let it be understood that this kind of study is for the mastery of the Bible as the one Book of God. It can not of course take the place of that needed for special personal spiritual profit or in preparation for instruction, nor can it supersede the connected study of Sacred History or the inductive study of fundamental doctrines; but it will lay the very best foundation, in wide knowledge of the letter of the Word of God, for all other kinds of Bible-study. Moreover, it

will help the student who adopts it to gather and retain in accessible and available form the fruits of a lifetime of searching the Scriptures, thereby saving a vast amount of well-meant effort now wearily wasted.

To secure the best results of such study, and to make them one's permanent possession, an interleaved Bible for daily use is an indispensable adjunct. On the blank leaves the connected thought of the Books may be outlined, and daily additions may be entered in such a way that the knowledge gained will be retained by the help of what is already known, and the biblical stores will accumulate and grow richer all through the years, and, indeed, all through the life. The study will no longer be mere drudgery, but a delight; and the results will no longer burden the memory as so much useless lumber.

In conclusion, is it too much to say that observation and experience seem to commend this as the one reasonable way of making one's knowledge of the Bible cumulative and permanent and ready for widest and most effective use? And is it too much to say that nothing is more imperatively demanded of the ministry at the present time than such systematic and fruitful study of the Book that must always furnish them with their only authoritative and saving messages for sinning and lost men?

If our judgment is not greatly at fault, the Christian Church is on the eve of a thorough revision of its views on this important subject and of its student methods.

## SMITH'S "OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY."

Prof. Willis J. Beecher, D.D., Auburn, N. Y.

This is one of the volumes of the International Theological Library, edited by Dr. Charles A. Briggs and the late Dr. Stewart F. Salmond. It is based on certain theories as to the composition

and the historical validity of the books of the Old Testament.

**Underlying Propositions.** The underlying theory as to the composition of the Old Testament may be roughly stated in three propositions.

First, none of the Old Testament writ-

<sup>1</sup>"Old Testament History." By Henry Preved Smith, D.D., Professor of Biblical History and Interpretation in Amherst College. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1903. pp. xxvi. 518.

ings are historical in the proper sense of the term.

Second, most of them are made up of earlier and later strata intermingled.

Third, the earlier strata of none of them are earlier than Solomon's time, and the larger part of the Old Testament is postexilic.

When Dr. Smith and men like him say that no part of the Old Testament is properly history, that its narrative parts are statements made for religious and practical purposes, rather than for the purpose of giving a complete account of events that have occurred, they say what is true, provided it be not misinterpreted through false inferences. It is correct to affirm that the writers of the Old Testament were preachers rather than historians, that their interest in history is mainly for the lessons it teaches. Neglect of this has led to much misinterpretation of the biblical narratives.

They say, further, that the Old Testament books are composite; that certain men wrote down poems and judicial decisions and stories and other traditions which had till then been orally transmitted; that these earlier writers were followed by later writers, and these by yet others, who reworked and combined and supplemented what their predecessors had written; that the books of Chronicles are mainly a reworking with large amplification of parts of Samuel and Kings; that a large part of our text of the books from Genesis to Kings consists of the work of later writers, who changed and supplemented the accounts given by their predecessors; that similar processes of change and expansion have been wrought in the books of prophecies and the wisdom books. In this there are, beyond doubt, certain important elements of truth, though particular theories are to such an extent based on mere analogy and conjecture as to render them fluctuating and ephemeral. For example, who is in possession of any hard facts concerning the oral transmission of parts of the material contained in the biblical narratives?

But, further, Dr. Smith speaks representatively when he says: "The earliest

Hebrew code, which has come down to us, was published at a date considerably later than the time of Solomon" (p. 174). All passages that presuppose a central sanctuary for all Israel, whether in the hexateuch or the other narrative books or the prophecies, he dates in the time of Josiah, king of Judah, or later. The ceremonial law and whatever fully presupposes it he assigns to a time not earlier than Nehemiah, the beginning of whose career he dates in B. C. 385. On this point he says: "What has been said about Ezra shows that the account given of the introduction of the Law by him belongs to the category of legend rather than fact" (p. 400). Of course, Dr.

