

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 *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

The Place of Old Testament Studies in Indian Theological Education

M. H. HARRISON

Do Old Testament studies have any place at all in the training of the Christian minister in an independent India? Or is this not something foisted upon the Indian church through its connection with the West? A few voices have been raised from time to time to affirm that in this land the Old Testament is an unnecessary encumbrance to those who proclaim the gospel of Christ. A sufficient preparation for the understanding of the New Testament message, it is claimed, is to be found in the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita.¹ But such views have found no favour with those responsible for the planning of Indian theological education. The teaching of subjects connected with the Old Testament has generally been given greater importance, if the number of class hours is a criterion, than any other branch of the theological curriculum, with the exception of the New Testament alone. Probably it has a greater place in Indian theological colleges than in similar institutions in the West. Nor is this unreasonable. The stress upon history and the belief in the close connection between religion and moral values which are characteristic of the Old Testament are greatly needed in the Indian church. In the West these can be largely taken for granted as part of the cultural heritage and they require no special emphasis. In India they are distinctly 'against the grain' of the prevailing Hindu environment, and the Christian enterprise requires the stress which the Old Testament places upon them. Certainly, the Old Testament is far more directly connected with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which it is the business of the future minister to learn to proclaim, than any other religious literature, whatever its value may be.² To endeavour to understand the teaching and work of Jesus without constant reference to His Old Testament

¹ So an Indian educationalist quoted by Dr. Godfrey Phillips in his *Old Testament in the World Church*, p. 3. This, by the way, is a most valuable treatment of the subject and should be carefully studied by every teacher of the Old Testament in India.

² Cf. the statement of Bishop Stephen Neill in *Christian Faith Today* (Pelican Books), p. 64: 'It is . . . the historic fact that the religious experience of Israel did flower in Jesus Christ . . . The words and work of Jesus may be universal in their significance, but they were historically conditioned by a relationship to a historic past which is unique. To no other system, to no other process of development, does the work of Christ bear the same, or even any similar, relationship. This is a matter of plain historic fact.'

background even at the points where He transcended it, is just to misunderstand Him and to run the risk of substituting for the Christian faith another gospel which will fail to challenge India's present religious outlook.

But to recognize the importance of Old Testament study is not to solve the problem of how best to use the time allotted to it. There is evidence to show that it is sometimes regarded as an 'easy' subject, which demands no strenuous grappling with problems. Papers written by students in University examinations, especially in courses of exegesis, have sometimes suggested that the text was regarded chiefly as subject-matter for harmless homilies of a superficial character without much understanding of the main emphases of Old Testament thought. The New Testament is studied through the medium of Greek and everyone knows that that requires serious effort. But comparatively few attempt Old Testament exegesis in Hebrew, and those who do it in English frequently seem to feel that they have already enough knowledge gained from popular sources to meet the demands of the examinations.

Actually, those who are engaged in the teaching of the Old Testament know that there is such a wealth of comparatively new knowledge that even with the most strenuous efforts the three years of the B.D. course are not sufficient for appropriating more than a small part of it. For one thing, the large extent of Old Testament literature is a problem to anyone who wishes to deal with it with any degree of thoroughness. A course in New Testament Introduction can attempt to deal with each book with a fair amount of detail; but to treat the Old on anything like the same scale is obviously impossible. Again, there is a vast amount of recent research touching upon the Old Testament and its times, the discoveries of archaeology in Palestine and the adjacent lands, the results of new methods of literary investigation, the comparative studies in the religious life of the Near Eastern countries, all of which bear upon our understanding of the word of Scripture. But where can time be found for more than a hasty introduction of these topics to the attention of the student? Thus, an immediately urgent problem for the teacher of the Old Testament is the proper selection of his material. This must be sufficiently inclusive so that the result is no fragmentary or distorted view. At the same time, sufficient attention must be given to at least some typical material so that the study does not become entirely superficial.

In surveying briefly the main fields of Old Testament study, I shall attempt to show what can be profitably attempted at the B.D. level in India, and at the close I shall suggest certain emphases which may well be given to the teaching of this subject in view of present opportunities and needs. I shall inevitably be drawing on the experience which I have had in teaching these subjects in Bangalore, and so I hope I may be pardoned if I give excessive weight to the practices of a single institution. I am sure that the editor of this Journal will be delighted, as I myself shall be, if this statement stirs up others to communicate the results of differing experience elsewhere.

