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A Review of Ancient Religions IV—The Hebrew Religion I

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Source: *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology (2nd Edition)*

Editor(s): John W. Welch

Published: Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1996

Page(s): 153–162



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The Hebrew revelation. In this review of the ancient religions, I have purposely reserved consideration of the Hebrew religion to the last, because that religion, more than any other, must be accorded higher claims upon direct revelation for its origin, and will therefore bring us more closely to grips with the question of revealed religion.

The Hebrew scriptures. The record of the alleged Hebrew revelation is to be found in what is commonly known as the Old Testament, comprising, according to Josephus (writing near the beginning of the Christian Era), twenty-two sacred books. In our Protestant version of the Old Testament they are distributed into thirty-nine books; the difference arises from a slightly altered grouping of the several books from that followed by Josephus.¹

I think Josephus is the most reliable authority that may be followed on the origin of the sacred literature of the Hebrews, and therefore I quote him somewhat at length on the subject. After granting superiority for excellence of composition and eloquence to the writings of the Greeks, Josephus claims the honor of accuracy and integrity for the Hebrew writings, and details with what care the Hebrew writers of sacred things were chosen. He then proceeds to say:

Josephus on the integrity of the Hebrew scriptures.

Every one is not permitted of his own accord to be a writer, nor is there any disagreement in what is written; they being only prophets

¹What are generally known as the minor prophets, twelve in number, are connected as one book in the grouping by Josephus; the book of Ruth is coupled with the book of Judges; Ezra with Nehemiah, Lamentations with Jeremiah, while the two books each of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are counted but one book each, making a reduction of seventeen in number from the authorized Protestant version which, plus the twenty-two books counted by Josephus, would complete

that have written the original and earliest accounts of things, as they learned them of God himself by inspiration; and others have written what hath happened in their own time, and that in a very distinct manner also. For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another (as the Greeks have), but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times, which are justly believed to be divine. And of them, five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses (1451 B.C.—Ussher^a) till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes (these two kings—father and son—reigned from 485 B.C. to 424 B.C.); the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life. It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time: and how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation, is evident by what we do: for during so many ages as have already passed, no one hath been so bold as either to add any thing to them, to take any thing from them, or to make any change in them; but it is become natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them. For it is no new thing for our captives, many of them in number, and frequently in time, to be seen to endure racks and deaths of all kinds upon the theatres, that they may not be obliged to say one word against our laws and the records that contain them.²

I may add that comparatively recent discoveries by George Smith, Professor Sayce and others of more recent times, showing that in the ancient religions of Chaldea and Babylonia there were elaborate narratives of the creation which in most prominent features may have been the source of the creation statements in the Old Testament, **do** not

the thirty-nine books of our authorized King James Version of the Old Testament. [Josephus, like Origen and Jerome, counted twenty-two books in the Old Testament—the same number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. For a recent discussion, see James A. Sanders, “Canon,” *Anchor Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman and others (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992), 1:840.]

^aRoberts often used the Ussher chronology in his works. It was a standard relative chronology compiled and published 1650–54 by Bishop James Ussher. As noted by the *LDS Bible Dictionary* under “Chronology,” “much work has still to be done in this direction. The dates found at the top of many printed English Bibles are due to Archbishop Ussher. Some of them have been shown to be incorrect.”

²Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews, against Apion*, 581–82. [Roberts omitted the comma in the phrase “the prophets, who were after Moses.”]

disparage the account here given by Josephus of the origin of the Hebrew literature.^b There can be no doubt but **that** what the accounts of the Creation and other ancient events found in both Assyrian and Egyptian sources are earlier than those written by Moses; and that their accounts of ancient events are somewhat similar in import; but because of these facts it is not necessary to disclaim either the Mosaic authorship of the five books of the Bible accredited to that prophet, or doubt the inspiration of those accounts given by Moses; and yet **on many minds** this has been the result to some extent of these discoveries. The truth is that the outstanding facts of the creation, the fall of man, the flood, etc., have been known by the human race from the earliest historical times, from the days of Adam, in fact. They were matters of common knowledge by tradition among the antediluvian patriarchs, and through the family of Noah were preserved to the families and races of men subsequent to the flood.^c The variously distorted creation stories and other ancient events [were] possessed by nearly all people. But all this did not prevent the Lord from revealing the creation history to Moses, together with subsequent events; nor does this new knowledge require us to doubt the inspiration which rested upon him and that enabled him to weave into splendid, coherent form the fragmentary truth among the ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, and other peoples.

