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The Bible as Literature [Three Bound Bundle]

Earl Clement Davis

The Bible as Literature

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Late 1910s[1]

Dean Stanley said, "By Literature I mean those great works… which rise above the professional or commonplace uses, and take possession of the mind of a whole nation or a whole age."[2] It is from this point of view that we wish to look at the Bible, not only this afternoon, but always, for the very wording of the subject indicates clearly the changed attitude of men concerning the Bible. No longer does it have standing as a deposit of supernaturally revealed wisdom. The Bible is a collection, a library, of literature of the Jewish people. Out of the vast amount of narrative, myth, folk tale, legend, history, laws, prophecy, poetry and religious literature that the Children of Israel created, the exactions of time and accident have left us these books which make up the Bible.

Not all of this material has the same value. Some of it, in fact large portions of it, do not come within the range of the definition of Dean Stanley. Ritualistic laws, and the civil code are very interesting as reflecting the nature and standard of social and religious development, but that can hardly be called literature in the exalted sense in which Stanley uses it.

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[1] While this manuscript is undated, it is among a collection held together with three brads along the top. The first of these, "Dreams of a Christmas Shopper," can be dated to December 1916. The third, "The Significance of Labor Strikes from the Point of View of Evolution of Religion" from 1918. So, perhaps it is reasonable to date this manuscript from the late 19teens. Also, Davis wrote extensively on the Bible in 1916, see his series *The Origin and History of the Bible.*

[2] Arthur Penrhyn Stanley (1815-1881) known as Dean Stanley, English Anglican priest and ecclesiastical historian. He was Dean of Westminster from 1864 until 1881. This quotation is from his book *Thoughts that Breathe,* published in Boston by D. Lothrop & Co., 1879. This exact quotation can be found in Cleland Boyd McAfee's *The Greatest English Classic: A Study of the King James Version of the bible and its Influence on Life and Literature,* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912, p. 131.

Without being too exact in statement, we may say that the books of the Bible were produced within the period beginning a little earlier than 800 B.C., and ending not far from 150 A.D., or in other words within the range of a hundred [clearly, Davis meant a thousand] years. While this period covers the range of actual composition, yet they embody many old traditions and folk poems which had been handed down from an earlier age. The Book of Genesis is entirely of this sort, a collection of old myths, folk legends, and hero stories. Exodus is almost entirely legendary in character, but it preserves some old poems like the "Song of Moses" in the 15th Chapter, and "The Song of Deborah" in Judges 5, which is regarded as the oldest piece of literature in the Old Testament, is another illustration. Besides these books of legendary and historical character, we have the prophecies, both the major and minor prophets in which the reformers of society and religion, at a white heat pitch, pour out their judgements upon society, and announce the doom of the nation and the judgement of God. Then we have the poetry, ranging in simple lyric poetry to the great epic drama of Job, which is regarded as one of the great literary creations of all history, ranking with Virgil's *Aeneid,* Dante's *Inferno,* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Goethe's *Faust.*

All of these writings carry the coloring and setting of the little nation whose record they are. This oriental setting gives them a background that is rich both in color and texture, and as warm and impulsive in style as the people whose life they sing. The legend says that the people of Israel were in bondage to the Egyptians. Prior to that they were one of [the] nomadic tribes of the Semitic race. Perchance in their wonderings they did come under the hand of the Egyptian Pharaohs. Be that as it may, about the year 1270 B.C. a clan called Israel settled in Canaan, the land of promise, flowing with milk and honey. To about this period in the history of this people the Song of Deborah belongs. It celebrates one of the incidents of the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites, a victory over Sisera and his hosts and the death of the fleeing king by the hand of a Bedouin woman in whose tent he had sought refuge.

Judges 5: This poem not only illustrates a very primitive form of poetic expression, but reflects the stage of development of the people.

About the year 1010 [B.C.E.], David was crowned king at Hebron. The reign of David and the reign of Solomon mark the high-water mark of the temporal power of these people. It was the decline of the kingdoms that gave rise to the great prophetic utterances from Amos in the year 750 [B.C.] or there abouts, to books of Esther just before the time of Christ.

In 586 [B.C.E.] comes the fall of Jerusalem and the period of the Exile, when in truth the great literary work of the Jewish people was accomplished.

In 539 [B.C.E.] Darius, the Persian, took Babylon, and in 516 [B.C.E.] the Jews began to return from exile, but as history records, they were even then scattered all over the world. What wonder then that their literature was always searching, and not to say doleful and resigned, in its tone.

I have already pointed out the Song of Deborah as the oldest example of literary remains of this people. It was one of those folk poems that was recited on festival occasions, and with varying changes a development was passed on from one generation to another as our nursery rhymes are today, in spite of books.

One of the most interesting and, at times, appealing, forms of literary expression is the folk legend. In these, there may be a trace of historic truth. Like the sagas of the European tribes, to which our attention has been called in recent years quite persistently. They are of [a] highly imaginative form, and here and there a passage of profound beauty, and insight appears, as for example, the incident of Moses and the Burning Bush, Exodus 3:1-6, and Jacob's Vision at Bethel in Genesis 28.