**Against Testimony.** Smith and those who believe with him concede that this scheme of late dates is in contradiction with all the testimony in the case, including that of the Gospels and the Acts and the Epistles; and to old-fashioned scholars the testimony seems weightier than the slender probabilities and the "harmonizing hypotheses" which constitute the only evidence adduced in proof of the late dates.

**Bearing on History.** Waiving this, however, and supposing for the sake of the argument that this theory of composition is true, late dates and all, what bearing should this have on the question of the trustworthiness of the narrative statements?

It would be correct to say that, inasmuch as these accounts were given for the purpose of pointing practical lessons rather than of teaching history, we ought therefore to use them for the latter purpose with some caution. Especially we ought to avoid inferences based on the assumption that the writer intended to give a complete account. For example, when the narrator omits all mention of the invasions of Shalmanezar II., that is not equivalent to saying that there were no such invasions. Or when he gives only a meagre account of Omri, king of Israel, it is not correct to infer that he was either ignorant or unappreciative of the greatness of Omri. Or when he magnifies certain religious events of the

reign of David by narrating them before David's conquests, that is no proof that he was ignorant of the chronological order. He is a preacher selecting his facts for homiletical purposes, and that should make us careful about the interpretations we put upon his facts. Moreover, preachers are accustomed to illustrate the points they make by fictitious narratives, and it is at the outset supposable that some of these narratives may be preachers' fiction. It is even true that some preachers are prejudiced, and misrepresent facts; and if we start without any presupposition at all in regard to these particular preachers, it is supposable that they may be of this class. For reasons like these it would be correct to say that a scientific student, entering upon the study of the history recorded in these writings, should observe his sources carefully, not taking their statements as a matter of course, but testing them.

Again, it would be correct to say that in view of the supposable existence of an interval of merely oral transmission (concerning such intervals information is lacking; we do not know, we only suppose), and in view of some things that we know as to the habits of primitive peoples, we ought to observe with care the contents of the earlier biblical writings, whichever these may be, in order to find out whether some of the narratives are not rather legend than historic fact.

And further, it is correct to say that a witness who lives long after the event is liable to be less competent than a contemporary, and that under this rule the testimony of the later biblical writers is to be carefully scrutinized. If two statements are irreconcilable, the less authoritative is to be rejected. If the form and contents of an account show it to be something else than historic fact, the showing is to be accepted. If the result be that we find in the Bible a larger element of fiction and of human fallibility than we have heretofore found, that does not diminish our obligation to follow the truth. Only, the obligation rests upon us first to examine the evi-

dence before pronouncing adverse judgment upon it.

Dr. Smith makes many statements that are in accord with these principles; but these do not agree with some of his other statements or with his practice. His view, briefly stated, is this: that the earlier writers in the Old Testament were men incapable of distinguishing between facts and legend; and that the later writers, though good men—he emphasizes this—were so prejudiced and ill informed that their testimony is not worth considering. The verbal skill with which he breaks this gently to his readers is equal to that of the statesmen of the Vatican, in our recent negotiations concerning the Filipinos; though he excels them in making his meaning clear. He says of the writer of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that in regard to the Persian period "his testimony alone is of very slight historical value" (p. 346). Concerning the testimony given in Chronicles and in the alleged later strata of the books of Samuel, he says: "The result is undoubtedly a serious modification, and in many cases a reversal of the statements which the Biblical historians have made" (p. 7). He dismisses with contempt the idea of identifying Mount Sinai, on the ground that it is "based upon the assumption that the data of P may be taken for history," and that "when we surrender these data we are left with only the vaguest intimations" (p. 64). There are scores of similar statements. His position is not that there may be reasons for doubting the truth of this half of the Old Testament narrative, but that its statements have so slight a claim to truthfulness that they are not even worth examining.

