THE RECOVERY OF THE ANCIENT HEBREW LANGUAGE

An inaugural lecture, as I understand it, should not aim in the first place at originality, but rather at presenting a more or less general account of some main problem connected with the lecturer's special field of study and the modern methods of investigating it. I propose, therefore, to speak on this occasion upon a problem which above all others is claiming the attention of Hebraists at the present time. This problem may be described as the recovery of the ancient Hebrew language. This subject is appropriate for this occasion, I venture to think, for another reason also. It is of importance not only for the Hebrew specialist, but also ultimately for all those who are concerned to see that the Old Testament is properly understood. For obviously, sound exegesis of the Old Testament must depend, first, upon the

establishment of the correct Hebrew text, and secondly, upon a right interpretation of it. And there can be no right interpretation of the Old Testament which is not based upon an exact knowledge of the Hebrew language. Among those present here there will be many who are not Hebraists, and it may appear that I have laid upon myself a difficult task in undertaking to speak upon a subject which falls within the sphere of the linguistic and textual study of the Old Testament. My hope is, however, that in spite of the technical nature of my subject, I may be able to convey to the inexpert something of the general problem; and I hope I may at the same time furnish the expert with an idea or two which may be found to be suggestive.

What then is the nature of our problem? Why must we speak in terms of the recovery of the ancient Hebrew language? Have we not the Old Testament, and is not that a sufficient basis for the study of Hebrew? To ask this question is at once to lay bare the problem. We have the Old Testament—but how meagre a monument it is of a people's literature! It is important, for the proper understanding of the problem before

us, that clear recognition should at the outset be given to the fact that the Hebrew literature which the Old Testament preserves is but a part, and a small part, of an extensive Hebrew literature, which has otherwise failed to survive. How extensive a literature the Hebrews possessed we can only guess. We cannot, therefore, with any certainty measure our loss. But certain considerations point to the disappearance of a considerable Hebrew literature. We think, for example, of the lost books to which the Old Testament itself refers—the Book of Jashar (Josh. x. 13, 2 Sam. i. 18), the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num. xxi. 14), and so on; of the loss of literature which must inevitably have resulted from the process of editing through which the Old Testament has passed—how much northern literature, for example, did the Judaean editors reject? And again we think of the fact that many, if not most, of the apocryphal books were originally written in Hebrew. Considerations of this kind impress upon us the essential fact that the Old Testament, representing as it does a very small part of the literature of the Hebrews, can preserve only a

fraction of the Hebrew language. It cannot then of itself provide a sufficient basis for the study of ancient Hebrew. It should be remembered, in addition, that some parts of it have little or no value for the Hebraist—those parts, for example, which are merely genealogical or repetitive.

The inadequacy of the Old Testament as a basis for the study of ancient Hebrew is heightened if we consider some of those external influences which, we may suppose, affected the language, but of whose effect little or no trace now exists. Just as in our study of Old Testament history we are aware of gaps in our records, so in our study of the language are we aware of similar lacunae. If, for example, we may see in the Hebrew conquest of Canaan part of a larger Ḫabiru movement,[1] what elements may not that mixed horde of peoples have contributed to the later Hebrew language?[2] Other nomadic incursions into Palestine, whether in pre-historic or in historic times, will not have been without their effect too upon the language. Again, the language of the Old Testament betrays hardly any Philistine influence. But may we not

wonder, as we read Old Testament history, whether that influence was not greater than our records suggest? And are the few Egyptian words in the Old Testament a true index of the influence of that language upon Hebrew? At certain periods, for example in the reign of Solomon, that influence may have been very great. What 'Phoenicianisms' too may not have been introduced during the Jezebel régime? And further, we think of the events of 721 B.C. and 586 B.C.—to say nothing of other invasions and deportations—with their disruptive influences not only upon the history and religion of Palestine, but also upon its language. Something of what took place after 721 B.C. we know from the Old Testament—how Samaria was peopled with Aramaic-speaking settlers from Mesopotamia (2 Kings xvii. 24), with the result that from this time onwards the north probably became bilingual; while after 586 B.C. came encroachments on the land by Edomite and other desert peoples from the south.[3]

