Guide to the American Institute of Sacred Literature Records 1880-1943

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Descriptive Summary

Identifier ICU.SPCL.AISL

Title American Institute of Sacred Literature. Records

Date 1880-1943

Size 13 linear feet (26 boxes)

Repository Special Collections Research Center
University of Chicago Library
1100 East 57th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.

Abstract The American Institute of Sacred Literature, which offered courses in the study of the Bible, was organized in 1889. The Institute grew out of the Correspondence School of Hebrew (established in 1880 by William Rainey Harper) which was renamed the American Institute of Hebrew in 1883. The AISL records contain primarily correspondence. Topics include Chautauqua summer schools, the Institute’s relationship with the University of Chicago and William Rainey Harper, and the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy. Also includes material on the founding of the Institute and courses taught.

Information on Use

Access The collection is open for research.

Citation When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: American Institute of Sacred Literature. Records, [Box #, Folder #], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Historical Note

Establishment and Purpose of the Institute-

In December of 1880, at the Morgan Park Theological Seminary, one of the first correspondence schools in the country was established by William Rainey Harper. By February 1881, the Correspondence School of Hebrew had an enrollment of three hundred students, mostly ministers and teachers, and a movement which might justly be called a revival in the study of the Old Testament in the original tongue was begun. In 1883 the school was renamed the American Institute of Hebrew; in 1889 Harper, now Professor of Hebrew and Woolsey Professor of the English Bible at Yale University, realized a need for broadening the scope of the Institute’s work.
and it was expanded to include Biblical Hebrew, such as Syriac, Assyrian and Arabic, the Bible in the original tongues, the Bible in the ancient versions, the Old and New Testaments in English, and Biblical literature, history and Theology.

Harper and the Institute-

From the founding of the Institute until the beginnings of the University of Chicago in 1892, the strong personality of Harper appears in every phase of the Institute’s operation. From 1892 until his death in 1906, Harper’s influence is seen less in the affairs of the Institute as he devoted himself more and more to the young University. Although the Institute maintained a constant fund raising effort, it is clear that after Harper turned most of his energy toward the University, the Institute began to suffer from a lack of money often sufficient enough to cause a slowing of its work. Beyond the money problem there were the more serious problems of the loss of Harper, with his imagination and drive, and the changing times. Reorganization and adjustment became the normal pattern of the Institute’s operation as it attempted to survive after the interest which had called it into being was dead.

The University of Chicago and the Institute-

The relation between the Institute and the University of Chicago began as soon as the University started to function. Upon the opening of the University and the organization of the University of Chicago Press, the good will of The Old and New Testament Student (published by the Institute) was transferred to the Press and the publication of Hebraica and The Biblical World began. Upon the organization of the Correspondence Department of the University, in the same year (1892), such courses of the Institute as would lead to University credit were transferred to the Department and carried on cooperatively. In the middle of 1905 the University’s Board of Trustees carried out Harper’s wish to make the Institute a part of the University and it was soon firmly attached to the Divinity School. By 1924 the Institute was handling most of the Divinity School’s extension work; by the early 1940s the Institute had reversed its position and was placed under the Divinity School’s Director of Extension, and by the mid-forties the Institute had ceased to function, except to fill orders for material if a stock still existed. (In Appendix II will be found a rough chronology of the Institute, some material quoted and some cited.)

The Administration of the Institute-

In the early years of the Institute, from 1880 to 1883, the administration rested largely in Harper’s hands. However, by 1883, the Institute had grown to such an extent that a stock company was formed to conduct both the Correspondence and the Summer Schools of Hebrew,
sponsored by the Institute. The following year a division of responsibility placed the publishing feature of the Institute in the hands of the stock company and the educational work with Dr. Harper. When the American Institute of Hebrew was formed in December of 1883 the organization consisted of seventy professors of Hebrew and the Old Testament subjects in the United States and Canada, and between one and two hundred interested persons, as associate members and patrons providing financial support. In 1889, when the American Institute of Sacred Literature was organized, Harper became principal and a board of twelve directors was appointed. A President, Vice-President, Secretary, Principal, Treasurer and Auditor, together with five instructors administered the work of the reformed Institute and gave instruction to its students. In 1890 Local Boards were organized in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, Kansas City and San Francisco, and under their auspices Winter Schools for Bible study of from one to twelve weeks each were held. In this year, also, publishing interests were transferred to the Student Publishing Company of Hartford, Connecticut, and the magazine The Old Testament Student became The Old and New Testament Student.