**Treatment of History.** His treatment of the history is consistent with this view of the sources. The narratives up to the time of Abraham he regards as myths. Those of the patriarchal times he calls sagas. A saga is a story invented to express "historical relations rather than historical incidents." "If one of them has a historical

incident as its basis, the incident is transformed." "The most striking example is the story of Dinah." The persons mentioned in this story never existed, but certain Canaanite clans interfered with an Israelite clan, represented in the saga as Dinah, and two other Israelite clans, against the judgment of the rest, avenged the injury. "Not many of the Genesis stories are so clearly historical as this one" (pp. 41-42). He holds that none of the patriarchs ever existed as individuals. Abraham may have been originally "a Canaanitish God," though this is to be doubted. Lot, Ishmael, Hagar, Isaac, Jacob, Gad, Judah and the rest are merely the invented terms in which people of later ages expressed their ideas of the relations between the clans which they found in Palestine. In what the Bible says about Moses and a new religious impulse through him, it is "altogether probable" that there may be a nucleus of historical fact (p. 56). "The most obvious hypothesis is that Yahweh was the ancestral God of Midian," and that through Moses he came to be adopted as the God of Israel (p. 57). But we really have no information concerning this movement. The earlier strata of the narrative are mostly legendary, and the later strata are a deliberate manufacture of false history, by good men who did this for edification. All that is said concerning the tabernacle and its worship, as well as most of what is said concerning the sojourn in Egypt and the exodus, is pure fabrication. Some of the stories of the times of the judges have a historical nucleus, those of Ehud and of Samson, for example; but we have really no knowledge of the history of Israel before the times of David. The biblical accounts for the times from David to Nehemiah are part fact, part legend, and part fabrication, the fabrication being the part that dominates the others, and gives the outline of the progress of the religion of Israel.

If the Biblical accounts were not properly history at the beginning of this process of rejection, what are they at the close of it? When he has thus dropped the statements which he thinks are false,

there only remain uncertain and unconnected fragments. To make history of these, the gaps have to be filled, and a connection supplied. The data for this from extrabiblical sources exist only to a very limited extent. For five-sixths of the region of the Biblical history there are no such data. In this condition of things what is to be done?

Dr. Smith lays down a sound principle that might supposedly govern the case. He says: "What actually happened at a given epoch is eternally concealed from us where (as is often the case) the documents are lacking" (p. 10). On this principle, provided he is right in his estimate of the Old Testament, most of the history of Israel "is eternally concealed from us," because "the documents are lacking."

We can imagine a person reaching this conclusion and finding his problem greatly simplified by it. We can imagine him finding himself freed from the embarrassments of controversy, with the way clear to use our Old Testament narratives for the ethical and spiritual lessons they teach. "Since we can not know what actually happened," he might say, "the next best thing is to take these venerable and picturesque stories concerning what happened, and use them, remembering that most of the practical lessons are equally true whether the stories are fact or fiction." But Dr. Smith is not this imaginary person. He is not content to regard the history of Israel as unknown to us, nor to permit us undisturbed to use the narratives for edification as they stand.

After excluding the testimony of the Biblical writers, he fills many of the gaps thus opened. **Filling the Gaps.** He has to do this. He can not help himself. For this process, commonly, "the documents are lacking." But it is clear that something happened. He is convinced that the thing that happened is not what the Scriptures say it was. Therefore it was something else, and he ventures to guess as to its character. Take one instance from among a thousand. "No more than a fraction of Israel ever sojourned in the

wilderness of Kadesh. . . . An important fraction did so sojourn." They "were in fact Edomite clans which were afterward a part of Judah" (pp. 65, 66). Where are the documents to justify these statements? Dr. Smith rejects a large proportion of the Old Testament testimony because, as he thinks, the Deuteronomists and the priestly writers and redactors and the Chronicler supplied by inference and conjecture such facts as they supposed their predecessors had omitted. His own work is confessedly of the same nature. What he has done, supposing his theories to be correct, is simply to disentangle some of the facts, filling in the interstices conjecturally, and thus substituting a new fiction for the old. Of course he regards himself as better qualified than these old scribes for work of this kind; but he should remember that their qualifications were such that the work they did is still interesting after more than two thousand years. Will his qualifications endure a similar test? He holds that modern theories of criticism and evolution and comparative mythology afford a better basis for inferences as to historical fact than was afforded by their religious theories; but not every one would agree with him in this. And he would concede that they had important advantages, as compared with him, in their possessing complete copies of the documents which they reworked, and other documents not now extant.

And Dr. Smith will not allow us to waive questions of historicity, and take refuge in the literary value of the Old Testament narratives as they stand. There are passages in which he seems to approve this. For example, after proving to his satisfaction that we have no specific historical facts in Genesis, he says:

"If these results seem meagre we must remember that literature has other than a directly historical value. Abraham as a type of the believer in God reveals the religious faith of the author who drew his picture. The manners, morals, and religion of the Patriarchs really existed

in the Israel of a later period. The authors who could charm us with the story of Joseph have established their kinship with universal human nature" (p. 51).

