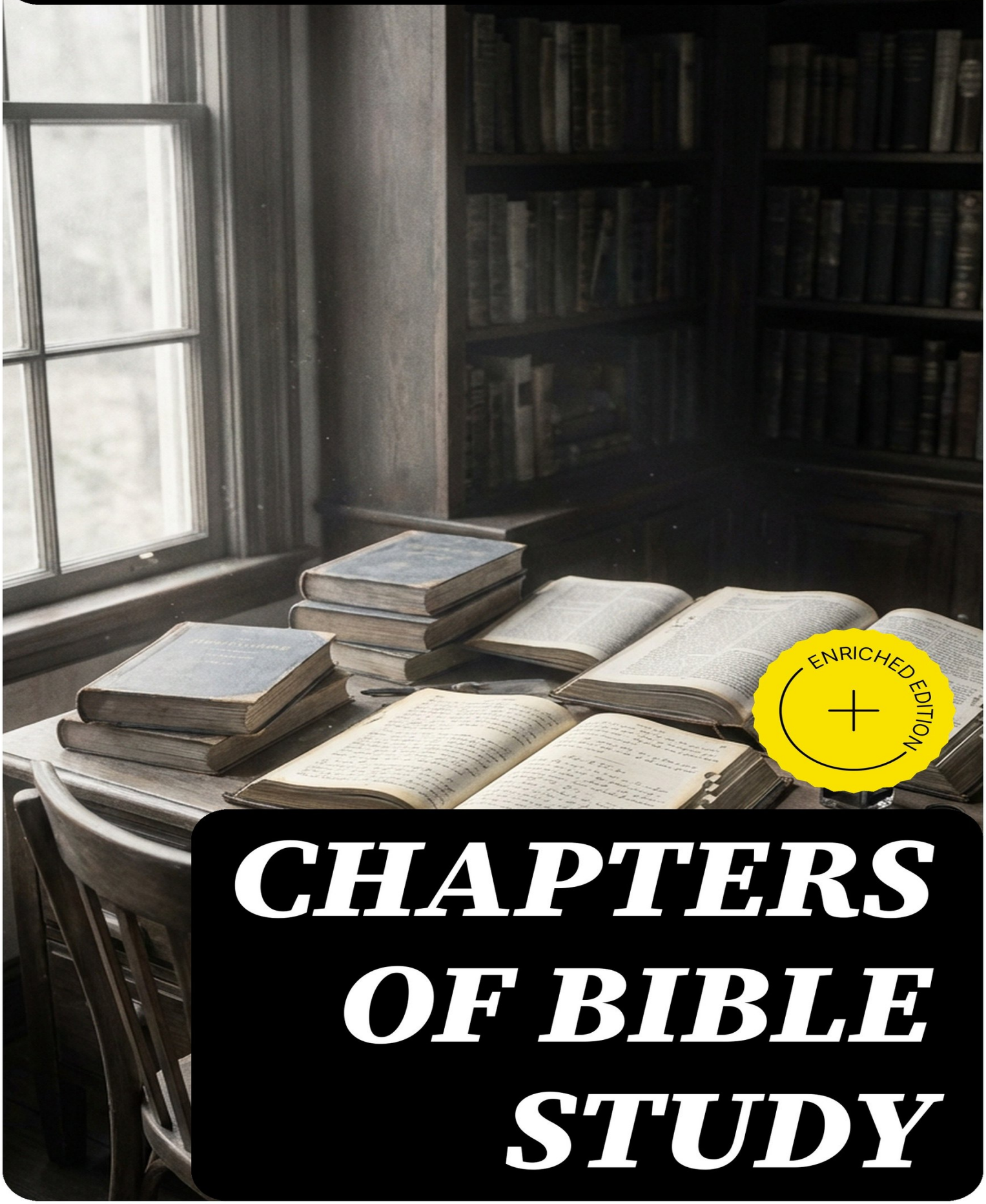
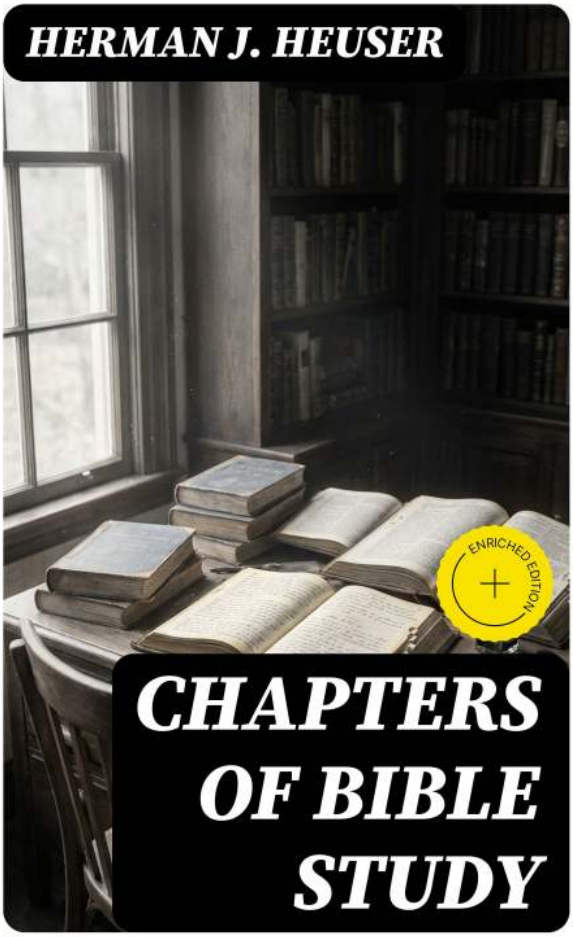
HERMAN J. HEUSER



