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**Hebrew Records:
an Historical Enquiry Concerning the Age, Authorship,
and Authenticity of the Old Testament**

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(p. 80) CHAPTER 12.

THE CASE OF THE SAMARITAN PENTATEUCH EXAMINED.

As an argument for the belief that Moses was the author of the five books has been drawn from the existence of the Samaritan Pentateuch, it is necessary to take some notice of the book which passes under this name: though there is one significant fact connected with it which would seem to disqualify it from being adduced as an evidence upon the subject at all. It is only 200 years that the Samaritan Pentateuch has been known in Europe. Moreover there is not the slightest information to be found about it in any ancient author, at least as regards the character in which it is written, and that is all that at present concerns us, for the language is the same as the Hebrew. All that we know about it may be told in few words. There had always been an opinion prevalent among the learned that the Samaritans, who were bitter enemies to the Jews, might possess a copy of the Bible, differing possibly in some particulars from the received Hebrew text. This notion may perhaps be traced to Origen, who collated such copies of the Pentateuch as he found among the Samaritans for his great work on the Old Testament. Many hundred years, however, elapsed, and nothing was discovered to support the current opinion. At last in very modern times, a copy of the Pentateuch, written in letters differing from the Hebrew letters but in the same language, was brought into Europe. This copy was unfortunately very imperfect, but Archbishop Usher afterwards procured six other copies of the same book. The fact of its being in substance and in language the same as the Hebrew bible seemed to confirm the authority of the latter volume, but (p. 81) of the fact that it is written in a different sort of letter an ingenious solution has been propounded. It was suggested that this particular copy of the Pentateuch had been preserved, in the old Hebrew character, by the obscure people who remained in Samaria, when the others and more distinguished of their countrymen were carried captive to Babylon. It is said that the Jews, during the captivity, lost the knowledge of the old Hebrew language, and their teachers, who read the Hebrew Scriptures to them in their synagogues, were obliged to interpret the meaning by using a Chaldee paraphrase. To bear out this explanation it is necessary to suppose, also, that the Jews transferred their scriptures from the old Hebrew character, which, according to this theory, was the same as the Samaritan, into the present Hebrew character, which is generally understood to be the Chaldee, as used at Babylon, where it was adopted by the Jews. In confirmation of this theory it is observed that the character found in the Samaritan Pentateuch is very similar to the inscriptions occurring on ancient Israelitish coins. Many learned divines have acquiesced in

this solution of a fact, which is certainly curious, and seemed before to present a philological difficulty.

Before this explanation of the case concerning the Samaritan Pentateuch can be received, it is necessary to shew, 1. that the book is a genuine remnant of antiquity, 2. that the coins to which it bears a resemblance are also genuine.

The first of these requirements is rendered necessary on account of the very short time that the book has been known to scholars in Europe: and the second is equally important: because the resemblance between the letters of the Samaritan Pentateuch and those found on the coins is the only circumstance which gives the slightest support to the theory suggested, or which at all exempts it from being considered as a mere conjecture. It is well known (p. 82) how skilful are the Orientals in imitating 'what appears to be eagerly sought after by Europeans; and perhaps no imposition is more easily practised than copying a book out of one character into another, the language still remaining unaltered. Coins, it is notorious, are often fabricated, and this fact would make it necessary to test the genuineness of all those which might be brought forwards to decide the question now under consideration.

As regards the question, who was the author of the Pentateuch, the Samaritan copy furnishes no argument either affirmative or negative, for the claims of Moses. If we admit the explanation, above given, to be true, the only inference which could be drawn from it is that the Pentateuch was in existence before the Babylonish captivity, i. e. about the year 600 before Christ, but it does not touch the long period of 900 years between Moses and the beginning of the Babylonish captivity. The Pentateuch might be as old as 600 years before Christ, and yet not as old as 1500 years before the same era.

But two grave objections lie against the arguments adduced to support the explanation above-mentioned of the existence of the Samaritan Pentateuch.