There are a good many of these passages which suggest that the literary and religious value of the Old Testament would be enhanced if we would consent to regard its characters as heroes of fiction rather than as historical persons.

Notice, however, that it is not our Biblical Abraham who "reveals the religious faith of the author." Dr. Smith holds that there are four or more Abrahams in Genesis, the Abraham of J, the Abraham of E, the Abraham of P, and the Abraham who rescued Lot from Chedorlaomer. The first may reveal the religious faith of the author of J, and the second that of the author of E, and so on; but any one of the four is a different Abraham from the Abraham of the Book of Genesis. And this is characteristic. The Old Testament characters, such as Abraham, Jacob, Judah, Joseph, David, are thoroughly human, many-sided, feeling the force of conflicting motives, presenting one aspect at one time and another at another time. Dr. Smith invites us to attend him in instance after instance, as he takes up the Biblical account of one of these characters and resolves it into the primitive sagas or other traditions of which it was composed; and forthwith our strong picture of the character is gone, and in place of it we have two or three or four pictures, each flat and one-sided and mechanical and devoid of human interest. I do not here speak of this by way of disproving his view of the matter, though I do not believe that a literary masterpiece like the story of Joseph was produced by the process of mechanically patching together two or three earlier stories that were not masterpieces. I only mention it in illustration of the illusiveness of his offer of literary compensations for the loss of historicity.

Further, he refuses to withdraw the charge of falsehood as against the Biblical statements, on condition that they will plead guilty of being fiction. His

torical exactness is not to be expected in a saga or legend. Its

**Fiction** being a legend is a sufficient **for Fact.** bar against its being condemned because its details are not historical. But Dr. Smith does not accept this plea. He considers the narratives one after another, and charges them with contradictions and incredibilities and other deviations from historical truth, just as if he regarded them as history and not fiction. It is not enough for him to call them fictions; an essential part of his view is that the Biblical writers retail these fictions for facts.

What is the basis on which men accept such views as these concerning the Old Testament? The one reason that is actually more influential than all others combined is that these **No Consensus of Experts.** conclusions are supposed to command the practically unanimous suffrage of modern experts. It is therefore interesting to note in Dr. Smith's work the many instances which indicate the lack of such unanimity even among the men of the school to which he belongs. He regards the accounts of the Patriarchs as sagas; many others regard them as legends or myths. Probably the prevailing opinion of the men of this school is that Samson is a sun-myth; while Dr. Smith says: "We accept the main incidents as historical, not mythical, only slightly legendary" (p. 101); though he thinks it possible that the account identifies Yahweh as the sun-god. In regard to the preabrahamic stories he says:

"Mythological as the earliest sources appear, they are not polytheistic. In each of the documents Yahweh alone is the God of Israel, and he is also the creator of the world and of mankind" (pp. 26, 16).

Here Dr. Smith is a dissenter among the men of his school. Further, he differs with Cornill in refusing to recognize a historical Abraham, and with Cheyne in that Smith recognizes a historical Moses, and does not count Jerahmeel the fountain head of Israel (p. 66). He is of the minority, apparently, in not finding an Arabian Mutsri in many of the places in which our English versions

speak of Egypt (p. 66). In Dr. Smith's book and elsewhere, the instances of disagreement are numberless. They are creditable as indicating independence of thought, but they are fatal to all claim of expert unanimity. If we are to accept the views of these men, we must do it on the basis of their reasonings and the evidence they adduce.

Such revolutionary conclusions can be justified only by the clearest and most overwhelming evidence, **The Slims Evidence.** while the evidence actually presented—the parts of it that really bear on the question—is of the slimsiest. For the present we must be content with a few specimens. They are taken at random, but are typical.

To discredit the historicity of the times of Abraham, Dr. Smith several times appeals to the picture of Palestine, presented in the El-amarna letters (p. 36 et al.). He ignores the fact that these letters belong to the later years of the eighteenth Egyptian dynasty, several generations later than the time commonly assigned Abraham.