ENRICHED EDITION

CHAPTERS OF BIBLE STUDY


HERMAN J. HEUSER
ENRICHED EDITION
CHAPTERS OF BIBLE STUDY

Herman J. Heuser

Chapters of Bible Study

Enriched edition. A Popular Introduction to the Study of the Sacred Scriptures

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Chapters of Bible Study

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I.

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THE ANCIENT SCROLL.

If a mysteriously-written document were brought to you, and its bearer assured you that it contained a secret putting you in possession of a great inheritance by establishing your relationship to an ancient race of kings, of which you had no previous knowledge, how would you regard such a document?

You would examine its age, the character of the manuscript, the quality of the paper or parchment; you would ask how it had come to you, and by whom it had been transmitted through successive generations before it reached you. And when, after careful inquiry, you had established the age and authenticity of the document, then you would study its contents, examine the nature of its provisions, and, having clearly understood its meaning, ask yourself: How can I carry out the conditions laid down in this testament, in order that I may obtain the full benefit of the generous bequest left by my noble ancestor?

It is on similar lines that I propose to treat our subject**[1q]**. We shall take up the Bible just as we would take up any other written work, requiring, for the time being, simply so much faith—no more, but also no less than we would exact in the fair examination of any other work, whether of fact or of fiction.

When we have assured ourselves that the Bible is really as old and as truthful a record of history as it pretends to

be, and that it has for it such human testimony as leads us to admit historic facts in general, we shall occupy ourselves with its contents, with the influence which this wonderful book, this ancient testament of our royal Sire, exercises upon the heart, the mind, the general culture, by which it leads us to our inheritance, and enables us to assume our place in our destined home.

The Bible, looking upon it as a merely human production, is a collection of documents of various antiquity, containing historic records of successive generations, going back to a very remote period. It relates the valiant deeds of valiant men and women, written either by themselves or by men of their own race. It contains, furthermore, a great number of principles, doctrines, rules, and laws for the moral and external government of individuals and communities, particularly of the families and tribes of the Hebrew nation. Finally, we find in this ancient scroll certain predictions and prophecies which, if we can show that they were definitely made long in advance of the events foretold by them, become a strong argument in favor of the supernatural origin of the work. However, this last point we shall leave entirely out of view for the present.