The problem of the recovery of the ancient Hebrew language springs then from the fact that the Old Testament is a small volume of

literature, which preserves only in part the full richness of the Hebrew language, and betrays but little of the many influences which must, in varying degrees, have left their mark upon it. It offers in consequence a very restricted field of enquiry for the study of ancient Hebrew. Certainly if we had to rely upon it alone we could scarcely hope to advance much further in our knowledge of the language. What means are then available whereby we may extend our knowledge of ancient Hebrew? First, and most important, we have the science of comparative Semitic philology. Here again we are conscious of a sense of loss. For some members of the Semitic group have vanished, some leaving a few traces, others none, behind them. Of the language of the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Amalekites, the Kenites and others we know little—in most cases, nothing at all. We can go little further than to suppose that they stood in a near relation to Hebrew. The Moabite Stone at least shows that the differences between Moabite and Hebrew were only dialectical.[4] The sudden appearance a few years ago of the 'Hebraic' dialect of Ras Shamra—of which I shall have

more to say later—well illustrates how a Semitic tongue could fall into oblivion. Its recovery only emphasizes the loss of others. But against such losses may happily be set greater gains. Since the nineteenth century the science of comparative Semitic philology has been firmly established through the study of the greater Semitic languages—Accadian (i.e. Assyrian and Babylonian), Aramaic and Phoenician, Arabic and Ethiopic. As knowledge of these languages has increased, so Hebrew, which belongs to the same Semitic family as they do, has been gradually and remarkably illuminated.

The major problem in the recovery of ancient Hebrew is the development of Hebrew from proto-Semitic to the form in which we now find it in the Old Testament. By proto-Semitic is meant the assumed parent language which the Semites are supposed to have spoken in Arabia when they all lived together there before they migrated thence to people those parts of the Near East where later they are found. It is not possible, of course, to reconstruct proto-Semitic. Indeed there are difficulties in the very assumption of such a parent language with a common

stock of words and a common grammar. The study of comparative Semitic philology, however, demonstrates that such a hypothesis is not only useful but necessary. This does not mean that we postulate a complete identification of vocabulary and grammar for all the Semitic languages in their earlier stages. There is obviously much in the several languages that cannot be fitted into any proto-Semitic scheme. But it does mean that the Semitic languages were less clearly defined in their earlier than in their later stages. I may here quote Professor G. R. Driver —'Early inscriptions', he writes, 'show Phoenician and Hebrew and Aramaic and even Arabic in a stage of development in which they stood in almost the same relation as Babylonian and Assyrian to each other and must indeed not so very far behind this stage have been a single language; it cannot therefore be considered surprising if idioms, present in regular use in this, are found sporadically also in that language, whether as isolated survivors from the common parent stock or as stray loans from the one to the other sister Semitic language.'[5] It is a fundamental position of the modern study of Hebrew

that the Hebrews shared with their fellow Semites certain linguistic characteristics which now may be only or most clearly observable in the sister languages, and which, through the study of these languages, can be recovered for Hebrew. To-day we recognize that Hebrew was from the beginning a highly mixed language.[6] By the time we meet it in the Old Testament it has assimilated a variety of linguistic phenomena drawn from many sources. As the modern study of ethnology has revealed the mixed character of the ancestry of the Hebrews, so comparative Semitic philology has revealed the mixed character of the Hebrew language. By the gradual extrication of the diverse elements which have gone to compose it, its vocabulary is being enriched and its grammar explained. In the sphere of syntax too the same mixed character is evident. The Hebrew verbal system is now seen to be composed of elements characteristic of the eastern and western groups of the Semitic languages, Accadian and Aramaean elements predominating. In this sphere we may note the interesting and important recovery of two forgotten Hebrew tenses—a present-future and a

preterite—in the light of which the difficulties surrounding the Hebrew construction with *waw* consecutive seem nearer solution than ever before.[7]

In the recovery of ancient Hebrew by means of the other Semitic languages Arabic plays an important part. At one time indeed, and it is not so very long ago, scholars depended almost entirely upon Arabic—with Aramaic—for their elucidation of Hebrew. The legitimacy of its use has, however, not always remained unquestioned. And still to-day there are some who accept it a little uneasily. No problem is involved, of course, in the use of Accadian for the elucidation of Hebrew, for Accadian literature can boast an antiquity far greater than can Hebrew literature. There can be no question either of the validity of the use of Phoenician and Aramaic for this purpose, for documents in these languages survive from an early period. But Arabic comes late on the scene as a literary language—some eight hundred years or so later than the latest literature in the Old Testament. Is it not dangerous, therefore, even absurd, it is sometimes objected, to utilize this youthful