

## LIFE AND WORK OF ROBERT DICK WILSON

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*At a time when his denomination and seminary were turning away from conservative, orthodox views of the Bible, Robert Dick Wilson felt called to challenge respected scholars in their Higher Criticism of Scripture. As a child and young man, he showed remarkable academic abilities, particularly in learning new languages. He attended Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, and while a student there, he learned and taught a number of languages. He demonstrated effectiveness as a preacher and evangelist, but chose to become a teacher because of his linguistic abilities. After studying Semitic languages in Europe for a time, he returned to join the faculty at Western Theological Seminary. In 1900, he left Western to become a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, a role that he held until 1929 when he left to help in founding Westminster Theological Seminary. He authored a number of articles and books related to the twenty-six languages and dialects he had learned. His writings were particularly noted for their effectiveness in answering higher critical attacks on the authenticity of the OT, particularly the Book of Daniel. He died on October 11, 1930.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The historicity, authenticity, and authority of the Bible are under attack on every front these days. Fiction works distort the truth of Christianity, denying the historicity of the Bible. Christian fiction is replacing theology on the bookshelves of churchgoers. Books that rip Scriptures from their historical and biblical contexts are being elevated to pseudo-scripture status. Self-help books with an amazing number of biblical references are being sold to help people find their purpose in life. So-

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called scholars rely on other so-called scholars to chop up the Hebrew Scriptures into their “component parts” to make sense of it, but are rather convoluting God’s Word.

Reverend Harold J. Ockenga, Assistant in the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, when that church took an offering for Westminster Theological Seminary, summarized conditions accurately.

That the majority of our denomination and of other churches have turned away from historical and Biblical Christianity is no longer debatable. It is an acknowledged fact. The reason for this lies in the fact that our schools, especially seminaries, have been taken over by these religious pacifists and dwellers-on-the-fence. The negative mind has pervaded our Church; many of our young preachers know not what to believe; the note of authority has been lost from their message, each constructs his own theology, and everyone can believe what he will. The nerve of evangelism has been cut and the Church is going backward.<sup>1</sup>

Those words are as relevant today as the day they were spoken, about 75 years ago.

Robert Dick Wilson challenged the “experts” at their own game: “I defy any man to make an attack upon the Old Testament on the ground of evidence that I cannot investigate. I can get at the facts if they are linguistic. If you know any language that I do not know, I will learn it.” When he said that in his address on “What is an Expert?” he had the ability to back it up!<sup>2</sup>

### LIFE OF ROBERT DICK WILSON<sup>3</sup>

Robert Dick Wilson was born in Indiana, Pennsylvania, on February 4, 1856, as one of ten children (he had five brothers and four sisters). He was able to read by age four and began attending school by age five. By the time he was eight years old, he had read, among other books, *Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World* by George Rawlinson. When he was nine, he and his ten-year-old brother accompanied their father on a trip from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia. The most

<sup>1</sup>Harold J. Ockenga, “Robert Dick Wilson: Torchbearer,” *Christianity Today* (January 1931):8, online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/findingaids/wilson/torchbearer.html>, accessed 1/25/08.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Dick Wilson, “What is an Expert?” online at <http://www.gracebiblefellowship-tx.org/Providential%20Preservation%20Appendix.htm>, accessed 1/23/08.

<sup>3</sup>Much of the information in this section is compiled from primary source material, including the inaugural address delivered on September 21, 1900, at Princeton Theological Seminary, which was later published as “The Lower Criticism of the Old Testament as a Preparation for the Higher Criticism,” and from lecture notes for “Old Testament Introduction” transcribed from stenography taken by Winifred Thomas, daughter of W. Griffith-Thomas, under the direction of Allan A. MacRae at Westminster Theological Seminary. The lectures are from the spring of 1930 and would have been among the last classes taught by Wilson. These sources may be accessed online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/findingaids/wilson/lecture1.pdf>, accessed 1/25/08.

exciting part of the trip was an excursion to Heffelfinger's bookstore on Chesnut Street. Their father told them to pick out a few books. By the time the father returned, they had selected about fifty volumes on history and English poetry, including Prescott, Robertson, J. S. C. Abbott, and others. Of course, their father purchased all the books for the boys.

