

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 *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

DR. GRAY'S NEW BOOK ON ISAIAH.

THERE is no more beautiful English word than interpretation, and hard as it is to be an adequate interpreter, whether of races, or of churches, or of literatures, or of classes of society, the pleasure far exceeds the pain. That there are specially great difficulties in interpreting the ancient Scriptures, need not be said. Our latest commentators on the Book of Isaiah are confronting these, and I have no doubt that Dr. Peake (the editor of the main part of vol. ii.) will maintain the high standard set by Dr. Gray in vol. i. It would be impossible to consider here the work of the latter scholar in all its aspects. In tone it is perhaps a little too restrained, but that may well be the result of having to condense so much under different heads. On the whole, the achievement is very satisfactory. I must indeed make one exception, but the implied criticism will undoubtedly be rejected by the great majority of moderate scholars. If, therefore, I express my opinions with decision, it will do my friend Dr. Gray no harm, and criticisms which are rejected now will perhaps bear good fruit after many days.

It was a favourite remark of an adopted son of Oxford, though by birth and education a Jew, that if David and Isaiah were to rise from their graves, they would be highly astonished at the Hebrew writing ascribed to them. This humorous remark meant two things, (1) that an immense amount of corruption has penetrated into the traditional text, and (2) that most of the conjectural emendations of modern scholars have only led us further away from the true text. Now that I am near the end of my active career I can realise the truth of these positions, thanks to the labour consequent on two largely planned works, the Isaiah in the *Sacred Books of the Old Testament*, and a series

of critical articles in the *Encyclopædia Biblica*. May I venture to say that Dr. Buchanan Gray thinks very much as I do? At least he speaks in a noteworthy passage of his Preface (p. ix.) of "the numerous uncertainties which appear to (him) at present to beset the text," adding that "few emendations are certain, though many enable us to approximate more closely to the original thought of the writer than do the prevalent conjectural translations of the existing Hebrew text." His view appears to be that, however corrupt many parts of the traditional text may be, there are passages enough where the meaning is sufficiently clear to justify us in determining what the original writer may, to be consistent with himself, have said. Of course, the roots of the proposed emendation must be still visible in the corrupt text. When this is not the case, it is better, with Dr. Buchanan Gray, to leave the true reading undetermined.

While claiming our latest commentator on Isaiah as an ally on the general question of the state of the text, I am far from asserting that we agree as to all aspects of the special question, how to deal with the largely corrupt text. The problem is complicated for those who believe, with Duhm, that simplicity of style affords no universal criterion of correctness. One might have thought it safe to collect the seemingly simple passages of a paragraph or section, and derive from them some hints for the healing of corrupt places. But experience shows that simplicity may be an artificial product. One might also have thought it sufficient much oftener than it is to turn the LXX text into Hebrew to arrive at a nearly correct text, whereas only too often the Hebrew text which really underlies the Greek is not less distant from the true text than the Massoretic. In fact, the study of the LXX as a textual aid is still in its infancy. Even more necessary is it than in the case of the Massoretic text to supplement old methods with new.

We must, therefore, in my opinion, give much more attention to the study of the mistakes of the scribes, and in order to guard ourselves against personal caprice and subjectivity we must perforce adopt some form of the North Arabian theory. It is on these two points that I feel that Dr. Gray and I are most likely to differ, and these points therefore most need discussion. At the same time, I am very thankful for the wide range of our agreement. We are both liable to the same charge—that of destroying the basis of the history of the Old Testament religion, to the discouragement of those who hold to the organic connexion of the Old Testament and the New.

In reply to this charge it is enough to say that the chief motive for studying the Old Testament should be the intrinsic interest of that many-sided book. Whether we solve its literary and historical problems or not, is comparatively unimportant, but whether through our study we become wiser and better men, imports us much. That is the whole matter. There is no better introduction to the problems of the science of religion than is afforded by the historical and psychological study of the Old Testament writings. To have worked at these problems makes a man truly wise, truly competent to express himself on the religious problems of our own day—problems which are history in the making. We may or may not attain to a permanently satisfactory scientific solution, but the eye of our mind will have been cleared, and the moral discipline of putting truth above all other considerations will be of priceless value for our higher culture. May we not say that, while mere critical theories "have their day" and perish, the love of truth is eternal?