To account for the prominence that came to be assigned to Abraham, in spite of Abraham's being a nonentity, he says:

"The fact is, that a single sentence in the account of Abraham appealed to the Apostle Paul, and the patriarch thus became an important figure in Christian theology" (pp. 49-50).

Which is the "single sentence" that appealed to Paul? Does Dr. Smith here refer to the statement that the nations shall be blessed in Abraham, or to the statement that Abraham's believing was counted for righteousness, or to Abraham's being constituted father of a multitude of nations, or to his receiving circumcision, or to some other sentence? And in view of the fact that Peter and Stephen and James and the author of Hebrews and John the Baptist and Jesus Himself base their teachings on Abraham, why does he say that "a single sentence" "appealed to Paul," as if there were only this one sentence, appealing to this one Christian teacher?

He also says that "none of the proph-

ets allude to Abraham until we come to Ezekiel" (p. 49). Test this statement by a concordance, and you will find it dissolving in mist, like the preceding one.

He says that in David's time the Calebites were "not yet reckoned a part of Judah" (p. 130). What proof is there? He says that in the Absalom affair "Zadok and Abiathar themselves bring the ark to David" (p. 4). What proof that they themselves brought it? The account as it stands says that it was carried by Levites (2 Sam. xv. 24). If we refer this statement to a later document, who knows that there was anything in the earlier document to contradict it? This and numberless like assertions come under the condemnation of Dr. Smith's own sound rule; "the documents are lacking."

Dr. Smith reasons that David did the will of God; David had teraphim; therefore the Old Testament narrator tells an untruth when he says that idol images were prohibited before David (p. 9). Parallel reasoning would be the following: Russians are men; Hottentots are men; therefore Russians are Hottentots.

He cites (pp. 5, 6) David's gathering 30,000 chosen men to bring up the ark (2 Sam. vi. 1) as in contradiction with the statement that about 340,000 were somehow concerned with David's being made king over Israel (1 Chron. xii. 23-37). It is precisely as contradictory as it is to say that Napoleon invaded Russia with more than 400,000 men, and fought the battle of Waterloo with about 72,000.

Dr. Smith says that because the two reigns between Ahab and Jehu "sum up fourteen years," the Bible is in contradiction with the record of Shalmanezzer II., who says that he fought Ahab in his sixth year, and took tribute from Jehu in his eighteenth year (p. 202). Parallel reasoning would infer that if a letter weighing an ounce requires one postage stamp, a heap of letters requiring fourteen stamps must weigh fourteen ounces. The Biblical narratives count fractions of years as the post office counts fractions of ounces. Give the Biblical numbers here their true value, and you

will find that the sixth year of Shalmanezzer was the twenty-first of Ahab, within the three years when he was at peace with Syria, while his eighteenth year was the accession year of Jehu.

In his rejection of the testimony of the writers of Ezra and Nehemiah Dr. Smith makes much of the occurrence of such titles as "Cyrus king of Persia," and "Darius the Persian." He says that these monarchs call themselves by various titles, "but nowhere, King of Persia." He adds:

"This title was given to them only after the Greek conquest of the East made men contrast Alexander with his predecessors who were primarily kings of Persia" (p. 345).

For this assertion "the documents are lacking." A contemporary record calls Cyrus "King of the country of the Persians" (*Annal. Tab. II. 15*). Darius Hystaspes, describing himself as "the great king, the king of kings," lets the description culminate in the designation "a Persian, the son of a Persian" (*Rec. of Past, o. s., v., p. 151*). If the sources were not so meagre we should presumably have many instances of this kind. Decades before Alexander, the Greek writers currently speak of "the king," and "the great king," but also use such phrases as "Darius the Persian," "Cyrus the Persian," "the king of the Persians," "Cambyses king of the Persians" (e. g. Herodotus *Euterpe* 110, 157; *Thalia* 21, Xenophon *Cyropedia* I. 1, 2, *Anabasis* III. iv. 12).

In fine these alleged proofs, wherever you test them, fail to conform to the canons of correct criticism.

Dr. Smith is a genial, cultured gentleman, a scholar of wide reading, earnest in the pursuit of the truth as he sees it, a man of whose work one would like to speak in terms of unstinted praise. And indeed his volume is an exceedingly able and valuable presentation of the views which he advocates. Its faults are the faults of the school to which it belongs, and they conclusively show that the positions of that school are hopelessly uncritical.