THE HEBREW ECCLESIASTICUS.¹


The recently discovered fragments and their publication.—The value of the language as a piece of dated Hebrew.—The light thrown upon the character of the versions previously known.—The style.—Its value for exegesis.—For the history of Jewish thought.

The publication which has lately been issued by the Clarendon Press under the title “The Original Hebrew of a Portion of Ecclesiasticus” places before the world with surprising promptitude one of the most important manuscript finds of recent years. The facts read like a bit out of a romance. The acquisition about the same time from two independent sources of two fragments of the same manuscript, one of which begins only one verse after that at which the other breaks off, constitutes an extraordinary group of coincidences.

The smaller fragment known as the Cambridge Fragment and comprising 39:15 to 40:7 was published in the July number of the Expositor for 1896, and is therefore no doubt well known to many readers of the Biblical World.

The larger fragment, comprising 40:8 to 49:11, which is now through the kindness of Professor Sayce in the Bodleian library, and is therefore known as the Oxford Fragment, appears in this volume for the first time. The whole text (for the Cambridge portion of it is reprinted or rather reedited) represents about 350 verses. It is very neatly printed, with an English translation on the opposite page, and underneath the Syriac and Greek versions. The Latin version is given separately. The whole book is “a thing of beauty” as well as a storehouse of scholarship.

The interest and significance of the new text are great and manifold. The Hebraist, the student of literature, the biblical expositor, and the historical theologian all find ample material for reflection and discussion.

The language supplies a specimen of Hebrew which can be dated with a margin of only twenty-five or thirty years. It is generally agreed that Ecclesiasticus was composed between 200 and 170 B.C. We have therefore in the new text the means of knowing how Hebrew was written by a man of culture and influence about two centuries before our Lord’s ministry. The result may be fairly described as startling. The Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus is biblical, not rabbinical. There are of course traces of Aramaic influence. There are also words which are either peculiar to the new Hebrew or are found there with especial frequency. In the main, however, the Hebrew of the son of Sirach is pure and vigorous. The distinctive characteristics of Mishnian Hebrew, such as the monosyllabic relative, the plural in -in, and the frequent use of the substantive verb as an auxiliary, are conspicuous by their absence. Ecclesiastes is much more closely related to new Hebrew.

The Greek version is known to have been made by the grandson of the author from the original in the year 132 B.C. The comparison of this version and of the Syriac version which was also made from the Hebrew with the newly recovered text sheds instructive light on the merits of these old translations. They are found to be much less literal than was supposed by many. The Syriac is often closer than the Greek, but neither can be trusted to reproduce the form. There are many passages in which the general sense is given whilst the form is largely disregarded. In the fine paragraph, for example, devoted to the portraiture of Elijah the simple stately words of the original borrowed from the Bible, “and he brake for them the staff of bread,” are represented both in the Syriac and Greek simply by “he brought famine upon them.” Again, the grandson seems sometimes to have been influenced by the Septuagint. He writes of Enoch (44:16) as “pleasing God” and “being translated,” whereas his grandfather had written that “he was found perfect

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and walked with God and was taken.” Other examples of the freedom of the Greek version are the following: (1) Hebrew, “Abraham put no blemish on his glory.” Greek, “There was found none like him in glory (44:19). (2) Hebrew, “Noah became the successor,” that is, “he was spared to carry on the succession and keep the race alive,” as Canon Driver explains the passage in the glossary, which is one of the most valuable parts of the book. Greek, “He was taken in exchange for the world” (44:17). (3) Hebrew, “Elisha all his days quaked before none, and no flesh had dominion over his spirit.” Greek, “And in all his days he was not shaken by any ruler and no one brought him into subjection” (48:12). These comparisons, which could readily be multiplied, show with convincing clearness that the restoration of a Semitic original from such translations as these can only at the best arrive at an approximation. All that can be said is that the writer may have written so and so. The uncertainty is increased when it is found that even a paronomasia which reminds the reader of Hebrew is found to have nothing answering to it in the original. This is the case in 49:4, where the Greek has πλημμελίαν ἑπλημμέλησαν but the Hebrew one word, hischithoo.

The style of Ecclesiasticus is on the whole clear and forcible. The editors remark that “it stands throughout on an altogether higher level than that of Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, and the Hebrew parts of Daniel.” There are no traces of meter, as an eminent scholar suggested some years ago, but the parallelism is often sharply defined. The son of Sirach was well read in the poetic literature of his people, and could handle its forms with skill and power. This comes out far more distinctly in the original than in the Greek version. Another oriental characteristic which is also brought out very clearly is the love of playing on names. Joshua was a great salvation to God’s chosen (46:1); and Judah was saved by the hand of Isaiah (48:20). Reho-boam was “ample in foolishness” (47:23). Hezekiah strengthened his city and was strong in the ways of David (48:17 and 22).