We need not, then, be upset at finding that there is great uncertainty about the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. The next question is, How does Dr. Gray deal with the most testing cases in Isaiah i.-xxvii.? One such case is certainly

offered by a passage in Isaiah's earliest prophecy (ii. 6), where the traditional Hebrew text has—

For thou hast forsaken thy people,
The house of Jacob,
For they are full from the East,
And are diviners like the Philistines,
And with the children of foreigners they. . . .

Every line of this suggests a controversy. The passage was already corrupt in the time of the LXX, but Dr Gray ventures to adopt one of that version's characteristic readings, "for his land is full," instead of "for they are full." His own special contribution is, the substitution of כנענים "Canaanites," i.e., "traders," for עננים "diviners." He states the case thus :—

"If we look at the wider context, another question arises, viz., Is any reference to soothsaying or the like probable? By a conjecture discussed (elsewhere) this is obtained. Judah (or Israel) has become a busy commercial people, thronged with foreign traders; hence flows wealth, which is expended on munitions of war, and the manufacture of handiwork to which, instead of Yahweh, the people pay worship." He has strong doubts as to the legitimacy of the combination of the Philistines and divination. This is ingenious, but would have been more cogent if it had been possible to show that there was a similar reference to commerce in the parallel line. Dr. Gray himself, however, admits that this cannot be done. I wish that he had also seen how clearly יִשְׁפִּיזוּ, "practise sorcery," underlies יִשְׁפִּיקוּ. Nothing is more common than the confusion of כ and ק, and a transposition of letters such as is here presupposed. I venture to add a translation of my own text which has in essentials been before the world for about five years.

For Yah has forsaken his people,
. . . the house of Jacob,
For they are diviners like the Ethbalites,
And practise sorcery in Yerahme'el.

It will be noticed here that מלאו מקדם and נכרים are unrepresented in the above. The former combination of words is probably a gloss on the words that underlie the obscure ילדי נכרים, viz., Yerahme'el Rakmanim; the latter word is itself probably a gloss, while ילדי for ירחמאל is justified by a whole group of passages in which ילד or ילדי must be a corruption of the regional ירחמאל.¹ As for מלאו מקדם, I grant the improbability of such a phrase; "his land is full of . . ." is what we should have expected. We ought also by this time to know that מלא is often a fragment of some popular form of "Yerahme'el,"² such as "Armal" (cf. the ethnic miswritten le'ummim in Isaiah xli. 1). מקדם is undoubtedly a corruption of רקמים or רקמנים, just as נכרים is.

Dr. Gray, too, does not scruple to omit superfluous words; מקדם and כפלשתים are both unrepresented in his corrected text. But he does not (so far as I can see) attempt to account for them. On the other hand, that revised form of the text which is suggested by the present writer's North Arabian theory does account for them, and effects this without yielding to the temptation of calling any single word superfluous. The whole verse means that Yahweh has given up Israel because Israel has given up Yahweh. Of this apostasy of Israel the grand proof is the prevalence in Israel of divination, which is due to the addiction of the Israelites to the religious practices of the Ethbalites—apparently the nearest branch of the Yerahme'elite or N. Arabian race. There is no doubt a lacuna in the expression of the post-prophet's meaning. For the prophet certainly considers that by adopting N. Arabian religion the Israelites will soon vie with their N. Arabian neighbours in worldly power. How can this be? Isaiah does not explain it. But the problem is not very obscure. The gods of the N.

¹ See *Traditions and Beliefs of Ancient Israel* (1905), pp. 247 ff.

² Cp. "Mioaiah the son of Imla."