By the time he was 13, Robert was ready for college, but had to defer entrance for two years due to illness. During that time, he amused himself in learning French, Greek, German, Spanish, and Italian. In college, he studied language, psychology, and mathematics. He was embarrassed to admit "in such Bible courses as he then studied he says that he got 'a very low grade of 90, which pulled down my average.'"<sup>4</sup>

By the time he entered seminary, he was able to read the NT in nine languages. Prior to entering seminary, an old gentleman gave him a Hebrew-Latin dictionary, a Hebrew grammar, and an old Hebrew Bible. He learned Hebrew on his own and, going into seminary, took all the prizes in Hebrew. When asked how he did it, he replied, "I used my spare time."<sup>5</sup> He would take a Hebrew grammar with him when he went for walks and would read for about 15 minutes, or until he completely understood everything taught on that page. He described the process as being "unconscious of the labor, as a man is interested in his roses, and doesn't think of the thorns."<sup>6</sup> He utilized this method to master Latin, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, biblical Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic, and others, twenty-six languages and dialects in all.

Wilson graduated from the College of New Jersey in 1876 with an A.B.; in 1879, he received his A.M. Prior to entering seminary, he and his brother went to the town of Indiana, Pennsylvania, to do the work of evangelism. The response there was very encouraging, but he felt that God had given him a gift for languages and he had a desire to use that gift in the study of the Scripture. He finally entered seminary at Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he studied comparative religion under Charles A. Briggs and A. A. Hodge. While he was there, he taught about eight or ten languages and studied about a dozen. He had an article

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<sup>4</sup>Philip E. Howard, "Foreword," in *Is the Higher Criticism Scholarly?* by Robert Dick Wilson (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times Company, 1922) 6. In the first lecture to his students in his "OTI" class, he gives his age as 13, contra to Walter C. Kaiser's biographical sketch in *Bible Interpreters of the 20th Century: A Selection of Evangelical Voices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 73. Kaiser gives his age as 14. Kaiser then says that he entered seminary at 17, but Wilson in his lecture seems to imply that he entered at age 15.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 7.

published while in his fourth year.<sup>7</sup> He desired to preach the gospel, but knew that he had a unique ability to learn and teach language. As shown by his previous success as an evangelist, he did not go into teaching just because he could not preach!

He traveled to Europe to study Semitic languages that were not taught in the States. He was advised to go to Leipzig to study under the younger Delitzsch.<sup>8</sup> Once in Germany, he entered the University of Berlin and studied Assyriology under Eberhard Schrader, August Dillmann, and Eduard Sachau. In Germany he made his ultimate plan for the rest of his days.

When I went to Heidelberg, I found I hadn't the strength to be a preacher and a teacher both, so I decided to be a teacher. I thought the world needed a man who was fitted as I was, so I decided that I would give my life just to that one thing, the defence of the Old Testament. I made my plan as to my life, that I would give—you know, like life insurance. I was good on that line, my family was noted for its longevity, and I felt I might reasonably live till I was 70, so I divided my life into periods of fifteen years. I gave myself the first 15 years to study languages, these languages divided this way. I would learn all the Semitic languages, every language which threw light on the vocabulary or the syntax of the Old Testament. Of course, I did already know Syriac, and Aramaic, and Hebrew, but there was Ethiopic and Phoenician and Babylonian, and Assyrian, and a number of others—about twelve different Aramaic dialects. Secondly, I would learn all languages that threw light on the history of the Old Testament, taking in Egyptian, Coptic, and others. Then, thirdly, I would learn all languages that threw light on the text of the Old Testament, down to the year 600 after Christ. The texts after that would be too late. So that took me into Armenian and several other languages, Gothic, and Anglo-Saxon, etc. . . . The second part of my life I would devote to lower Criticism, studying the text of the Old Testament, the comparison of the Hebrew text with the Versions, Greek, Latin, Syriac, especially, and all the versions down to 600. . . . The last 15 years, after which I had acquainted myself with all the machinery, I would tackle the subject which is called the Higher Criticism of the Old Testament, including all that the critics have said, and so be able by that time to defend the history, the veracity of the Old Testament. . . . Well, I admit, and you will admit too, that that was a pretty big proposition that I laid out for myself, and I think you will admit that the Lord must have been in it.<sup>9</sup>

Upon returning to the States in 1883, he returned to Western Theological Seminary, where he served as an instructor until 1885 and then as Professor of Old Testament from 1885 to 1900. He was ordained in 1885 and received his Ph.D. from the College of New Jersey in 1886. He ultimately became chair of the Department of Old Testament History and Hebrew at Western, a position he held until 1900 when he left to take a similar position at Princeton Theological Seminary. In his inaugural

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<sup>7</sup>Wilson, "OTI Lecture 1."