One elementary goal which must be set before the student in our theological colleges is a fair degree of acquaintance with the actual contents of the Old Testament as read either in English or in his own mother tongue. No matter how eloquently the theological graduate can discourse on the origin of ethical monotheism or on Pentateuchal criticism,

this will hardly recommend him to his ordination examining committee or to the elders of his own church if they find that he is unable to recognize the 51st Psalm or the account of Isaiah's prophetic call. Students come to a theological college with very different degrees of preparation in this respect. Some have grown up in homes where the Bible is commonly read, others have had the advantages of an S.C.M. study group or of the Bible class of a Christian college. On the other hand, we find some, and perhaps an increasing number, whose acquaintance, especially with the Old Testament, is quite elementary. Perhaps the student is a convert from Hinduism or Islam, or he may have gone to a Government High School or College in which he received no Bible instruction whatever. At least such students will have the advantage that they will come to the study of the Old Testament with a fresh outlook. But it is important for them as well as for others to make good their previous lack of acquaintance with the Old Testament at the earliest possible moment. It is our conviction that the Bible is a fairly intelligible book even to the common reader, and that anyone who will give the matter proper attention can gain that primary acquaintance which is required through his own efforts without the assistance of special lectures on the contents of its books. In fact such lectures may defeat their purpose if they are used as a substitute for the student's independent reading. For a number of years we have endeavoured to see that this goal is actually achieved by setting an annual examination—of new students in the entrance test which they take before admission, of others by a compulsory examination held on the first day of each college year. The latter of these examinations is a fairly rigorous one which cannot be satisfied merely by the memory of Sunday School lessons, and covers the entire Bible, laying special emphasis upon the aspects of the Biblical literature which are likely to be of primary importance to the working pastor. In the last few years, we regret to say, the number of failures in this examination has been increasing, and we have now taken the further step of insisting that in case of failure in June the student must take a further examination in November. All marks are reported to the churches responsible for the student's support.

The Place of Hebrew

Ideally, it may be urged, the Old Testament should be studied in Hebrew, as the New Testament is studied in Greek. Hindus expect that professed teachers of their religion will be familiar with its fundamental texts in their classical tongues. A similar requirement is made by Islam. But in this matter it is necessary for us to face realities, and the fact is that unless we should prolong the theological course to the length required in Roman Catholic seminaries—and for economic as well as for other reasons this seems to be impracticable—there is a distinct limit to the amount of time which can be given to linguistic courses. As it is, the load of language study in India is far beyond that required in most Western institutions. To begin with, practically every student must have a high degree of proficiency in two languages as working tools, in his mother tongue in which he will be exercising his ministry, and in English in which alone he will find adequate library resources even where it is not used as the medium of instruction. Then Greek is required of all students on the B.D. level, and not all have the gift of acquiring that

language quickly. In India it is essential for the evangelistic task of the church that at least a few should have a knowledge of Sanskrit. We do not believe, then, that we should expect that every student will undertake the study of Hebrew. To learn but a smattering under compulsion is of little value, for it can be forgotten even more quickly than it can be gained, and unless there is some prospect that the knowledge will actually be used in later life, we feel that the student's time can be better employed elsewhere. On the other hand, the Indian church needs and will continue to need some from among her own sons who will become experts in Old Testament studies. They will be needed as future translators and revisers of the Bible in Indian languages, and as teachers of the Old Testament in our theological schools and colleges. At Bangalore Hebrew has been an optional subject, but one which is increasingly being chosen by our better students. Although most of those who are graduates begin Hebrew only in their second year, practically all complete the whole of the Hebrew course, doubling up in their last year so as to complete two years' work in one. Thus by confining our teaching to those who are keen students of the subject we are spared the problem of those who are merely a drag on the work of the class as a whole.

Old Testament Introduction

When I began my work at Bangalore Old Testament Introduction was required of every student. In the intervening years a change has taken place in this subject both in the West and in India. For one thing, it has been realized that the answers to the questions of date, sources, authorship, etc. can hardly be as cut and dried as was once assumed. The process by which the Old Testament has taken its present form is much more complicated than was frequently recognized by scholars in the early years of this century. But these complications have made the subject more and more difficult to teach in an elementary course. Then the question must arise as to whether every student needs to familiarize himself with all the minute detail which is involved in the study of problems of introduction for every book of the Old Testament. Our feeling here at Bangalore is that it is impossible to take the time which would be involved in doing a thorough job with the student whose main interest may be in some other branch of theological study. The questions of literary criticism, while still important, are scarcely of the same burning interest in the Christian church as they were at the end of the last century when they even furnished the occasion for trials for heresy. Very few either in India or elsewhere in the world can become quite so excited about them today. It is important that every student should gain a point of view in regard to the Old Testament which takes full account of the processes of literary composition. He should have a fair measure of acquaintance with the assured results of a century of research. In some selected cases he may go through the questions of evidence and proof for himself. But to follow in every case the methods by which the present results have been reached (and in many of these the knowledge of Hebrew is essential), seems to be beyond what is indispensable for the pastor of an ordinary Indian church. Doubtless to understand the telephone or the radio thoroughly requires a considerable knowledge of advanced physics. But thousands make satisfactory use of these conveniences without the knowledge which is necessary in order to manufacture or repair them. It is important that we have experts, but

one may do an entirely reputable task in the church without the possession of detailed knowledge in just this speciality. We have therefore incorporated into the course on the History of the Hebrews, which is our fundamental course of Old Testament study, much of the literary as well as the political history of the Hebrew nation. The exegetical courses provide the opportunity for expanding this general knowledge in the case of particular books. On the other hand, for those for whom the Old Testament is a matter of special interest, we provide a more technical course in Old Testament Introduction. Although we have done little to encourage the choice of this subject, it has proved unexpectedly popular.