Arabians must have been regarded as patrons of civilisation and its luxuries, and of such luxuries Isaiah and his disciples were the sworn opponents. Another difficulty found by Dr. Gray has been already mentioned—it is the connexion of divination with the Philistines. But if, as I think that I have shown, there has been a great confusion between the Pelethites—or rather, the Ethbalites—and the Pelishtim, this objection falls to the ground, for the Ethbalites (i.e., the Ishmaelites) and the Yerahme'elites were the same race, and the Yerahme'elites were certainly great in all abstruse religious lore.

All this is not of merely scholastic or technical interest. It requires to be made widely known that there were two religions among the Israelites; the most popular of these was, in all essentials, identical with the N. Arabian. One part of the popular religion was probably the belief in a supernatural divine-human Being who was to deliver Israel from its foes, and rule over the people of Yahweh in restored Paradise. This becomes very plausible, if "soured milk and honey shall he eat" (Isa. vii. 15) can be equivalent to "he shall begin his career as an inhabitant of the divine garden," and if the *'almah*, whose child this great Being is, can be regarded as, in the original form of the myth, a virgin-goddess.¹ If only one might re-write the whole of the supposed Messiah-passage so as to fit in with a popular Messiah-myth, one might turn out a much more satisfactory piece of exegesis. All that we can do is to indicate the various possibilities suggested by phrases of the traditional text, and if one feels free to do so, to reconstruct a more plausible text.

Isaiah vii. 14–16 is, therefore, a highly testing passage, and not least from the point of view of textual criticism. There is, as it seems to me, no theory which enables us to do

¹ See my *Bible Problems* (1905), pp. 71–91.

justice to every statement of the passage, and we are, therefore, compelled to apply the more approved critical methods, new and old, to this possibly much corrupted text. Dr. Gray certainly does his best to be just to competing possibilities, but, owing to his prejudice against new text-critical methods, he offers no contribution to the recovery of the original text. This is what he says on the text-critical question.

“The ambiguities and awkwardnesses of the passage are so numerous as to give little hope of reaching an interpretation that will command general assent ; and under these circumstances even the dogmatic or traditional Christian interpretation will doubtless continue to find defenders, while others may infer that the text has been deeply corrupted and must be reconstructed by bold and extensive conjectures (see Cheyne, most recently, in the *Two Religions*, 309 ff.).”

I think the critical section of the notes on vii. 14–16 would have been even more thorough than it is, if some idea had been given to the reader of the conclusions which I have reached, and of their grounds, and I take the liberty of referring the reader to pp. 314–316 of the book called *The Two Religions of Israel*, and of adding one more correction here. It relates to the troublesome word *‘almah*, “a girl of marriageable age.” As I have mentioned, I regard the prophecy in Isaiah vii. 16 as an announcement of the birth of a son to Isaiah. The parallelism of the prophecy in viii. 3b cannot be ignored, and if so, we may, without rashness, attempt by critical methods to bring *העלמה*, and *נְבִיאָה* nearer together. Now, we know of several names for the population of N. Arabia, and among these are *אמלִים* (Amalites) and *צִבְעֹנִים* (Zib'onites). There is nothing inconceivable in Isaiah's being married to a N. Arabian woman ; not all Yerahme'elites were forsakers of Yahweh. The prophet in vii. 14 and the narrator in viii. 3 both mention that Isaiah's

wife was a N. Arabian, the one calling her *העלמה* (or perhaps *העלמיה*) "the Amalite," and the other *צבאוניה*, "the Zib'onite."

Dr. Gray does not hold the Immanuel prophecy to be Messianic. He agrees with Robertson Smith, and most of those recent scholars (including myself) who approach the subject from a philological point of view, that the children—not the child—spoken of are normally born human beings, who will be, each of them, a sign, inasmuch as they will receive, and deserve to receive, the memorial name Immanuel, "God (is) with us." I for my part still hold that, if Isaiah vii. 14 *has to be* translated, Prof. Robertson Smith's version must be the right one. If, however, besides grammatical accuracy, complete naturalness is always essential in translation, then the version referred to is certainly wrong. But I have only time to add one more remark, viz., that the religion of Isaiah and of the prophets of his school was diametrically opposed to the notion of a Messiah.