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

address on September 21, 1900, he gave the reason why he would teach at Princeton: "It shall be my aim and ambition, with the hoped for hearty aid of the faculty and directors of this institution, and of our *Alma Mater* across the way, to present to every student the opportunity of acquiring any language which, as cognate to the Hebrew, throws light upon its grammar and lexicon, or any language in which a version of the Bible was made before the Sixth Century, A.D."<sup>10</sup> He served faithfully at Princeton until 1929 when the reorganization took place. He left Princeton in 1929, in spite of persuasive efforts for him to stay, to assist in the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary. He could have stayed at Princeton and had a very comfortable retirement awaiting him. He could have stayed and taught what he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt to be true in his classes without trouble no matter what the rest of the institution did or taught. He could have left the fight to the younger men, but he would not do that. The essence of his decision to leave Princeton was his training for a lifetime of devotion to the Word of God. Like the keenness of a Damascus blade, his conscience cut through any argument leveled against leaving. You see, "he saw that for him to remain at Princeton would be to commend as trustworthy what he knew to be untrustworthy, that it would be to lead Christ's little ones astray."<sup>11</sup> He could not bear to affirm by association what he knew to be false. He never regretted that decision even though there was no endowment, retirement, or honors awaiting him at this new institution.<sup>12</sup>

"On Saturday, October 11, 1930, the Reverend Robert Dick Wilson, Ph.D., D.D., LL.D., Professor of Semitic Philology and Old Testament Criticism in Westminster Theological Seminary, entered into his heavenly reward."<sup>13</sup> A colleague, Allan A. MacRae, recounts Wilson's last days in an October 14, 1930 letter. Wilson had been ill for several days and it did not seem serious, but it quickly became quite serious. He taught one class at Westminster before he was taken ill. He was in bed for four days when Mrs. Wilson called Mr. MacRae to come to the house to assist her in calming her husband so that he could breathe freely. The next day the physician sent Wilson to the hospital and after three days of little trouble, he took a severe turn for the worse. Wilson became unconscious at 3:00 P.M. on Friday and never woke up. He died quietly with his wife and Allan MacRae at his bedside.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Robert Dick Wilson, "Inaugural Address," delivered on September 21, 1900, at Princeton Theological Seminary, online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/findingaids/wilson/index.html>, accessed 1/25/08.

<sup>11</sup>Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, "The Power of a Noble Example," December 1930, online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/findingaids/wilson/index.html>, accessed 1/25/08.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Allan A. MacRae, "Personal Letter," October 14, 1930, online at <http://www.pcahistory.org/findingaids/wilson/index.html>, accessed 1/25/08.

## WRITINGS

By the time Robert Dick Wilson died, he had almost achieved everything he set out to achieve. He had learned over 26 different languages and dialects<sup>15</sup> that were related to the Old Testament in some way. Before going to Princeton in 1900, he wrote for *Harper's Magazine* and for the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*.<sup>16</sup> His *Elements of Syriac Grammar by an Inductive Method* was published in 1891, and his booklet *Notes on Hebrew Syntax* in 1892. After he left Western to teach at Princeton, he continued writing. His inaugural address on September 21, 1900, was published the next year under the title *The Lower Criticism of the Old Testament as a Preparation for the Higher Criticism* (1901). He then wrote *Illustrations of Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar with Vocabularies* (1906) and *A Hebrew Grammar for Beginners* (1908). He wrote and published thirty-six major articles and fifteen book reviews in the *Princeton Theological Review* as well as four monographs on key critical issues of the day.<sup>17</sup>

In 1902, Friedrich Delizsch, the son of the highly respected Hebrew scholar Franz Delizsch, lectured before the Kaiser of Germany declaring that the Hebrew Scriptures were highly influenced by the Babylonian religion. Wilson could not allow such an opportunity to pass, so at the opening exercises of the 91st session of Princeton Seminary on September 18 in that same year, he delivered a devastating reply to Delizsch, under whom he been advised to study.<sup>18</sup> This marked the beginning

<sup>15</sup>A discrepancy occurs between Walter Kaiser's number in his biographical sketch in *Bible Interpreter's of the 20th Century* and the one found in the "Foreward" by Philip E. Howard, former publisher of the Sunday School Times, of *Is The Higher Criticism Scholarly?* Howard states the number of languages and dialects is forty-five (5) while Kaiser states the number as twenty-six (75). Either way, the sheer number of languages and dialects is daunting and impressive. Wilson had a command of any language related in any way to the study of the OT.

<sup>16</sup>Wilson, "OTI Notes." For a complete bibliography of the writings of Robert Dick Wilson, 1856-1930, please access the PCA Historical Center's website <http://www.pcahistory.org/findingaids/wilson/bibliog.html>, accessed 1/25/08. The website can be accessed also at [www.pcahistory.org](http://www.pcahistory.org), accessed 1/25/08.