Testimony of the New Testament to the integrity of the Old.

It should also be noted that in addition to the testimony of Josephus, the writers of the New Testament give emphatic testimony to the authenticity and divine authority of the Old Testament, since these

^bSimilarities between the biblical creation story and texts which predated Moses and which were found in Assyria and Babylonia caused some scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to argue that the biblical creation story was not original with Moses, but rather a later composite account heavily influenced by the earlier Mesopotamian mythologies. An account of some of these discoveries from the time of B. H. Roberts can be found in A. H. Sayce, *The Archaeology of the Cuneiform Inscriptions* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1907). See also George Smith and others, "Chaldean Account of the Deluge and Translation of the Deluge Tablet," in *Records of the Past*, ed. Henry Mason Baum and Frederick Bennett Wright, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Records of the Past Exploration Society, 1902), 363-79. A recent discussion of the parallels can be found in Alexander Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). Roberts's argument here is a summary of a lengthier treatment in *Seventy's Course in Theology* 1:24-26. He also treated this subject in the *Young Men's Manual*, 1903-4 (no. 7), ch. 1.

^cOn this issue, Roberts cites the example of the account of creation in the book of Abraham; see *Seventy's Course in Theology* 1:25.

writers so frequently quoted it as a work of divine authority. “Indeed,” say a group of commentators on the New and the Old Testament,

the references are so numerous and the testimonies so distinctly borne to the existence of the Mosaic books throughout the whole history of the Jewish nation, and the unity of character, design and style pervading these books is so clearly perceptible, notwithstanding the rationalistic assertions of their forming a series of separate and unconnected fragments,^d that it may with all safety be said, there is immensely stronger and more varied evidence in proof of their being the authorship of Moses than any of the Greek or Roman classics being the productions of the authors whose names they bear.³

One thing more should be borne in mind with reference to this whole volume of ancient Hebrew scripture, the Old Testament, and that is whatever the subdivisions may be—history, legislation, poetry, prophecy, biography, or proverbs—it is alleged to have been written under the inspiration of God. That does not mean that human elements are not to be found in it, but rather that a divine spirit is present in the midst of human elements, giving forth light and truth and wisdom such as is to be found in no merely human production. There is a divine spirit always present in these scripture narratives, prophecy and poetry, that makes the whole to contain a revelation of God and an account of his methods of doing things among men. All of which gives those writings an authority that does not pertain to the ordinary writings of men.

The revealed religion of the Hebrews. The message of these scriptures to the world on the great themes that have occupied thus far our attention, the source, or origin of things, the nature of the world, and man’s place in it, are now to be considered. God is referred to as the

^dThis is an allusion to the scholarly theory, called the Documentary Hypothesis, that developed primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is still widely held by many scholars. This hypothesis attempts to explain the apparent doublets in the text of the Pentateuch as the result of an editorial combination of several different accounts. In the case of the creation story, this theory claims the creation story in Genesis 1 was written by an author who refers to God as Elohim (KJV “God”) and Genesis 2 is a different creation story from a different time period by a different author who uses Jehovah (KJV “Lord”). Roberts treated this topic in more detail in the *Seventy’s Course in Theology* 1:33, as well as in the *Young Men’s Manual*, 1903–4 (no. 7), chapter 1. For a more modern discussion of this issue by a Latter-day Saint scholar, see S. Kent Brown, “Approaches to the Pentateuch,” in *Studies in Scripture: Volume Three, The Old Testament*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 13–23.

³Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, “Preface to the Pentateuch and Historical Books,” *Commentary*, 5.

Creator of the world and all that is in it. The story of the creation as given by Moses is the most magnificent account known among men. Listen to its opening statement:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. (Gen. 1:1-5)

Then follow the successive acts of the creation, the waters were divided and gathered together and called seas; the dry land appeared and was called earth; and God said, “Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind” (Gen. 1:11). The seas also were made to bring forth life “abundantly”; and the fowls of the air also were to multiply, each after his kind.

“And God made the beast of the earth after ⟨their⟩ [his] kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after ⟨its⟩ [his] kind: and God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:25).