1. Why did the Jews transcribe their copies of the bible out of the old letters used by their fathers into the new letters used by the Chaldees their enemies? Was it because, during the captivity, they had lost the use of the Hebrew tongue? Yet they would not be more able to read the bible when written in Chaldee than in the old Hebrew letters. We do not find that Greek words become more intelligible to those who do not know the Greek language, by being written with the Roman alphabet, than when they are written in their own character. The Hebrew doctors, Ezra and the others, would be likely to understand the bible, even if written in the old character; and the common people would have no occasion to read it at all.

It is not found, in the history of other nations, that such (p. 83) changes take place suddenly, or in consequence of any particular event. Changes of style in writing are made gradually, and are continually being made,—it is impossible that the hand-writings of a nation can either remain stationary or be completed suddenly: they flow on" like the course of time, imperceptible in their minutiae, but wonderful in their results. If we could trace the progress of man through all the variations to which he is subject, we should find, in all cases, a continuity of thought, though judging from the appearance of distant points only in our history, we are apt to regard as heterogeneous, varieties of the same species acting under the same natural laws.

2. The argument drawn from coins may be summarily disposed of, and in refuting it I shall adduce the evidence of one who is well acquainted with the Hebrew language and literature, and author of a learned and valuable Hebrew Grammar,¹ Mr Stuart, associate professor of sacred literature in the institution at Andover. His words are these:

¹ Grammar of the Hebrew Language. &c. 4th edition, reprinted with the concurrence of the author, 8vo, Oxford. D. A. Talboys, 1831.

The present *square* form of the Hebrew letters, is not the most ancient one; as is evident from inscriptions on Hebrew *coins, stamped in the time of the Maccabees*, which have characters such as are designated in alphabet No III. [*alluding to his table of alphabets, in which No III gives the Samaritan letters*]. The present square letter is evidently derived from the Aramaean forms of letters, and probably originated some time *after* the birth of Christ. This, Kopp has recently shown, in a satisfactory manner, in his *Bilder und Schriften der Vorzeit*, II, pp. 95 seq., particularly pp. 156 seq.

This extract throws a clear light upon the subject before us. The present Hebrew letters are, it seems, later than the Christian era, whilst on the other hand the coins which have been adduced to prove the antiquity of the Samaritan Pentateuch, were struck long after the Babylonish captivity. (p. 84) The same process of inference therefore goes to prove; first that the Samaritan letters are not necessarily as old as the period of the captivity, but only as the time of the Maccabees, and secondly, that the Jews did not change the form of their letters in consequence of their slavery in Babylon, but in a much later age, namely after the beginning of the Christian era.

The Samaritan Pentateuch, therefore, can furnish no aid towards our present enquiry, which is to ascertain who was the author of the book; or if it bears at all upon the question, it rather furnishes a testimony unfavourable to the claims of Moses. For if the book had been written by Moses in its present form, it is probable that the Israelitish people would never have consented to its being transferred into another character.

In conclusion, I will venture to propose an easy and natural solution for the case of the Samaritan Pentateuch. It is known that the hand writing of all countries gradually changes with time. No two generations write alike; and if we take the writings of the same country at two different periods removed to the distance of two or three centuries apart, the diversity will be so great that the two specimens may be supposed to belong to different countries and to different languages. The Samaritans are known to have borne a national enmity towards the Jews: there was no intercourse between the two nations. Together with their manners and habits, their handwritings, also, would naturally vary: it seems therefore in no way remarkable that their bibles, as they appeared in the seventeenth century after Christ, should be written in a different character from those of the Jews, who have also adopted different modes of writing, in consequence of their dispersion into foreign countries. The reader will find in the Appendix to this work a long extract about the Samaritan Pentateuch, in which I see good reason for believing that the Samaritans received their sacred books from the Jews themselves, in (p. 85) the time of Manasseh, and long after the return of the latter from captivity.

This reference is not located in *A Bibliography of the Samaritans, Third Edition, Revised, Expanded, and Annotated*, by Alan David Crown and Reinhard Pummer, ATLA Bibliography, No. 51, **The Scarecrow Press, Inc.** Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford. 2005

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