<sup>17</sup>Kaiser, *Bible Interpreters 75*. As a recognized scholar of his time, Wilson also wrote numerous articles for the original edition of ISBE edited by James Orr. They include: "Abed-Nego," "Ahasbai," "Arsaces," "Artaxerxes," "Ashpenaz," "Baladan," "Belshazzar," "Cambyses," "Daniel," "Daniel, Book of," "Darius," "Evi-Merodach," "Ezra," "Ezra-Nehemiah," "Melzar," "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin," "Merodach-Baladan," "Nebuchadnezzar," "Nehemiah," "Shadrach," "Sanballat," "Sheshbazzar," "Tirshatha," "Tobiah," and "Zerubbabel." Many of these entries were retained in whole or in edited form in the 1979 Wm. B. Eerdmans edition of ISBE. All these articles are accessible online at [www.StudyLight.Org](http://www.StudyLight.Org) and can be accessed at <http://home.earthlink.net/~ironmen/wilson/robert.htm>, accessed 1/25/08.

<sup>18</sup>This address was published as "Babylon and Israel: A Comparison of Their Leading Ideas Based upon Their Vocabularies," *The Princeton Theological Review* 1/2 (April 1903):239-55.

of his intense defense of the veracity of the Hebrew Scriptures, focusing most of his energy on the book of Daniel.<sup>19</sup>

Wilson was able to mount one of the most successful attacks on Higher Criticism, astutely defending the conservative, orthodox position on many of the most critical issues in the forefront of OT scholarship during the first third of the twentieth century. Some of those battles centered on the book of Daniel, namely its miracles (e.g., fiery furnace, lion's den), history (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar, Darius), and prophecies (e.g., 70 weeks). "It was his conviction that if one maintained a clear conservative view on this book of the Bible, one would remain conservative on the other matters as well."<sup>20</sup> In the Introduction of the first volume of *Studies in the Book of Daniel*, he gave his concluding argument. He was convinced that "the methods pursued by many so-called higher critics are illogical, irrational, and *unscientific*. They are illogical because they beg the question at issue. They are irrational because they assume that historic facts are self-evident, and that they can set limits to the possible. They are unscientific because they base their conclusions on incomplete inductions and on a practical claim of omniscience."<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, the second planned volume was never completed. It was to have dealt specifically with all the linguistic problems in the Book of Daniel. The third planned volume originally appeared as a series of articles in the *Princeton Theological Review* and then later as volume 2 of *Studies in the Book of Daniel* (1938).<sup>22</sup>

Wilson's early date for Daniel clearly contradicted Driver's Maccabean date set forth in his commentary published in 1900.<sup>23</sup> He took a firm linguistic approach to Daniel and attacked Driver's thesis that "The verdict of the language of Daniel is thus clear. The *Persian* words presuppose a period after the Persian Empire had been well established: the Greek words *demand*, the Hebrew *supports*, and the Aramaic *permits*, a date *after the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great* (B.C. 332)."<sup>24</sup> This set up a feud between the two men: Driver felt that Wilson did not represent his position accurately, while Wilson clearly articulated his own views of the above-mentioned conflict in *Is the Higher Criticism Scholarly?*<sup>25</sup> Even before that booklet

<sup>19</sup>See note 19 regarding this volume.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 76. See n. 5 on the same page.

<sup>21</sup>Robert Dick Wilson, *Studies in the Book of Daniel* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, Knickerbocker, 1917) xiii (emphasis in the original).

<sup>22</sup>Kaiser, *Bible Interpreters* 76.

<sup>23</sup>S. R. Driver, *The Book of Daniel*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1900; reprinted 1901, 1905, 1912) xlvi-lvi.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, lxiii (emphases in the original).

<sup>25</sup>Robert Dick Wilson, *Is the Higher Criticism Scholarly?* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times Company, 1922) 27-57.

was written, Wilson addressed the issue very thoroughly in an article entitled, "The Aramaic of Daniel" in *Biblical and Theological Studies* written by the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary and published in commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the seminary.<sup>26</sup> The opening statement of the article expresses the need for Wilson's response to Driver.

Every student of the Old Testament who has read the chapter on Daniel in Dr. Driver's *Literature of the Old Testament* (LOT latest edition 1910) must have been forcibly struck by the arguments presented in favor of a late date for the book which are based upon the alleged agreement between the Aramaic contained in it and that found in the dialects of the Nabateans, of the Palmyrenes, and of the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan. So impressed was the writer of this article by the significance of these statements, backed up as they are by an imposing array of evidence, that he determined to undertake a new investigation of the whole problem of the relations existing between the various dialects of Aramaic. Such an undertaking necessarily involved as complete an investigation as was possible of the documents which constitute the extant literature of these dialects, in so far as they bear upon grammar and lexicography. Fortunately, a large part of the work involved in the investigation had already been completed by him. But, needless to remark, the accomplishment of such a task—and the writer does not regard it as yet accomplished, although he is firmly convinced that further investigation will only serve to strengthen and confirm the conclusions which he has put forward in this article—would have been utterly impossible, had there not been already to hand so many grammars, lexicons, and texts, of scientific value.<sup>27</sup>

