

BA Portrait: Edward Robinson: Biblical Scholar

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Source: *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Dec., 1983), pp. 230-232

Published by: The American Schools of Oriental Research

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3209782>

Accessed: 28-03-2016 15:45 UTC

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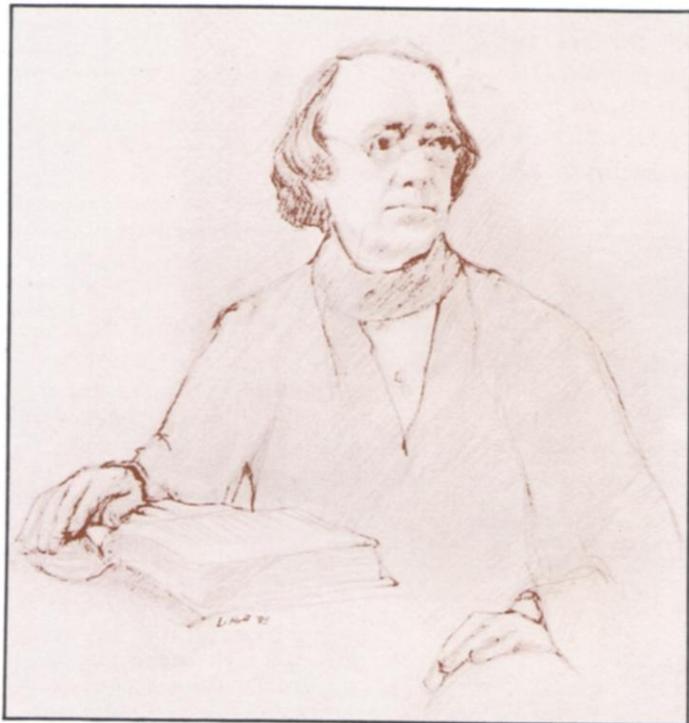


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Edward Robinson: Biblical Scholar

by Philip J. King



In the rediscovery of the Holy Land during the nineteenth century few scholars contributed as much as Edward Robinson. A distinguished geographer and explorer, he was also an outstanding philologist and biblical scholar. Born in Southington, Connecticut, in 1794, Robinson did not manifest in his early years the qualities usually associated with a budding scholar. In fact, there were several indications that he would find his career in agriculture. He pursued his formal education at Hamilton College in Clinton, located in central New York. Founded in 1793 as a school for Indians, Hamilton College was chartered in 1812 and specialized in the liberal arts. Robinson achieved such an excellent scholastic record at college that shortly after graduation in 1816 he was invited back as a tutor in mathematics and Greek. This appointment started him along the road to a brilliant academic career.

Robinson continued his education at the Andover Theological School in northeastern Massachusetts. In contrast to the liberal Harvard Divinity School, Andover, established by the Congregationalists in 1808, was the center of conservative biblical studies in America. At Andover, Robinson came under the influence of the charismatic teacher Moses Stuart. A distinguished Hebraist, Stuart is considered the father of modern biblical studies in America. Imbibing Stuart's love of the Bible, Robinson soon became his protégé. In a short time Robinson was proficient enough in Hebrew to be able to collaborate with the master in several scholarly projects. About their cooperative ventures Roswell D. Hitchcock, president of the Union Theological Seminary in New York and also Robinson's friend and biographer, stated, "If Stuart was the more brilliant, adventurous, and electric, firing his pupils with enthusiasm, Robinson was looked upon as the more careful, exact, and thorough. He was a most indefatigable student." (This and subsequent quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the biography of Robinson by Hitchcock and Henry B. Smith—the only biography ever written on him. See the note at the end of this paper for more information on it.) In time Robinson became an instructor of Hebrew at Andover and he also taught biblical literature.

Stuart and Robinson were both theological conservatives; nonetheless they had a deep respect for German scholarly method, which was far from conservative. It is not surprising that with Stuart's encouragement Robinson went to Germany in 1826 to pursue advanced studies. During his four years abroad he came into contact with the leading scholars of Europe and they had a profound influence on him. The research methods of the German universities were virtually unknown in America in Robinson's time; at Göttingen, Halle, and Berlin he was exposed to the best of German scholarship. Wilhelm Gesenius of Halle and Carl Ritter of Berlin

helped to shape Robinson's life as a scholar. Gesenius, a controversial biblical critic, was a pioneer in Hebrew philology and epigraphy. His Hebrew-Latin lexicon published in 1833 influenced generations of biblical scholars; Robinson contributed to the heritage by translating it into English in 1836 (*A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, Including the Biblical Chaldee. Tr. from the Latin of Wm. Gesenius*, Boston, Crocker and Brewster; New York, Leavitt, Lord & Co.). Even today the lexicon, though dated, is a valuable reference. Ritter was the celebrated geographer who co-founded, with Alexander von Humboldt, modern geographical science.

Robinson not only translated the works of others but also produced original works of biblical scholarship. For example, he made a significant contribution with his work *A Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1836). He also founded and edited the *American Biblical Repository* and *Bibliotheca Sacra*. The former, started in 1831, was the first scholarly series of articles on biblical and theological topics to appear in America. The latter, started in 1834 as a serial issue of tracts and essays, many written by himself, was converted to a quarterly in 1844 and continues today, published by Dallas Theological Seminary. (*American Biblical Repository* was merged into *Bibliotheca Sacra* in 1851.)