Both in imagery and insight, these fall but little short of poetry. It seems tragic that such splendid legend and folk myth should have been sacrificed for so many years upon the altar of a dry juiceless and useless theology.

I will not mention wisdom literature, which is simply a collection of short pithy sayings with here and there a sonnet, or some simple poem thrown in. These are what we would call epigrammatic wisdom, the commonsense sayings of a people collected. For example,

A false Balance is an abomination to Yahwey

But a just weight is his delight[3]
See also the folk song of good husbandry, Proverbs 27:23-27.

These are not always profound, but they are the gleanings of human experience, and constitute one of the illuminating portions of literary remains, for such couplets indicate a growing sense of discriminating judgement. Just increase the proportion of passionate insight, and you are not far from that form of literary expression that finds as high expression in the Hebrew literature as in any literature of the world. A discriminating wisdom, made human and universal by a great insight, results in the outpouring of the Prophets. Now it is the blazing smiting stinging blasts of Amos, and again the tender, yet upright pleadings of Hosea, speaking out of the disciplined understanding of his own wisdom. See Hosea, Chapter 14. See Amos, Chapter 8:4-14. Such are the minor prophets.

Yet how different the poems of the Exile. In Psalm 42 and 43 we have the cry of the Israelite in Babylon during the captivity. Having in mind the contrast. The Psalmist, taken from his native city and country, torn from his friends, deprived of the comforts and joy of his religious ceremonies, an unwilling captive in a city whose customs, whose religion, whose standards of life were so different. Beyond that, to be compelled to act as slaves and servants to this heathen nation. In this Psalm that is the story that he is telling. Also, Psalm 61, exilic. Also 63. Finally, 137, best of all.

Then the group of Psalms 120-134, which were probably used in the liturgy of the pilgrimages to Jerusalem. As the people approached the city they sang these songs, amid the waving of emblems, perhaps bundles of wheat, or palm leaves, or flowers.[4]

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[3] Proverbs 11:1.

[4] The text ends here halfway through the page. The next two pages of the manuscript, which are not paginated as the first five pages were, present a kind of outline of Davis' thinking about the kinds of literature in the Old Testament.

Primitive.

Song of Deborah, Judges V.
Song of Moses, Exodus 15.

Folk legends or myths.

Moses and the Burning Bush, Exodus 3:1-6
Jacob's Vision at Bethel, Genesis 28.

Wisdom literature, Proverbs.

Folk song of good husbandry, Prov. 27:23-7.

Minor prophets.

The smiting prophet, Amos 8:4-14.
The prophet of disciplined love, Hosea, Chapt 14.

Poetry of the Exile.

Psalm 42, 43, 61, 63, 137 (best).
Psalms of Ascent. 120-134. Festival Flowers etc.

Great Prophecy.

Israel in the economy of life, destined to the great task of "servant Nation."
Isaiah 52:13, 53:12.

Lyric Poetry.

Song of Songs? Moulton 202.
Drama. Wedding Day.[5]

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[5] Richard Moulton (1849-1924) Professor of English Literature, ultimately settling at the University of Chicago in 1892. His book: *The Literary Study of the Bible: An Account of the Leading Forms of Literature Represented in the Sacred Writings,* London: Macmillan & Co., 1896. Also: *The Modern Reader's Bible: The Books of the Bible with Three Books of the Apocrypha presented in Modern Literary Form,* New York: Macmillan Co, 1907. Very possibly Davis refers to another publication, Lyman Abbot, *The Life and Literature of the Ancient Hebrews,* Boston: Houghton,

Job.

One of the great literary achievements of all time, dealing with the problem of moral evil, like Faust, Dante, etc. by all odds the greatest book of Hebrew Literature.

Book of Job:

I. Prologue, Chap. 1-2. Probably belongs to the age of captivity.

II. Round of Discussion. Job and three friends.
   a. Job Opening complaint. Chap. III.
   b. Replies and answers
      i. Eliphaz, Chap 4-5
      ii. Job, Chap 6-7
      iii. Bildad, Chap 8
      iv. Job, Chap 9-10
      v. Zophar, Chap 11
      vi. Job, Chap 12-14
   c. Second round.
      i. Eliphaz, Chap 15
      ii. Job, Chap 16-17
      iii. Bildad, Chap 18
      iv. Job, Chap 19
      v. Zophar, Chap 20
      vi. Job, Chap 21
   d. Third round.
      i. Eliphaz, Chap 22,
      ii. Job, Chap 23-24
      iii. Bildad, Chap 25
      iv. Job, Chap 26
      v. Zophar, Chap 27:8-23
      vi. Job, Chap 27:1-8
   e. Chapter 28
   f. Job's Soliloquy

III. Elihu. Possibly an interpolation. Not referred to in prologue or epilogue. Chap. 32-37.

Mifflin and Co., 1901, which on page 202 discusses the Song of Songs: "It has even been suggested that the poem was written to celebrate the nuptials between Solomon and the daughter of Pharaoh. This, which is the traditional view, is adopted by Hengstenberg, Delitzach, Keil, Kingsbury, and Professor Moulton."

IV. Yahweh passages, 38 to 42.
V. Job’s reply to Yahweh, 42:1-6
VI. Epilogue.