Though an in depth analysis of the specific arguments set forth by Wilson is beyond the scope of this article, a summary of the four propositions he used is not. Wilson very thoroughly addressed the issues of (1) Daniel belonging to the Western Aramaic, (2) the Aramaic of Daniel being all but identical with that of Ezra, (3) the Aramaic of Daniel being nearly allied to that of the Targum of Onkelos and Jonathan and to that of the Nabateans and the Palmyrenes, and (4) the Aramaic of Daniel being that which was spoken in or near Palestine at a date after the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great.<sup>28</sup> His conclusion concisely summarizes his argumentation:

In conclusion, we would express the hope that we have been able to convince our readers that in so far as philology is concerned there is no such evidence existing as Dr. Driver alleges, in support of the late date and western provenience of the book of Daniel. The early date derived from the orthography is not as convincing in the case of every individual letter as could be desired; but taken as a whole, it is in favor of an early rather

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<sup>26</sup>R. D. Wilson, "The Aramaic of Daniel," in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, by the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary (New York: Scribner's, 1912) 261-306.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 263.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 262.

than of a late date. The evidence derived from forms and inflections and syntax is decidedly, and that from the vocabulary is overwhelmingly, in favor of an early date and of an eastern provenience. . . . For there never has been a time and place known to history save Babylon in the latter half of the 6th century B.C., in which an Aramaic dialect with just such an admixture of foreign ingredients and in just such proportions could have been brought into existence. . . . Therefore, it being thus apparent that on the basis of foreign elements imbedded in Aramaic dialects, it is possible for the scholar to fix approximately the time and the locality in which the different dialects were spoken; all the more when as has been shown in the case of Daniel such a date and locality are required by the vocabulary of the pure Aramaic substratum and favored or at least permitted by its grammatical forms and structure, we are abundantly justified in concluding that the dialect of Daniel containing, as it does, so many Persian, Hebrew, and Babylonian elements, and so few Greek words, with not one Egyptian, Latin, or Arabic word, and so nearly allied in grammatical form and structure to the older Aramaic dialects and in its conglomerate vocabulary to the dialects of Ezra and Egypto-Aramaic, must have been used at or near Babylon at a time not long after the founding of the Persian Empire.<sup>29</sup>

Driver was shocked at the challenge put forth by Wilson, so much so “that he included a rejoinder to Wilson in the ninth edition of his *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*. Driver was most incensed that Wilson had not represented his position fairly: Driver had not claimed that the Aramaic of Daniel ‘proved’ the book to be a product of the second century B.C.; he had said only that the Aramaic “permitted” it to be from that date.”<sup>30</sup> H. H. Rowley entered the fray with his book *The Aramaic of the Old Testament*.<sup>31</sup> He does not hold back in his argumentation, viciously attacking Wilson at times, accusing him of ineptitude, inaccuracy, blindness, and prejudice in handling the data.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, even though Wilson spent the summer before his death studying Rowley’s book, not enough materials remained after his death to publish a response in his name.<sup>33</sup>

The booklet mentioned above, *Is the Higher Criticism Scholarly?*, published in 1922, was the forerunner to Wilson’s seminal work, *A Scientific Investigation of*

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 303-5.

<sup>30</sup>Kaiser, *Bible Interpreters* 76-77. Samuel Rolles Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 9th ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913) xxxiv-xxxviii.

<sup>31</sup>H. H. Rowley, *The Aramaic of the Old Testament*, (London: Oxford University, 1929).

<sup>32</sup>For some of the many examples of Rowley’s attack, see vii, 1-2, 11, esp. 19, 21, 23, 33, 44, 46-47, 54-55, 62-67, 74-75, to cite a few. The entire volume seems to be an attack on Wilson’s view of the Aramaic of Daniel.

<sup>33</sup>Kaiser, *Bible Interpreters* 77.

*the Old Testament*, published originally in 1926.<sup>34</sup> In this booklet intended for use by laymen without a language background, he astutely defends the historical reliability and truth of the Hebrew Scriptures.

We may take the purely defensive line and endeavor to show that the general and particular attacks upon the truthfulness of the Old Testament narratives are unsupported by facts. Or, we may take the offensive and show that the Old Testament narratives are in harmony with all that is really known of the history of the world in the times described in the Old Testament records, and that these records themselves contain the inefaceable evidence that the time and place of their origin agree with the facts recorded. The best method, perhaps, will be to make an offensive-defensive, showing not merely that the attacks are futile, but that the events recorded and the persons and things described are true to history,—that is, that they harmonize in general with what we learn from the contemporaneous documents of other nations.