It is very clear that the book which we have in our hands, and which we call the Bible, or The Book *par excellence*, has been printed and reprinted during four hundred years, in millions of copies, all of which agree substantially, not excepting the Bible of the so-called "reformers," with whom, on the whole, we differ rather in the interpretation than in the wording of its contents. There are indeed some disagreements on subjects touching religious doctrines,

which, whilst very important if we accept the Sacred Scriptures as the inspired word of God, hardly count for anything in a merely historical work; and this is the light in which we regard the Bible just at present.

The Bibles which are printed to-day are practically and substantially the same as those which were printed four hundred years ago. A great number of copies of first editions in different languages may still be found in public and private libraries[2q]. The New Testament version, from which Luther principally made his translation, was an edition by the well-known humanist, Erasmus. All the modern European translations, including that made into English five hundred years ago by Wiclif, had for their original an ancient Latin version which was employed in the service of the churches, and of which copies in manuscript, made over a thousand years ago, are still extant. One of the oldest uncial Latin manuscripts is the "Vercelli Gospels[1]," attributed to the hand of Eusebius. The Corpus Christi College Library at Cambridge has a manuscript copy said to have been made by St. Augustine. Of Greek copies we have a very famous one in the Vatican Library, probably the oldest preserved in the world—about 350; another manuscript, called the Codex Sinaiticus[2], is in the Imperial Library of St. Petersburg; and a third, of nearly the same age (IV. century), is the "Codex Alexandrinus[3]," at present in the British Museum. Manuscripts older than these are wanting, not only of the Bible, but of any other book, except fragments of writings on parchment and certain manuscripts rescued from Egyptian tombs, and papers discovered in the recent excavations of Herculaneum, near Naples, in Italy.

Parchment, on account of the expensive preparation required to make it suitable material for writing, was sparingly used by the ancients at any time. They preferred to employ the so-called papyrus, made of the fibrous pith of a kind of rush growing abundantly in Egypt, and brought to Europe by Eastern merchants. This, and other kinds of vegetable fibre from which paper suitable for writing was prepared since the days when Moses, as we must presume, practised the art of writing in the schools of Egypt, do not withstand the destructive influence of time. Experience proves that the ordinary atmosphere has completely corroded cotton paper of nine hundred years ago; the same is true of the linen paper made in the time of Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas. Those exceptional treasures of Egyptian papyrus referred to above, which have been found of late years, owe their preservation to the fact that they were enclosed in almost air-tight tombs, in a singularly dry climate; the same is the case with regard to the manuscripts discovered in Herculaneum, which have been kept hermetically sealed by the tight lava-cover from Mount Vesuvius for a space of more than seventeen hundred years.

However, among such manuscripts as have been preserved under ordinary conditions, by far the greatest number are copies, in various tongues, of the Bible, and some of these carry us back to the fourth century. We have Bible manuscripts written on paper in Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, Latin, in the dialects of the Copts, the Arabs, the Armenians, the Persians, the Ethiopians, the Slavs, and the Goths, who were among the earliest nations converted to Christianity. Now all these manuscript Bibles, more than

fourteen centuries old, substantially correspond to our Catholic Bibles of this day.

The early Christian missionaries who introduced the word of God to the pagan nations speaking a strange tongue must have had some uniform source whence to make their translations. So many persons in different parts of the world, unacquainted with one another's language, could not, except by some incredible miracle, have composed out of their fancy so large a book, agreeing page for page, nay, line for line. They must have had some original at their disposal whence to make a uniform copy. The fact is, we find that original book in the churches of Italy, Greece, Asia, and Africa. The apostolic Fathers speak of it as known to everybody; they read from it on Sundays and festivals; they quote long passages, and the young candidates for Holy Orders are taught, like the Hebrew levites of old, to memorize the psalms and moral books of the Bible. Among these witnesses is St. Clement of Koine. According to Tertullian, who lived near his time, he was ordained by St. Peter the Apostle; at any rate, St. Paul speaks of him in his Epistle to the Philippians. Other disciples of the Apostles were St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, St. Polycarp, the friend of St. John. These are followed by St. Justin, who wrote a famous defence of the Catholic faith called the "Apology," which he presented to the Emperor Antoninus. The latter, convinced of the young convert's sincerity, put a stop to the cruel persecutions which were then going on against the Christians. The Emperor Marcus Aurelius also received a copy of the "Apology" from St. Justin. In this well-known work the Saint states that "*the Gospels, together with the*