Thus the earth was made ready for the coming of man, but when that point was reached in creation by the divine Intelligence, or Intelligences—for there appears to have been more than one person in the work of the creation^c—then something special seems to have happened, for God said:

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let ⟨him⟩ [them] have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl ⟨in⟩ [of] the air, [and] over the cattle, and over all the earth. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it. . . . And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. (Gen. 1:26-28, 31)

This story of creation, the origin of the various forms of life upon the earth, and finally crowned with the advent of man upon it, his commission to have dominion over the earth, and subdue it—all this, at once so simple, yet sublime, involves us in none of the speculations, and hair-splitting definitions of “being” and “becoming”; and of “matter,” of “space,” and of “spirit.” It simply shows us God at work in the midst of things, of which in the proper place we shall have more

^cThe Pearl of Great Price account of creation in Abraham 4-5 constantly refers to the various acts of creation performed by the “Gods.”

to say, and upon it much will depend for the right unfolding of the great theme we have undertaken. But for the present this will be sufficient on this point of origins—this accounting for the commencement of things *as according to* revelations.

Developments following creation events. Following this commencement came the development of events that have made the history of man in the earth. It seems that man was created “sufficient to stand,” yet “free to fall”^f—if he so willed it: and the opportunity was afforded in the economy of the Creator to test this man’s power of free, moral agency. The commandment was given concerning a certain fruit, which seemed to have in it in some way the elements of ~~life and~~ death.[†] Of all the fruit of God’s garden, man was at liberty to partake save only this one—the fruit of the tree of “the knowledge of good and evil.” “In the day [that] thou eatest thereof,” ran the divine commandment, “thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:17). That is *to say*, it might not be eaten without certain consequences following the partaking of it.

The story is well known, and we need not dwell upon the details of it. The tempter came, contradicting the decree of the Almighty. “Ye shalt not surely die,” was the tempter’s assurance. “Eat . . . and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil”! (Gen. 3:5). The law was broken and man learned that God’s word was true. Death ensued, and has reigned in the earth from then until now. Separation from God, a spiritual death; and later separation of man’s spirit from his body, resulting in physical death.

~~*God’s decree found true.*~~ ***Enter death.*** Man, I say, learned God’s decree was true, death entered the world, but it was not intended that a lasting victory should be granted unto death. Even when announcing the sentence upon man, in consequence of his transgression of the commandment, the word of hope was whispered to his heart. Pronouncing the curse upon the tempter who had induced man to break

^fRoberts quotes here from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* 3.98-99. God, outlining his plan to the hosts in heaven, says the following of his human creations: “I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.”

[†]The committee of the Quorum of the Twelve that reviewed the draft of this book submitted by Roberts to the Church in 1928 questioned “that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil had in it the seeds of life and death.” In a handwritten note, Robert responded: **wh[ich] see 6, 7**. Reporting to President Rudger Clawson on October 10, 1929, George Albert Smith asked: “Since the tree had in it the seeds of death, and no reference is made to seeds of life, cannot this word be eliminated?” Roberts changed the typescript in response to this comment.

the law, God said of the seed of the woman, that while his heel should be bruised by the tempter, the tempter's head should be bruised by the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15).

The hope of deliverance. The time came when the unfolding of this hope of deliverance through the promised seed of the woman, took the form of a more direct prediction of the advent of God into man's earth life. One of the inspired prophets declared that a virgin would "conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel," which by interpretation means God with us, or God with man (see Isa. 7:14; cf. Matt. 1:23).

In another prophecy the message ran: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). And, of course, what he is "called" that he will be—the "mighty God," the "everlasting Father"—"Immanuel"—God among men!

Again the advent of God among men is prophetically proclaimed including the promise of a resurrection from the dead of all the hosts of Israel—and impliedly of all men—by Isaiah. To comfort Israel at a period when Israel was painfully conscious of failure to establish the things of God hoped for—then Isaiah took the account of their afflictions before God. "We have not wrought any deliverance in the earth," was Isaiah's complaint. "Neither have the inhabitants of the world fallen." Then God, to give comfort to this prophet and to his people, said—and gave it to his prophet as a message to Israel: "Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead" (Isa. 26:18-19).⁸

⁸Roberts saw in this verse an allusion to the resurrection of Christ and mankind. His interpretation, which runs counter to most of the standard Jewish and Christian interpretations of this passage, was the basis for Roberts's article in the periodical *Redeemed Hebrew* (1926-27), where he attempted to prove the divinity of Christ to Jewish rabbis, and for his subsequent response to objections to his argument raised by Rev. Max Wertheimer, a Jew converted to Christianity. Both of these articles appear in Roberts, *Rasha the Jew: A Message to All Jews* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1932), 11-34. It is interesting that the interpretation Roberts put forth is suggested in the Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown *Commentary*: "However, as Jesus is the antitype to Israel (Matt. 2:15), *English Version* gives a true sense, and one ultimately contemplated in the prophecy: *Christ's* dead body being raised again is the source of Jehovah's people (*all*, and especially believers, the spiritual Israelites) also being raised (1 Cor. 15:20-22)." See Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary*, 459.