The Text of the Old Testament

There is one section of Introduction which in India is remarkable for the fact that no attention is paid to it. I refer to the study of the text of the Old Testament. The corresponding division of New Testament study is adequately provided for, but for some reason it has been overlooked in the case of the Old Testament. But for some purposes the study of this subject is quite as important here as in the New Testament. The translator of the Hebrew text into Indian languages must frequently decide as best he can whether to follow the Hebrew text, even when this seems improbable or quite impossible (and there are more of these cases in certain books than the casual English reader suspects), or whether to take the reading of one of the ancient translations, or whether he will accept some editor's conjecture. Too often in the past the translator has been content to follow the English authorized or revised version—a most unsatisfactory procedure from the scholarly point of view. The basis for an intelligent choice can only be founded upon a much more detailed knowledge of the materials and methods of textual criticism than is generally available in Indian theological colleges. Here we have given some elementary knowledge about manuscripts and versions in our Orientation course, but this is very far from meeting the actual need. With the astounding discoveries recently made of Old Testament manuscripts in Palestine it is remarkable that there is at present no place in the curriculum which demands a reference to them.

Detailed Exegesis

Mention has already been made of the courses for the detailed exegesis of books or rather parts of books. At present, in the Serampore plan of study, one of these is chosen from each of the main divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Some would feel that much larger sections of the Old Testament should be studied in such courses. But it is hardly possible to see how this can be done within the available time unless the standard of study is to become much more superficial. A legend at Bangalore, possibly apocryphal, from another branch of study is to the effect that in the good old days before we were corrupted by our present affiliation with Serampore, a New Testament professor chose for his book of the year the first epistle to the Corinthians. At the end of a year of work on the part of his students they just managed to complete the second chapter! The work of the exegesis courses should be done through class discussion rather than through lectures, and the students may be asked to discover

with the help of commentaries the answers to questions either proposed by the teacher or growing out of the study of the group. The important thing is not so much the communication of a fund of information but the discovery of a method of Bible study which will in fact be continued by the future minister as a life-long habit.

The History of the Hebrews

We have kept until the end, as containing perhaps less grounds for difference of opinion, what are probably the most important parts of Old Testament study, namely, the History of the Hebrews and the Religion of Israel. These are rightly required of every student and form the centre of the work in this department. With us the History of the Hebrews is our fundamental course introducing all the work of this branch to the B.D. student. One of our greatest problems here is the limitation of the time available for its super-abundant material. We must keep in mind the purpose for which we are studying the Old Testament. We are not primarily interested in the history of Palestine as a part of the ancient history of the Near East, although such study can make valuable contributions to our outlook. We are not trying to make students into amateur archaeologists, although archaeological discovery frequently throws a vivid light upon general conditions or particular incidents in the pilgrimage of Israel. Such studies have their proper place in the world's research institutions. But our interest in the Old Testament is a far more practical and immediate one. A knowledge of the history of the Hebrew people is important to the Indian church because we see in it, as the Hebrews themselves saw, the record of the revelation of God through the history of a particular people. It is important that we see that history in a wide enough perspective so that we do not completely misinterpret it. But at the same time our own interest must be chiefly upon its religious bearing. Just because the Old Testament is so largely concerned with history, and because this course is given in the B.D. student's first year, we have frequently taken the opportunity to spend a little time at the outset in considering the meaning and the method of historical study. It is rather painful to observe that, although a large proportion of the graduate students in our College have taken Arts degrees with history as one of their special subjects, they frequently show little evidence of ever having considered the methods to be followed in coming to historical conclusions. Frequently historical study in India seems to be limited to an uncritical memorizing of facts and dates, and if the study of the History of the Hebrews can give an impetus to a different kind of historical study it may be of great value not only for Old Testament studies but for many other sections of the theological curriculum. As already mentioned, the History of the Hebrews includes with us not only political but literary history, and also the history of the Old Testament canon. This means that the course is far too full for comfort and if time could be gained from other branches it would be easy to double the amount of time given.