writings of the prophets, are publicly read in the assemblies of the Christians."[1] He also affirms that they were written in part by the Apostles themselves and partly by their disciples. This was shortly after the year 138, when men were still alive who had conversed with St. Paul, and who could well remember the sweet admonitions of brotherly love given by the aged St. John, who tells us that he had seen with his own eyes the things which he writes.[2] The chain of apostolic writers from St. Peter to St. Augustine, *i.e.*, from the first century to the fourth or fifth, bears witness that this wonderful book was used in every Christian community from the regions of the Jordan, whence St. Justin came, to the confines of Spain, where Isidore of Cordova wrote his commentaries; from the northernmost part of Dalmatia, where Titus had preached the doctrine delivered him by St. Paul, to the limit of the African desert, whence one of the oldest Latin versions of the Scriptures was brought to St. Ambrose.

It is interesting to be able to cite the testimony of pagan as well as of Jewish writers concerning the great events which the Christian Gospels record. We have the historic fact of Christ's person and work attested in the "Annals" of Tacitus, the greatest of Roman historians,[3] who was consul of Rome in 97. His statements are corroborated by Suetonius, secretary to the Emperor Adrian, by Pliny, the Viceroy of Bithynia and friend of the Emperor Trajan, by the Jewish writers Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Christ, and the historian Flavius Josephus, and by the rabbis who collated the traditions of the Talmud. All these, whilst they wrote but briefly of the subject, bear indirect witness to the

belief and to the practice by the earliest Christians of the Gospel precepts, although the books of the New Testament had not at that time been formed into a definite canon. Thus the unbroken evidence of the existence of the Christian Scriptures goes back to the very time of their first composition.

We come to the Old Testament. That the Jews in the time of Christ possessed a collection of sacred books is recorded on every page of the New Testament, of whose authentic source there can be no reasonable doubt. There are altogether about two hundred and seventy passages in the New Testament books which are quotations from the Old Testament. There are innumerable references in the Gospels and Epistles, and in the early Christian writers, to the sacred law of the Jews, among whom the first converts were made; for these converts continued to use the Mosaic writings and the prophetical books. Christ Himself had beautifully illustrated this practice, from the first, in His teaching. "He came to Nazareth," St. Luke tells us, "where He was brought up; and He went into the synagogue, according to His custom, on the sabbath day; and He rose up to read. And the Book of Isaias the Prophet was delivered unto Him. And as He unfolded the book He found the place where it was written: *The spirit of the Lord is upon me, wherefore He hath anointed me; to preach the gospel to the poor He hath sent me; to heal the contrite of heart. To preach deliverance to the captives, and sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised; to preach the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of reward*. And when He had folded the book He restored it to the minister and sat down. And the eyes of all

in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them: *This day is fulfilled this Scripture in your ears*. And all gave testimony to Him."[4]

Any attempt to corrupt the Old Testament writings, or to change and destroy them, even in part, became impossible after the Gospels had been written. It would at once have aroused marked attention among both Jews and Christians, who with equal reverence regarded the Book as the sacred and inviolable word of God, however mutually hostile their feelings were regarding the interpretation of its meaning. For if ever there existed a document whose authority was sanctioned and whose preservation was guaranteed by the severest laws and most minute precautions, it was the code of sacred writings known to the Jews as the "Law and the Prophets." It was read in every synagogue on the sabbath and festival days. Every Jew above the age of twelve was obliged to repeat certain parts of the Sacred Book each day, morning and night. Thrice dispersed among the Gentile nations, north, west, and south, the Jews carried with them the book of the Law and the Prophets, and we find them repeat its sweet words of hope and trust in Jehovah by the rivers of Babylon as under the glimmer of the torchlights in the caverns of Samaria or rocky Arabia. Their faces were forever turning towards Jerusalem. Nay, when the language of their fathers had ceased to be spoken during generations of enforced exile, the children still repeated the Hebrew words of the Law in the temple, even though they had versions made for the people by rabbis who were under sacred vow not to change an iota of the Lord's written word. We have in the present Hebrew Bibles some remnant of the