If this be the case, a still more trying consequence (to many people) is that a fine passage, Isaiah ix. 1-7, which is certainly Messianic, must be denied to Isaiah, and given up to some unknown exilic or post-exilic writer. I do not assert that this is the only argument for a late date of this passage, but it is certainly the argument which, for me, carries most weight. Dr. Gray too inclines to a late date. He does not, however, contribute much to the correction of the text, and there is, therefore, perhaps less cogency about his argument than might be desirable. To me, five out of the eight quatrains of the poem appear to contain North Arabian regionals and ethnics. For instance, the very doubtful words, *דון*, *שכמו*, and *ע* may most satisfactorily be thus explained. To confine myself to the Messiah's name, I venture to think that Dr. Gray might have had better results if he had applied the N. Arabian key. The leading ideas are

surely that the Messiah will conquer N. Arabia, and rule righteously over the united dominions of Judah and N. Arabia. Dr. Gray's version of ix. 4 differs in no important respect from the well-known Authorized Version. I venture to submit a version of my own revised text. Verse 4 (5) falls, as Dr. Gray also thinks, into two quatrains.

For a child has been born to us,
A son has been given to us,
And dominion is over Kashram,¹
And his name is called [over Ashmar].²

The mighty hero
Hath swallowed up Sib'on,³
The potentate of Arabia,
The prince of Shalem.⁴

There are a number of points here which invite a more lengthy consideration than can be given in footnotes. I think it would have made the commentary more stimulating if some hint of these problems had been given, but I admit that in point of quantity Dr. Gray is not open to criticism, and that to have given space to a record of heretical views might have depressed some readers. I must confess, however, that I hope that the author makes a wrong estimate of his public.

I find no difficulty myself in saying that even where I most differ from Dr. Gray, I can recognise and appreciate the combination of learning and common sense, which is perhaps one of this esteemed scholar's most striking characteristics.

¹ Kashram (often miswritten Kasdim) is a popular substitute for Ashhur-Aram. See references in the index of *The Two Religions of Israel* and *The Mines of Israel*.

² יִשְׁמָן in the original text was probably followed by יִשְׁמָן לְעַל, "over Ishman" (=Ishmael).

³ Sib'on, a derivative of Ishmael, is a name for N. Arabia.

⁴ The traditional text has *shalom*. The confusion of *shalom* with *shalem* is also visible in Judges vi. 24, Mic. v. 4 ("that is, Ishmael"). *Shalem* comes from *Ishmael*.

The present volume closes with chaps. xxiv.–xxvii., which Dr. Gray describes as “an Apocalypse of Judgment on the World, and of Yahweh’s reign and glory.” Later on, however, the title, “Apocalypse” is reserved for xxiv., xxv. 6–8, xxvi. 20 f., xxvii. 1, 12 f. All the parts of the singular compound which we have in chaps. xxiv.–xxvii. are, Dr. Gray thinks, post-exilic, even xxvii. 13, in which a captivity in the lands of Asshur and Misraim is spoken of. Of course, the passage might conceivably be an Isaianic fragment, though Isaiah was not usually a prophet of consolation. But Dr. Gray holds that here, as in Ezra vi. 22, “Asshur” is a term for the Persian empire. He adds a reference to Isaiah xi. 11; Hos. xi. 14, Mic. vii. 12, Zech. x. 10 might also be parallel. I am very sorry, but surely this is far too arbitrary, nor can I think that language was given us to conceal thoughts. If I understand right, Asshur or Ashhur was one of the names in the Old Testament for N. Arabia, either in its totality or in its more distant parts. In *The Decline and Fall of the Kingdom of Judah* I have sought to indicate some passages in which this view of Asshur is inevitable; among such passages must, as I venture to think, certainly be included Isaiah xxvii. 13. I have said nothing yet about verse 12, and will here only note that, as in Judges xii. 6, *shibboleth* (which Dr. Gray here doubtfully renders ‘current,’ should probably be *shōbal* (i.e., Ishmael). Both verse 12 and verse 13 are clear upon the N. Arabian theory and upon no other; there was a N. Arabian as well as a Babylonian captivity, as I have sought to show at length in *Mines of Isaiah Re-explored*.