This is true of the very earliest narratives of the Old Testament. . . . From this time downward there is no good reason for doubting that the Biblical narrative is derived from *written* sources based on *contemporaneous* documents.<sup>35</sup>

He clearly argues that writing was known early in the history of humanity as attested in the Amarna correspondence between the pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty in Egypt (fourteenth century B.C.) and various princes in Palestine and Syria.<sup>36</sup>

He then points out “the general scheme of *chronology* and *geography* presented to us in the Hebrew records corresponds with what we can learn from other documents of the same period.”<sup>37</sup> He points out one of the unique biblical phenomenon unequaled in the history of literature is the “extraordinary confirmation of the careful transmission of the Hebrew documents from original sources lies in the exact manner in which the names of the kings are spelled.”<sup>38</sup> He then shows how the 24 names of the kings of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, et. al. contain 120 consonantal letters, “of which all are found in the same order in the inscriptions of the kings themselves or in those of their contemporaries. That the Hebrew writers should have transliterated these names with such accurateness and conformity to philological principles is a wonderful proof of their thorough care and scholarship and of their access to the

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<sup>34</sup>Robert Dick Wilson, *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times Company, 1926). Moody Press republished this volume in 1959 with revisions by Edward J. Young.

<sup>35</sup>Wilson, *Is the Higher Criticism Scholarly?* 14-15 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 16 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 19.

original sources.”<sup>39</sup> He then contrasts that fact with the reality that not one name is preserved when compared to the transliteration of foreign words in other documents from other comparable periods. “In the list of names of the companions of Alexander given by the Pseudo-Callisthenes, nearly every name is changed so as to be unrecognizable; and the same is true of most of the names of the kings of Egypt as we have them preserved in the lists of Manetho, Herodotus, and Diodorus Siculus, and of the kings of Assyria and Babylonia as given in Africanus, Castor, and the Canon of Ptolemy.”<sup>40</sup>

Wilson then turns to confront the intrusion of foreign words into the Hebrew Scriptures and utterly disproves the higher critics claims regarding date and authenticity. “In each stage of the literature the foreign words in the documents are found to belong to the language of the peoples that the Scriptures and the records of the nations surrounding Israel unite in declaring to have influenced and affected the Israelites at that time.”<sup>41</sup> In the remainder of the booklet he asks the critics some very difficult questions that they are either unwilling or unable to address. He concludes the booklet by stating, “I have not attempted to fix the exact dates of composition, or final redaction of the books composed before that time, preferring rather to show that there is nothing in the history of the world from 2000 to 164 B.C. that militates against the possibility, nor even against the probability, of the trustworthiness of the history of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament.”<sup>42</sup> This little pamphlet was ultimately translated into Swedish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.<sup>43</sup>

In 1919, Wilson authored a series of essays published in the *Princeton Theological Review* in which he set forth the method that he followed during his years at Western and Princeton. The essays were then revised and enlarged for his seminal work, *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament* (1926). “It is the purpose of the present volume to show that intelligent Christians have a reasonable ground for concluding that the text of the Old Testament which we have is substantially correct, and that, in its true and obvious meaning, it has a right to be considered a part of the ‘infallible rule of faith and practice’ that we have in the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>44</sup>

Again, I have ventured to use the term scientific, not merely because these conclusions are based on knowledge, but because, after the introductory pages, I have presented the

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>43</sup>Young, “Introduction: The Life and Ministry,” in *A Scientific Investigation* 20.

<sup>44</sup>Wilson, *Scientific Investigation* 5.

evidence in an orderly manner, treating of text, grammar, vocabulary, and history in what I consider to be a logical sequence. The results of some of my investigations, such as those of the foreign words in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, and of the religion of Israel, have not yet been fully published. If it please the Lord to spare my life and grant me health I hope in the future to publish the results of my labors on these and other subjects.<sup>45</sup>

He applied the evidence in the same way it would be used in a court of law in order to demonstrate its veracity. “He was consumed with a deep desire to remove the subjective intrusions into Old Testament studies in order that the objective facts could be given their proper prominence.”<sup>46</sup> He championed the conservative stance on the historicity and truth of the OT.