traditional care with which the Jew guarded the letter of the Law, whatever might be the spirit in which he interpreted it. In order that the Sacred Text might never be tampered with, even by the addition or omission of a single letter or word, the scribes were obliged to count the verses, words, and characters of each book. They knew by heart every peculiarity of grammatical or phonetic expression. Thus the young rabbi must verify that the Book of Genesis contains 1,534 verses; that the exact middle of the book, counting every letter from the beginning and from the end, occurs in chapter xxvii. 40. He knew that there were ten verses in the Scriptures beginning and ending with the letter נ (*nun*) (as in Lev. xiii. 9); two in which every word ends with the letter ם (*mem*). The letter ע (*ayin*), in Ps. lxxx. 14, is the exact middle of the Psalter. The letter א (*aleph*) occurs 42,377 times, ב (*beth*) 38,218 times, ג (*ghimel*) 29,537 times, and so of every letter in the alphabet. These, and a thousand other peculiarities which made the corruption of the Hebrew text an almost absolute impossibility, were in later ages collected into a glossary called the Masorah**[6]**, which forms a sort of separate commentary to the Bible. If you open the Hebrew volume of the Old Testament, just as it is printed to-day, you will find many of these warnings inserted in the very text. Thus at the end of the Book of Chronicles we have this sentence: "The printer is not at fault, for the sum total of verses in the whole Book of Chronicles is 1650." Then, lest the reader might forget this number, a verse is attached which contains the letters representing the same number. The verse, which is taken from the I. Samuel vi. 13, reads: "*They saw the ark and rejoiced in seeing it*." Just as the

words "*MeDiCaL VIrtue*" might stand in English for the same number.

Many other peculiarities in the manner of copying the Hebrew text have been transmitted for ages without change. Thus in the Book of Numbers xi. 1 we find the letter נ (*nun*) written backward [Hebrew: reversed nun], to express more emphatically the meaning of "perversity," mentioned in the verse. In Job xxxviii. 13 the letter ע (*ayin*) in the word רשעים (*reshachim*), "ungodly," is raised above the line, to indicate how God will shake up into the air, like chaff, the ungodly of whom the Prophet speaks.

But it is needless to point out in detail all the odd precautions which were invented by the rabbis that they might exercise a most rigorous control over the Hebrew text; and although these methods are the results of a later school of Hebraists, they go to show the sense of responsibility which the Jews must always have felt regarding the preservation of the ancient Testament. Even at this day you can hardly discover a substantial departure from the original in the numerous manuscript copies extant. Kennicott, an English Biblical scholar, brought together five hundred and eighty Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible which, after careful study and comparison, revealed scarcely any differences of the text. An Italian, Prof. de Rossi, who died in 1831, had collected seven hundred and ten manuscripts, and had seen in various libraries one hundred and thirty-four more, all of which he examined critically without finding any notable differences. I am speaking, remember, of such differences as would affect the historical identity of these manuscript copies with their original. It would be folly to

assert that these manuscripts, which reached the number of over 1,600, are copies made by the same scribes; for some of them were discovered in Arabia, others in old Jewish settlements in China; one, the oldest in existence, as some believe, was found in a synagogue in the Crimea, by a Jewish rabbi named Abraham Firkeowicz.

[1] *Apolog.*, i. 67.

[2] Ep. St. John, chap. i. 1.

[3] Tacit., *Annal.*, xv. 38-44.

[4] St. Luke iv. 16-22.

II.

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STRANGE WITNESSES.

If there remained no trace of the original writings of the Old Testament books preserved for us in the Hebrew tongue, we should still possess very reliable witnesses of ancient date to testify to their existence in substantially the same form in which we have them; for the children of Jewish exiles, who were forced gradually to substitute the language of their conquerors for their mother tongue, had well authenticated translations for their use in the synagogues. The most remarkable of such translations is the so-called Greek Septuagint**[4]**, commonly believed to have been