While gladly recognising the fullness and accuracy of the commentary on Isaiah xxiv.–xxvii., I think that honourable mention might have been conceded by the editor to this no longer new theory. For let us consider how much it explains. In xxiv. 14 there is one very strange statement,

“For Yahweh’s majesty they cry aloud from the sea” ;
and another in the next verse,

“Wherefore in the lights glorify ye Yahweh.”

All that Dr. Gray can find to say is that *from the sea* “may mean *from the west*,” though this limitation of jubilation would be curious and that though “it is very doubtful whether *the lights* means *the East* as the region of light,” yet “some term for East in antithetic parallelism with *the isles of the sea* (ver. 15*b*), i.e., the West, may very well have stood here.” From the later point of view, however, it is certain that here, as in xxvii. 1, *yam* is a short form of *yaman* (= *yāwān*), and possible that both *urim* and its corruption *'iyyim*¹ are shortened forms of *asshurim*. Of course, these readings imply that there was a N. Arabian captivity; but why should we not frankly confess that the N. Arabian theory may be right? I will only add that Isaiah lxvi. throws much light on this passage. The jubilant ones in ver. 14 are the Jewish exiles in the more distant parts of N. Arabia who (in ver. 15) call upon those N. Arabians who have survived the great judgment to glorify the God who “only doeth wondrous things.” I am bound to add that, though in general Dr. Gray keeps his eyes wide open for Babylonian and Assyrian illustrations, he says nothing about the great eschatological myth borrowed from Babylon, directly or indirectly, by Israel.² It is a myth of the destruction of the world issuing in a fresh creation, and therefore Dr. Gray is quite justified in rendering *'eres* “earth.” The earth, however, for these Hebrew writers is virtually confined to the peoples most nearly related to the Judaites, i.e., those of N. Arabia, and the city which is to be “broken” is the capital of the leading people of that region. It is a question, however, whether *'eres* might not more correctly be rendered

¹ The phrase “*'iyyé hayyām*” presumably comes from *'Yr-Yaman*.

² See Zimmerer (*KAT*, part ii.), and cp. Cheyne, *Mines of Isaiah* (1902).

“land,” by which would be meant the united countries of the Abrahamic peoples, which had still a keen consciousness of this affinity (cp. Isa. xix. 26 f.). And further, it is a question whether תבל has not come from אֶתְבַּל, i.e. Ethbal = Ishmael. “It was not Yahweh’s will that any of those kindred peoples should altogether perish. Sifted they would have to be, but not broken. A general dissatisfaction with their unprogressive cultus would have to arise, and would, for N. Arabia, be only wholesome.” For have they not “transgressed laws, overstepped statutes, broken the eternal covenant” (xxiv. 5)? From the beginning God has communicated with these favoured peoples, and they have rejected the revelation of His will.

There were some Israelites, then, who could not believe that there was a hopeful future for the N. Arabian races, and, again, there were others who held with equal firmness that those dangerous nationalities would be extinguished. One of the latter is, I think, the writer of those grim words in xxv. 8a, “He hath annihilated Ishmael for ever” (מֵוֶת from אֶתְמוֹל = אֶתְמוֹל, i.e. Ishmael). Ishmael is the author of the sorrow of all the subject peoples. Dr. Gray would, in my opinion, have done well to have mentioned this possibility. But how can I wonder that he has regarded primarily the public of teachers, and avoided so-called eccentricities? Nobly has he acquitted himself of his task.

T. K. CHEYNE.