

**MASKIL LE-SOPHER; THE
PRINCIPLES AND PROCESSES OF
CLASSICAL PHILOLOGY APPLIED
TO THE ANALYSIS OF THE
HEBREW LANGUAGE**

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BY

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Διὰ τοῦτο πᾶς γραμματεὺς μαθητευθεὶς εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν ὁμοίως ἐστὶν ἀνθρώπων οἰκοδοσοῦν, ὅστις ἐκβάλλει ἐκ τοῦ θησαυροῦ αὐτοῦ καιρᾶ καὶ ταλαιᾶ.

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MASKIL LE-SOPHER.

§ 1. FEW persons have noticed, and no one has sufficiently regretted the fact, that although Indo-Germanic Philology in general, and Greek Scholarship in particular, have made greater progress in the last few years than in the three centuries before, the theory of Hebrew Grammar, and the etymological analysis of the Hebrew Language, remain just as they were; and if an attempt has been made by several philologers in Germany to connect the study of Hebrew, to a certain extent at least, with the improved philology of the day, their good intentions have not met with much success in their own country, and their views have obtained no recognition or reception in England¹. On the contrary, our English writers on this subject have either confined themselves to the old traditional systems of the Rabbis and Masorethic teachers, or, at best, have merely sought to illustrate the Hebrew language by comparing it with other Semitic languages, especially with the Arabic. It is the object of the following pages to show that this sort of comparison can produce no solid results, and that

¹ Gesenius and Ewald have made a good many detached comparisons between the Semitic and Indo-Germanic languages, but do not appear to have seen their way to any systematic investigation into this subject; and, to say the truth, their minds seem to have wanted that thorough training in Indo-Germanic philology, which is more necessary for this sort of inquiry than the highest attainments in Semitic learning. The claims put up by Delitzsch (*Jesurun*, p. 32 *et passim*) for his friend and teacher Julius Fuerst, appear not a little extravagant. Fuerst's gigantic *Concordance* is a most valuable work, and there is a great deal of merit in the *Lehrgebäude der aramäischen Idiome*, which he had previously commenced; but we cannot allow that he was either the first to see the truth, or that he has seen the whole truth. Some of the views to which Delitzsch attaches so much importance are positively erroneous.

if any real improvement is to take place in Hebrew Scholarship, it must proceed from a scientific application to the analysis of the Hebrew language of those principles which are derived from an inductive examination of the Indo-Germanic idioms, and which have owed their best confirmation to the habits of accurate thought, and to the matured linguistic experience, of the well-trained classical scholar.

§ 2. In order to vindicate this opinion, it will be desirable, in the first place, to correct a common error, which is at the root of the false philology of our Hebrew grammarians. The undoubted antiquity and inestimable value of the books which form the standard of the Hebrew language, have given rise to a fixed belief in the primeval condition of the language itself, which must be done away with, if any advance is to take place in our knowledge of its structure. The prejudice to which we refer should give place to more rational considerations, derived from the facts of the case. It should be recollected, that, although the different works which compose the Bible were written at very different periods, they were all collected, revised, and edited by Ezra, at a period subsequent to the age of the Pisistratidæ, when the old poems of Homer were rearranged and modernized, in accordance with the living language and existing tastes of the Athenians: and that the uniformity of style and dialect which is observable in the Sacred Volume, is more properly attributable to a similar proceeding on the part of the Masora, than to the adoption by them in the later books of an archaic and obsolete idiom found in the books of Moses. Sound Biblical Criticism depends upon this view of the case; and we might as well ignore the effects produced by the Alexandrian school on the literature of Greece, or the labours of the school of Vicramaditya's court in regard to Sanscrit literature, as deny the importance of this consideration to him who would really understand the sacred books of the Jews in their existing state.

§ 3. But even if there were no evidence for the fact, that our text-book for the Hebrew language is a comparatively recent collection and edition of ancient works, the evidence furnished by the language itself would remain the same, namely,

that it is an idiom in an advanced state of disintegration. This, again, is a point to which sufficient attention has not yet been paid by any Semitic philologist. In order to make our view of the matter clear and intelligible, we must premise a few general observations.

It is the tendency of sound comparative philology, to establish more and more the original identity of human speech, and its necessary connexion with certain psychological laws, which are coextensive with human nature. The farther we go back in our endeavours to reproduce the common mother of languages, the greater fulness do we find in the etymological forms; the less frequent and the less obvious, because the less necessary, are those contrivances which give to syntax or construction its greatest definiteness and precision. In fact, as we have observed elsewhere, "the method of language gains at the expense of its materials." The chief cause of the change thus brought about, is to be sought in the invention of writing. Language is the spontaneous result of our intellectual organization, but writing is an invented art. And the triumph of syntax over etymology is not so much a war of language with itself, as a contest between two modes of expression, one of which is best adapted to the memory unaided by written records, and the other best suited to the formal statement and registration of our connected thoughts. Accordingly, when we speak of languages as being in an old and new state or condition, we speak of them as more or less affected by the cultivation of prose literature and by the common use of writing. As we have not, by the nature of the case, any ancient language which is altogether unaffected by the written records which have transmitted it to us, we can only speak of these differences as differences of degree. But we may divide all languages known to us into three states or conditions, thus differing in the degree of detriment which their cultivation of syntax has caused to their etymological structure. We shall call these *primary*, *secondary*, and *tertiary* states.

(1.) Languages in a primary, or highly etymological, state, are those which have few or no syntactical contrivances, but complete and regular inflexions, and a living power of derivation and composition. In such languages, writing has been cultivated at a late period, and circumstances have not favoured the