This has in it the same ring of assurance as that found in the book of Job, included in Hebrew literature, who said, when his fortunes were at their lowest:

I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold \langle him \rangle , and not another; though my reins be consumed within me. (Job 19:25-27)

This conviction of a resurrection from physical death (which is in part a redemption from the consequences of the broken law in Eden), viz. redemption from physical death, implanted in the heart of Israel, inspired the prophet Daniel to say: “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2).

The call and mission of Abraham and Israel. Going back now to the early period of the Hebrew literature, we have in Genesis the story of the Patriarchs to the time of the flood, the destruction of the world by that cataclysm, and the subsequent story of mankind to the selection of a special family, the family of Abraham, a family through whose “seed” all the nations of the earth were to be blessed. This a promise frequently iterated in the sacred records.⁴ This family was finally to be developed into a chosen people with a mission, the mission of being God’s witnesses in the earth. A people, who, whatever might be their fortunes, prosperous or disastrous, obedient or disobedient, they should nevertheless be a witness for God, and for the truth of this body of sacred literature (the Old Testament) among all people. God made a covenant with the Hebrews before the death of their prophet Moses, the consequences of which were set forth in great plainness; on the one hand, for good; on the other hand, for evil. This was the covenant—the Lord said:

And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, [that] the Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: And all these blessings shall come on thee, . . . if thou \langle wilt \rangle [shalt] hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God. (Deut. 28:1-2)

⁴Genesis 18:19—“I know him,” [Abraham, said the Lord] “that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (see also Gen. 22).

Then follows an enumeration of blessings that should come upon Israel for their obedience; and truly that blessing includes everything that national well-being could hope to enjoy: no blessing, or power that would make for prosperity, or honor, or glory, or power for good. The enumeration rears a monument to national aspiration, prosperity, and perpetuation, that would satisfy the highest righteous ambition of the patriot and the statesman (Deut. 28:3-14).

Per contra, the terms of the covenant were:

But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee. . . . And they shall be upon thee for a sign and for a wonder, and upon thy seed for ever. (Deut. 28:15, 46)

Then follows an enumeration of curses that would follow disobedience. These *are* the most awful and calamitous that could possibly befall a people or nation. Every disaster that could come within human experience is therein enumerated. But I must ask the reader to turn to the original document for a perusal of them, as the document is too long to quote at length, and nothing but completeness can reveal how terrible it all is (Deut. 28:15-68).

The effective testimony of Israel. I say nothing more terrible than this prophecy of disaster may be found in human literature, and that is true. But there is the more terrible truth that Israel, having been disobedient, has reaped the full harvest that grew from his sowing of the Dragon's teeth of disobedience, and every calamity mentioned in the conditional prophecy has overtaken Israel, and especially the Jewish tribe of Israel. Whether Israel would or not, having accepted the role or witness given him of God, and accepted by him, he could not, and has not escaped producing that evidence in his national and racial history. It was ordained that it should be so. For obedience, prosperity, and God's upholding power; for disobedience, calamity the like of which has overtaken no other people. Bishop Lightfoot was right when he said:

You may question if you will every single prophecy in the Old Testament, but the whole history of the Jews is one continuous prophecy, more distinct and articulate than all; you may deny, if you will, each successive miracle which is recorded therein, but again the history of the Jews is from first to last one stupendous miracle, more wonderful and convincing than all.⁵

⁵Lightfoot, *Quarterly Review*, April 18, 1888. [Source not found.]

Such the evidence that God has given for the truth of this great revelation contained in the Hebrew Old Testament.

This line of thought will be resumed when in addition to what is here set down, we shall take up what is properly supplemental to the Hebrew Old Testament account of this revelation, namely the advent of the Christ among the Jews and the fulfillment of his mission in redeeming man from the Fall through the resurrection from the dead and the reestablishment of man's union with God, thus bringing to pass, ultimately, the complete healing of that wound which brought death into the world and "all our woe,"^h and the alienation of man from God. Meantime there are yet two other things in regard to the revelation of God to the world through the Hebrew scriptures that are of the utmost importance; and each has to do with the nature of the Deity revealed.

^hRoberts quotes from the opening lines of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* 1.1-3: "Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste / Brought Death into the World, and all our woe."

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: Kitto, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature*; Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible*; Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology* 1:22-73.