The Religion of Israel

The Religion of Israel is a title which is inherited from a day in which there was a necessary protest against the rigidity and lack of

historical sense which had fallen upon the Biblical theology of the time. This protest is probably no longer necessary, and there is now need for a greater emphasis upon the actual content and permanent worth of the Old Testament life and teaching. As in the case of Old Testament history much which is found in textbooks in this field is not very significant for the Christian church in its confrontation with Hinduism and Islam. It is perhaps of no more than curious interest that certain primitive ideas have survived in Hebrew religion, or that some of the same religious influences were at work in Palestine as in Syria or Babylon. True, there may be a value in showing that the religious life of mankind reveals certain common features and that the religious experience of one nation, however distinctive it may be, is not utterly separate from that of others. But this emphasis can easily be exaggerated, and what is of value to the Christian church is not so much points of likeness but of difference. The Old Testament scholar in the West has been too often tempted to a narrow specialism, and in India he needs rather constantly to ask how this knowledge can profit the church, what its relation is to the main Christian convictions of our teaching. In the future the teaching of this subject should concern itself more largely with what has been called Old Testament theology although the historical approach of the Religion of Israel need not be lost.

The Approach to the Old Testament in India

Finally, we may ask how the student and teacher of the Old Testament in India will differ in his approach to his subject from the Western writers whose textbooks are still so generally used. Surely in many ways, of which only a few can be mentioned here.

The illustrations which will naturally be used in India will be taken from the Indian scene rather than from the West. There is little profit in instituting a comparison between the size of Palestine and that of some area in England or America when these convey little meaning to the Indian student. Frequently, customs in Hebrew culture will take on a new significance when they are compared or contrasted with the Indian parallel. In many ways the agricultural life of India stands far closer to conditions in Palestine than does the industrialized life of the West. Again in religious matters one may easily find some points of resemblance between the Canaanite Baals and their high places and the village gods of India, although here one should be on the lookout for differences too.

But with all the points of resemblance which suggest themselves the student will be struck with many great differences in outlook. Although one can see that Canaanite religious influences entered deeply into even later orthodox Hebrew religion, yet we have the deeply felt opposition of the prophets from Hosea onwards. Hindu thought has throughout the centuries largely been concerned with harmonizing opposites. Its motto may be summed up as 'Both—And'. Hebrew thought on the other hand has been uncompromising in its negatives. As in the witness of Elijah on Mount Carmel it has placed before men the alternative 'Either—Or' and has demanded a decision.

Once again, the Old Testament lays stress upon moral life as intimately connected with man's relationship to God. It may be a matter of speculation why a similar development did not take place in

India, despite promising beginnings in the Rigveda. But while moral teaching is not wholly lacking from Hinduism, it has a far different place there from what it has in Hebrew life. It will be the task of the teacher of the Old Testament in India to make clear the emphasis on the moral life at the various stages of Hebrew development, to show the dangers of legalism (a danger which is found in India as well), and the broader outlook of the prophets who surmounted this barrier to religious advance. In this connection a point of special value for India today lies in the insistence of the prophets upon justice in social relationships, their concern for the State as well as for the individual, and their insight into the duties of citizenship.

And finally, the teacher of the Old Testament will endeavour to make clear to his students that the Old Testament is concerned with God's action in history. The Old Testament, as we have pointed out, is largely concerned with historical facts, related not merely for their own sakes, but because they are viewed as the mighty acts of God. The call of Israel, the deliverance from Egypt, the making of the covenant at Sinai, the settlement in Canaan, the history of the judges and the kings, the exile and the return, the hope of a coming age, these are all matters in which the Old Testament writer thought of God as acting. He had very little place indeed for a philosophy. It may be that we shall dispute some of the interpretations of historic events to which the Old Testament writers came. But the contrast with the typical thought of India is clear, and should be made plain by detailed study. The monotheism to which the Hebrew prophets came is a very different thing from the philosophical monism of India, and it should be one of the tasks of Old Testament teaching to make this so evident in the Christian church that it will never for a moment yield to the temptation to consider all forms of religious life of equal value for the world today. There are other characteristic emphases of the Old Testament which may be stressed in teaching, its insistence on the holiness of God, its long struggle to deal satisfactorily with the problem of the existence of evil in the world which set it off from the typical thought of India, but perhaps what has been said will give some indication of the interests with which the student and teacher in India will approach his tasks.

★

The entire redemptive history unfolds in two movements: the one proceeds from the many to the One; this is the Old Covenant. The other proceeds from the One to the many; this is the New Covenant, and at the very mid-point stands the expiatory deed of the death and resurrection of Christ.

O. CULLMANN

★

Whom we call God stands behind Jesus, and it is Jesus who gives, as it were, colour, light and *rupa* to God. Out of the infinite nebulousness emerges the face of Jesus. God is the unmanifested, and Jesus is the manifested. God is the *sat*, or being, and Jesus is the *cit* or intelligence, wisdom and love which indicates the nature of the being of God.

V. CHAKKARAI