[T]he conservative position is, in general, that the Canon of the books of the Old Testament was completed in the fifth century B.C., before the succession of the prophets ceased. As to the particular portions of the Old Testament, their view is:

1. That the Pentateuch as it stands is historical and from the time of Moses; and that Moses was its real author, though it may have been revised and edited by later redactors, the additions being just as much inspired and as true as the rest.
2. That Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, and Kings were composed from original and trustworthy sources; though, in the case at least of Kings, they were not completed till about 575 B.C.
3. That the prophets Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, and Isaiah were all written about or before 700 B.C.; Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah before 600 B.C.; Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel, between 650 and 550 B.C.; Daniel, Haggai and Zechariah between 550 and 500 B.C.; and Malachi in the fifth century B.C.
4. That there is good and sufficient reason for concluding that the headings of the Psalms are as a whole correct; that it is probable that all of the Psalms were written before 400 B.C.; that Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs and most of the book of Proverbs may, for all we know, have been written by Solomon; that Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles were written before 400 B.C.; and Job at 550 B.C. or earlier.

In conclusion, let me reiterate my conviction that no one knows enough to show that the true text of the Old Testament in its true interpretation is not true. The evidence in our possession has convinced me that at “sundry times and in divers manners God spake unto our fathers through the prophets,” that the OT in Hebrew “being immediately inspired by God” has “by his singular care and providence been kept pure in all ages”; and that, when the wisdom of men and the law of God had alike failed to save humanity, in the fullness of time, when all the preparation was complete, God sent forth His Son to confound the wisdom of man and to redeem those who come under the Law. Thank God for the Holy Oracles. Thank Him yet more for “the unspeakable gift” of His love, who brought life and immortality to light in His gospel.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>46</sup>Kaiser, *Bible Interpreters* 77.

<sup>47</sup>Wilson, *A Scientific Investigation* 11-13.

Marion Ann Taylor, writing about the OT and the Princeton Old School, concludes the following about Robert Dick Wilson:

Wilson's scholarship therefore was often highly technical, theologically barren and had little appeal to a general audience. Moreover, his work in exegesis was negligible. Wilson was neither able to develop Green's insights regarding the importance of being sensitive to the theological shaping of the texts (although he did assign Green's *Unity of the Book of Genesis* to his students) nor was he able to mount a much-needed comprehensive defence of the conservative position based upon a completely reformulated Princeton approach. He had neither the aptitude nor the philosophical training to do this kind of work. Finally, as the interchanges between Driver, Rowley and Wilson demonstrate, Wilson was regarded as a very learned but highly idiosyncratic scholar whose alignment with conservatism seriously tainted his scholarship. At the time of his death, the Princeton OT school which he had tried so valiantly to update and defend had lost its primary institutional authority and the credibility that it had once enjoyed. The Princeton OT school was hardly taken seriously by the wider academic community. Its demise had come.<sup>48</sup>

Ms. Taylor seems to embrace the expectations of others regarding what they felt Wilson should have done rather than commend him for his choice of the path that he pursued the rest of his life.

Robert Dick Wilson spent his life defending the OT from the attacks of the liberal "scholars"; therefore he had to be "highly technical" for them to accept his scholarship. His works were not necessarily ever intended for the "general audience." She seems to fail to recognize the sheer volume of unpublished study and exegesis that he did in Hebrew and other cognate languages which enabled him to publish the other titles.<sup>49</sup> He devoted his life to cognate language study, not to theological study, but had he decided to apply his intellect to theology, he would have been more than able to "develop Green's insights." The fact that he assigned the reading of Green's book is testimony that he regarded the "theological shaping of the texts" as important for his students to understand.<sup>50</sup> Could it be that he was hopeful that one of his students would take on that challenge? Wilson began his study of the OT with the

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<sup>48</sup>Marion Ann Taylor, *The Old Testament in the Old Princeton School (1812-1929)* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University, 1992) 272.

<sup>49</sup>See PCA Historical Center's bibliography of Robert Dick Wilson at their website <http://www.pcahistory.org/findingaids/wilson/bibliog.html>, accessed 1/25/08 or at [www.pcahistory.org](http://www.pcahistory.org), accessed 1/25/08.

<sup>50</sup>Taylor is referring to William Henry Green, *The Unity of the Book of Genesis* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1895). During this time Wilson was the William Henry Green Professor of Semitic Philology and Old Testament Criticism (1900-1929). He took the tasks associated with that title very seriously and literally.

presupposition that it was the inspired Word of God and nothing else. That is the position that his “conservatism” defended. Wilson recognized what was happening at Princeton and before his death aligned himself with Oswald T. Allis and J. Gresham Machen, two other conservative defenders of the truth, to begin a new seminary in Philadelphia, whose goal was to defend biblical truth from liberal reinterpretation. Ms. Taylor’s sketch mentions that Wilson’s monographs missed what he accomplished in his book reviews, encyclopedia articles, and classroom lecture notes that inspired his students to take God’s Word seriously, learn Hebrew, and know it well in order to defend it from liberal “scholarship.” Oswald T. Allis, who was one of Wilson’s students, carried the flame lit by Wilson and devoted his life to defend the approach begun by Wilson in OT studies. He defended the OT against liberal attacks very successfully for many years.<sup>51</sup>