In 1891 the headquarters of the Institute moved with Harper to Chicago. The Secretary and two members of the teaching staff were brought to Chicago, and the eastern interests, chiefly financial, were left with Dr. F. K. Sanders of Yale. In 1896 the Institute was incorporated under the laws of the State of Illinois. In 1905 the Institute was accepted by the University of Chicago with the agreement that the University continue the Institute "as part of the extension work of the University." At this time President Harper placed the immediate administration of the Institute under the control of an executive committee, selected form members of the Divinity School faculty, and an Executive Secretary who were responsible to the President and through him to the Board of Trustees.

Professor Ernest D. Burton, the first Chairman of the Institute’s Executive Committee, remained active until his appointment as Director of the University Library. After this Miss Georgia L. Chamberlin, who had been Harper’s secretary in the pre-Chicago days, and who remained with the Institute until 1935, carried on the work of the Institute from her post as Executive Secretary. Upon her retirement in 1935, Professor Archibald G. Baker was appointed Director and remained in this position until 1940. Between 1940 and 1943 the Institute was placed under a committee and then Professor Sidney E. Mead was appointed Director. After little more than a year the dying Institute ceased to function actively and was subordinated to the Divinity School’s Director of Extension.

Scope Note
The American Institute of Sacred Literature records consist of 13 linear feet and cover the period 1880-1943. The collection includes general correspondence files that have been arranged chronologically by year and in most cases has a rough alphabetical treatment, by writer, within the year. Where distinct groupings of correspondence could be related, this has been done, and the material filed at the end of the general correspondence for that particular year. Some of the purely historical material, early undated material and printed Hebrew lessons will be found in
the first box. At the end of the sequence more undated course material, of a later period, and a partial file of The Institute will be found.

This collection of correspondence is related to other material in the University Archives, particularly the Divinity School correspondence. Men such as Ira M. Price and Edgar J. Goodspeed, who were involved with the Institute, were often connected with the Morgan Park Theological Seminary which was to become part of the University of Chicago's Divinity School. And so information about these men and their work is in this collection. Further information relating to the Chautauqua summer schools and the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy is to be found in the correspondence over-and-above the value of the collection which as a whole provides information on the Bible study movement in the United States, and the career of President Harper.

Related Resources
The following related resources are located in the Department of Special Collections:

http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/select.html

Subject Headings
• Harper, William Rainey, 1856-1906
• Price, Ira Maurice, 1856-1939
• Goodspeed, Edgar J. (Edgar Johnson), 1871-1962
• American Institute of Sacred Literature
• American Institute of Hebrew
• Chautauqua Institution
• Bible -- Study and teaching -- History
• Hebrew language -- Study and teaching

INVENTORY

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Miscellaneous articles
• "The American Institute of Sacred Literature, a Historical Sketch, 1881-1902" by John Henry Barrows, reprinted from the Biblical World, March 1902
• "A History of the American Institute of Sacred Literature, Part II, The American Institute of Sacred Literature," typescript, 29 pp., 2 copies

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Miscellaneous publications of the AISL
• Postal Bulletin to the Members of the Bible Students’ Reading Guild, nos. 4 and 7, 1898
• Five-Minutes Leaflets, undated
• Gilkey, C. W., "What is Inspiration?" undated
• Harvey, BCH, "The Religion of an Anatomist," undated
• Mathews, S., "The Modernist Believes," undated
• Mathews, S., "Christ's Interpretation of His Second Coming, undated"
• Popular Religion Leaflets, undated
• Fosdick, H. E., "Religion Plus Intelligence," undated
• Beaven, A. W., "Positive v. Negative Goodness," undated
• Mathews, S., "Why Denominations?," undated
• Popular Religion leaflets, Bible Series, undated
• "The Sermon on the Mount," undated
• "The letter to the Galatians," undated
• Popular Religion leaflets, Good-will Series, undated
• Hough, L. H., "Good-will Between Churches," undated
• Popular Religion leaflets, Science and Religion Series, undated
• Schmucker, S. C., "Through Science to God," undated
• Conklin, E. G., "Evolution and the Bible," undated
• Mather, Kirtley, "The Religion of a Geologist," undated
• Popular Religion leaflets, Why I Believe Series, undated
• Brown, W. A., "Why I Believe in God," undated
• Macintosh, D. C., "Why I Believe in Immortality," undated
• Stifler, J. M., "Why I Believe in Worship," undated
• Supplementary catalogue of books as of September 1940
• "A Short History of Christianity; a new study course," advertising circular, undated