In 1837 Robinson was offered the chair of biblical literature at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. He accepted under the condition that he be permitted to travel to the Holy Land in fulfillment of his lifelong ambition, or in his words "the object of my ardent wishes." From March to July 1838 Robinson traveled in the Sinai peninsula, Palestine, and southern Syria; the journey began in Cairo and terminated in Beirut. He was fortunate in having as his traveling companion Eli Smith, an American missionary in the Near East who had been Robinson's student at Andover. Smith's firsthand knowledge of the Holy Land and his fluency in Arabic were unmatched. Consequently, Robinson and Smith were able to veer from the well-trodden paths to explore areas seldom seen by their predecessors. Smith's knowledge of the language was especially useful in discovering the correct Arabic form of place names. By matching the modern Arabic names with Hebrew names, they identified many sites; for example, the name of Anathoth, the birthplace of Jeremiah, has been preserved in that of ^cAnata, three miles north of Jerusalem; Bethel was recognized in the Arabic place name Beitin; the modern er-Ram suggested biblical

Ramah in the general vicinity of Bethel. Were it not for Smith's knowledge of the land and the language, the joint undertaking would not have been so successful. In acknowledging this fact, Robinson paid appropriate tribute to Smith the Arabist who spent the last ten years of his life translating the Bible into Arabic:

I count myself fortunate in having been thus early assured of the company of one, who, by his familiar and accurate knowledge of the Arabic language, by his acquaintance with the people of Syria, and by the experience gained in former extensive journeys, was so well qualified to alleviate the difficulties and overcome the obstacles which usually accompany oriental travel. Indeed, to these qualifications of my companion, combined with his taste for geographical and historical researches, and his tact in eliciting and sifting the information to be obtained from an Arab population, are mainly to be ascribed the more important and interesting results of our journey.

(*Biblical Researches*: See note at end of article)

In the course of their journey Robinson and Smith lived frugally and traveled lightly, both conditions necessitated by the primitive conditions in those days. Their equipment consisted of little more than compass, thermometer, telescope, measuring tape, English and Hebrew Bible, and a few books of earlier travelers and explorers. Each kept a detailed journal, and every night they faithfully transcribed their notes of that day. Robinson's biographer, Hitchcock, observed, "Dr. Robinson was of the Poet Gray's opinion, that 'a single line written upon the spot, is worth a whole cartload of recollection.'"

With Smith's expertise in Arabic and Robinson's competence in Bible, they were better equipped than any of the earlier travelers to explore the Holy Land, as the results testify. In the process of analyzing countless sites scientifically, they were able to identify over a hundred biblical places, thus laying the foundations for biblical archaeology and geography. Despite their extraordinary achievement, there were limitations. For example, the nature of a tell, one of the most prominent characteristics of the landscape of Syria-Palestine, eluded Robinson and Smith. By not recognizing these truncated cones as signs of successive human occupation, they failed to identify such important sites as Jericho and Lachish. They thought the tells were simply natural formations. Nonetheless, Robinson deserves to be called the father of biblical geography; he was surely the most important nineteenth-century explorer of the Holy Land.

Only three years after their historic trip Robinson published the results in a monumental book entitled *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mt.*

Sinai, and Arabia Petraea. It appeared simultaneously in England, America, and Germany. Appropriately the German version was dedicated to Carl Ritter, and the American version to Moses Stuart. Ritter commented that Robinson's *Biblical Researches* marked the beginning of a new era in biblical geography. (Subsequent editions, with slightly modified titles, were also to appear. In 1856 he published *Biblical Researches in Palestine and the Adjacent Regions, a Journal of Travels in the year 1838*, and in 1867 a third edition appeared, entitled *Biblical Researches in Palestine and the Adjacent Regions. A Journal of Travels in the Years 1838 & 1852*.)

In 1842 the Royal Geographical Society in London awarded Robinson the coveted gold medal. According to Hitchcock, "[Robinson] looked upon [it] as the highest of all his earthly honors."

Perhaps the greatest ambition of Robinson's life was to write a biblical geography, a systematic work on the physical and historical geography of Palestine based on his own topographical studies. He envisioned a two-volume work, the first volume to be divided into three parts: physical geography, historical geography, and topographical geography. He was able to bring to completion only the first part, the physical geography. At the time of his death in 1863 the work remained unfinished. Hitchcock lamented, "There lives no man to finish it, and when one shall be born to do it, God only knows."

Robinson was naturally skeptical, especially about the pious lore which monks of the Holy Land transmitted to naive pilgrims. Some may have considered him an iconoclast, but his critical attitude arose from his scholarly training; he wanted to distinguish between fact and fancy. "Till he was quite

sure of a thing, he would not affirm it; and it required more to assure him, than it does most men."

Robinson was a far better writer than speaker, yet he was an effective teacher. About Robinson the teacher, Hitchcock remarked:

He required no genius in his pupils, knowing well how rare that is; but he did require a proper deference to his opinions, and, above all, fidelity and diligence in study; and no man ever gave proof in his class-room of having slighted a lesson, without smarting for it.

Not by accident did the word *biblical* appear in the title of Robinson's monumental work, *Biblical Researches in Palestine*; he used it deliberately, as Hitchcock observed:

It was the supreme ambition of his life to explain and illustrate the Holy Bible. The one adjective in our language which he loved the most, was *Biblical*. It was the watchword of all his studies; and now we carve it upon his tomb-stone.

Bibliographical Note

Two important works related to Robinson have recently been reprinted. The biography by Henry B. Smith and Roswell D. Hitchcock entitled *The Life, Writings and Character of Edward Robinson* was reprinted in 1977 by Arno Press (New York). It was originally published in 1863 by Anson D. F. Randolph (New York). Robinson's great book *Biblical Researches* was reprinted in 1970 in three volumes by Universitas Booksellers (Jerusalem). Anyone interested in Robinson should also see the essay on him by William Foxwell Albright in volume 16 of the *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), edited by Dumas Malone.

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