### THE LAST YEARS

Robert Dick Wilson traveled extensively from 1922 to 1927. His itinerary included Japan, Korea, China, England, Wales, Scotland, Canada, and many larger cities within the United States. In 1927, he addressed the two opening sessions of the Ninth International Congress of the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association. It was also in that same year, on April 11, that the Kittanning Presbytery passed its four resolutions on the occasion of Wilson’s fiftieth anniversary in the ministry.<sup>52</sup> On May 23, 1929, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. met in St. Paul to elect a new moderator, which turned out to be the most controversial item on the agenda. The two men with the most support were Cleland McAfee, a professor of systematic theology at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, and Robert Dick Wilson. Wilson’s candidacy was sponsored by a group of “fundamentalists” who yearned for the Old School Presbyterianism that had prevailed prior to its reunion with the new school in 1870. This led to the reorganization of Princeton Theological Seminary and the departure of J. Gresham Machen, Oswald T. Allis, and Robert Dick Wilson to start Westminster Theological Seminary. Wilson was only able to teach at this fledgling seminary for one year. Before he died, he had the opportunity to speak to his students one last time. Wilson declared,

I have made it an invariable habit never to accept an objection to a statement of the Old Testament without subjecting it to a most thorough investigation, linguistically and factually. If I find that the objector bases his objection upon a general theoretical consideration such as the denial of miracles or of predictive prophecy, I just smile at the objector and turn him over to the department of

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<sup>51</sup>Taylor, *Old Testament in the Old Princeton School* 273 n. 93, found on p. 360.

<sup>52</sup>Kaiser, *Bible Interpreters* 79-80.

theism, to learn who and what the God of the Bible is. 'He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh' at them, and I for one laugh with Him. But if a man believes in the probability or certainty of miraculous events wherein God is working but is precluded from faith in the claims of the bible to be a divine revelation by doubts based upon alleged historical, scientific, or philological evidence, then I consider it to be my duty to do my best to show that this alleged evidence is irrelevant, inconclusive, and false.<sup>53</sup>

His last public appearance was on October 1, 1930, at the opening exercises of the second year of the new seminary. Two weeks later, his body was laid to rest in Indiana, Pennsylvania.<sup>54</sup> On the day of his funeral, the Board of Trustees of Princeton Seminary was meeting. In the minutes was recorded the following: "The hour of four o'clock having arrived, and having been informed that at this hour the funeral services of the Rev. Robert Dick Wilson, D.D., were being held in Philadelphia, Pa., the Board of Trustees suspended its regular order of business to stand in solemn tribute to him who had served the Seminary so long and faithfully as a teacher. The President, Dr. McEwan, led the Board of Trustees in prayer." Included in the minutes was a unanimous motion "to express to [Robert Dick's] family the sincere sympathy of its members, and to express its appreciation of the long and faithful service he rendered the Seminary and the whole Church in a most distinguished way."<sup>55</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Robert Dick Wilson was gifted in an amazing way in his ability to absorb and learn languages. His seminal works, *Studies in the Book of Daniel* and *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament*, are unparalleled to this day in their ability to defend the truthfulness of the Hebrew Scriptures. These two works should be on the shelf of every pastor and seminary student who has a desire to grasp the truth contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. The liberal higher critics do not have an answer to these books and so rather than attempt to address the issues raised within their pages, they would rather just ignore them and hope they "go away." Thankfully, these volumes are still available in either reprinted form (*Daniel* by WIPF and Stock) or on the Internet (*Daniel* e-text at <http://home.earthlink.net/~ironmen/wilson/robert.htm>, accessed 1/25/08, and *Scientific Investigation* at <http://www.pcahistory>

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<sup>53</sup>Young, "Introduction: The Life and Ministry," in *A Scientific Investigation* 20-21, citing *Christianity Today* 1/2 (June 1930):5.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>55</sup>Kaiser, *Bible Interpreters* 80, quoting from *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 24/3 (November 1930):26-27.

.org/findingaids/wilson/siot.html, accessed 1/25/08). They can also be found in their original forms through careful searching on the Internet.

Very few men have had the scholarly impact on the veracity of the OT that Robert Dick Wilson had. The impact of many others has been questionable because of their insistence on a new and creative way of interpreting the OT to discount the historicity of the Hebrew text. Robert Dick Wilson clung to the belief that God's Word is inspired, inerrant, and authoritative—that is what makes him unique among the great Hebrew scholars from the turn of the century into the early twentieth century. Many, if not all, twenty-first-century Hebrew scholars owe him a debt of gratitude as they stand on his shoulders and continue his legacy of defending the truth of the Hebrew Scriptures.