Biblical exegesis may glean some useful hints from these chapters. It is not impossible that ts’dakah is used, as in new
Hebrew, in the sense of "almsgiving" (40:17 and 24). The bitter saying, "A daughter is a deceptive treasure" (42:9) contains an expression not found hitherto in classical Hebrew. "Deceptive treasure" or "treasure of deceit" is matmoneth sheker. Now if, as can scarcely be doubted, matmoneth is identical with the Aramaic mammon or mamon, we find here the Hebrew ancestor of the expression "the mammon of deceit" which occurs repeatedly in the Targum. So two hundred years before the time of Christ a phrase coming very close to "the mammon of unrighteousness" (Luke 16:9 and 11) was in use among the Jews of Palestine. The remarkable saying, "There are no corrections [according to a marginal reading "corrections unto life"] in Sheol" (41:4) must in future be taken into account in all inquiries into Jewish ideas about the hereafter before the Christian era.

The relation of the Hebrew Ecclesiasticus (in so far as it can be determined from these fragments) to the Old Testament and to later Jewish literature and theology is too large a subject to be discussed at length here. Room can be found only for a few hints which may perhaps stimulate research. (1) The way in which the prophecy of Malachi about Elijah the prophet (Mal. 4:4-6) is referred to shows more plainly than the Greek version (which is indeed so obscure as to be almost unintelligible) the existence of a definite expectation of a literal return of Elijah as early as two hundred years before the ministry. It runs, "who art written down as ready for a season to make anger to cease before ... to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and to give understanding to the tribes of Israel" (48:10). Have we not here a glimpse of the beginnings of the belief with which the disciples were familiar, that Elijah would come before the Messiah (Matt. 17:10)? (2) The brief allusion to the visions of Ezekiel is suggestive: "Ezekiel saw the vision and declared divers kinds of chariot" (48:8). The Hebrew word for "chariot" is merkabha, a word not found in the Book of Ezekiel but often used in later Jewish literature of this prophet's visions of the cherubim. "The chariot" was a favorite theme of Jewish mystics or theosophists (Chagiga, 14 v.). The occurr-
rence of this notable word in this connection in Ecclesiasticus seems to show that the fascination of these mysterious visions was felt by some at least among Jewish thinkers long before the time of Christ. The speculations recorded in the Talmud represent, it would seem, the growth of centuries. (3) The reference to Job in the next line is very remarkable: "Also he made mention of Job who maintained all the ways of righteousness" (49:9). The second hemistich seems to imply acquaintance with the Book of Job. The allusions in Ezekiel (14:14 and 20) are too general to warrant the strong and curiously worded statement, "maintained all the ways of righteousness." Some exceptional experiences, such as are so vividly described in the great poem, must have been in the writer's mind. Not less remarkable is the silence concerning Daniel, who is named with Job in both passages. Had the writer been familiar with our Book of Daniel, or even with some document made use of by its compiler, he could scarcely have failed when referring to Job as mentioned by Ezekiel to devote at least a line to so attractive and imposing a figure. (4) In the Greek version Enoch is described as "an example of repentance" (44:16). The original represents him as "a sign of knowledge." The difference seems trivial, but is really full of meaning. The belief in the vast knowledge of this early patriarch underlies the whole of the Enoch literature which once assumed such extensive proportions and the remains of which have recently excited so much interest. The Ethiopic Enoch repeatedly introduces Enoch as "the scribe" (12:3; 15:1, etc.). The "Book of the Secrets of Enoch" makes him responsible for the following audacious words: "I know all things from the lips of the Lord, for my eyes have seen from the beginning to the end. I know all things and have written all things in the books" (40:1 and 2). In the last chapter Enoch is said to have written down "the descriptions of all the creation which the Lord hath made in 366 books (68:2). Now part of this Enoch literature can be traced as far back as the century in which Ecclesiasticus was written. Charles puts chaps. 1 to 36 of the Ethiopic Enoch at the latest in 170 B.C. If so they were written by a contemporary of our
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author. Be that as it may, his reference to Enoch (as he wrote it) shows clearly enough that the germ of the Enoch literature was lodged in the Jewish mind at least two centuries before our Lord's ministry.

The way in which the new text has been edited and illustrated merits the warmest praise. The contents of the manuscript are laid before the reader without a commentary, but with many references and a few suggestions. The addition of the most valuable of the ancient versions means great saving of labor to the student. The glossary by Canon Driver which has been already mentioned would of itself make the volume worthy of notice, and the collection of references to Ecclesiasticus in Jewish literature is at the same time curious and instructive.¹

¹See also the critical note on "The Hebrew Ecclesiasticus" in the July number of the American Journal of Theology, pp. 777-86.