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# DOMINICANA

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Vol. XII

SEPTEMBER, 1927

No. 3

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## THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

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WHEN we read the Bible, we are generally prompted to do so from the fact that it is the Word of God, the divinely inspired message which with Tradition forms the governing element of our Catholic Faith and the guide of our spiritual life. But besides the inspirational nature which God has bestowed upon the Bible, He has seen fit to clothe it with another striking characteristic, beautiful literary form. In our endeavor to absorb the substance of the Divine Book, we often pass over entirely the literary beauties which it contains. We seem to forget that the Bible is a masterpiece of literature, nay more, a literature in itself, more beautiful and influential than the literature of any nation.

"Literature," says Maurice Francis Egan, "is the written expression of life." The literature of any nation is that collection of writings which expresses its national life. It is the productions of those writers who have chronicled in more or less beautiful form the records of the doings of a people, their outlook on life, their way of thinking, their sentiments, their hopes and their aspirations. Ancient Greek literature is the account of classic Greek life as found in the writings of Pindar, Homer, Sophocles, Euripides and that long list of Greek literary masters. Latin literature tells us of ancient Rome and may be seen in the works of Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Livy, Plautus, Cicero and other well-known Latin writers. English literature portrays English life in the productions of Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Addison, Ruskin, Tennyson, Newman and other English literary lights. So also, German literature, French literature, Italian literature, Spanish literature and the other literatures of the world are each the written manifestation of the nation's life, its desires and aspirations, as found in the literary products of its great masters.

The Bible is the expression of the national life of the Jewish

people. It is a collection of seventy-two works produced by Moses, Job, David, St. Paul and other Hebrew writers. It is composed of two parts, the first of which, the Old Testament, gives the story of the chosen people of God and sets forth the fulfillment of the promise to them; the second part, the New Testament, tells of the life and death of Jesus Christ and the principal events of Jewish life connected with them. Thus, the Bible is a written account of Jewish national life and should be considered a national literature on equal grounds with Greek, Latin, English, German or any other national literature of the world.

Upon examination we find that the Bible has a further claim to the title of literature inasmuch as it contains almost every species of literary writing. It has both prose and poetry and forms of each which the superficial and inattentive reader might easily pass over without noticing. It is true that the arrangement which these forms take in the Bible is not always the best, for there is often no obvious distinction between prose and verse, no titles of poems and essays and the like; nevertheless the careful reader can easily detect the various kinds of prose and poetry which adorn the pages of Holy Writ. Among the prose forms will be seen historical narrative in the Books of Genesis, Kings and Paralipomenon; constitutional history in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy; literary essays in the Book of Ecclesiastes; biography in the Gospels; epistolary literature in St. Paul and other New Testament writers. The poetry of the Bible contains such forms as dramatic poetry (though not in the form of the drama) in the Book of Job and in the Canticle of Canticles; tender and touching elegies in the Lamentations of Jeremias; sacred songs in the Psalms; poetical essays in the Book of Wisdom.

Besides having the various forms of prose and poetry, the Bible contains them in the most charming and beautiful manner. Newman calls the Scriptures "compositions which, even humanly considered, are among the most sublime and beautiful ever written." After all, how fitting it was that God, the principal author of the Sacred Books, should endow them with every beauty and perfection. As He is perfection itself, He could not but lend beauty and adornment to the words written under His divine inspiration.

Among the qualities of beauty which characterize the Sacred Scriptures are complete simplicity, making them attractive to all classes of readers, splendid rhythm, rich musical form, stateliness and dignity of expression. For pure simplicity and yet true loftiness of

spirit, what can compare to the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, the *Nunc Dimittis*? Or for rich musical character, what can equal the well-known Psalm 132, which in the Vulgate Version begins: "*Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum, habitare fratres in unum.*"

In point of literary beauty and expressiveness, the Psalms and the Canticle of Canticles have perhaps never been equalled. Of the Psalms, St. Ambrose remarks: "They breathe love. God's love for man and man's love for God are found in the harp of David and the Sacred Hymns." Some of the narrative portions of the Old Testament, the pastoral literature of Ruth, the books of the Prophets, the literary Epistles of St. Paul, St. Peter, St. John, and St. James, stand alone in the literary history of every people according to the unanimous consent of literary students of the Bible.

Profane and religious writers alike in all ages, have been loud in their praise of the literary beauty and perfection of the Bible. The historian Froude calls the literature of the Bible "the rarest and richest in all departments of thought and imagination that exists."<sup>1</sup> Milton considered no songs whatever comparable to the Songs of Sion, no orations the equal of the prophetic orations. Coleridge declares that after reading Isaias or St. Paul or any of the other Scriptural writers, Homer, Virgil and Cicero were disgustingly lame to him. Emerson puts the sayings of Isaias and Amos, of St. Paul and St. John, on a higher level than the sayings of Socrates or Marcus Aurelius. Even Renan, always hostile to the Bible as the inspired Word of God says of the Sacred Book: "We are struck by that character of absolute perfection which entitles this masterpiece to be looked upon as a classic in the same degree as the productions of Greek, Rome and other peoples."<sup>2</sup>

St. Jerome was well conversant with the classical writers of Greece and Rome and warmly admired their works, yet when speaking of their beauty and the beauty of the Scriptures said: "Homer cannot compare with the Psalter, Virgil with the Evangelists, or Cicero with St. Paul."<sup>3</sup> But perhaps the greatest tribute paid to the beauty of the Bible is that contained in the words of Père Lacordaire: "Like Christianity itself, the beauty of the Bible, ever inimitable, finds nothing comparable to it here below. Even Homer has not equalled the account of the lives of the Patriarchs in Genesis; Pindar never reached the sublimity of the prophets; as historians, Thucy-

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<sup>1</sup> *Bunyan*, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> *Etudes d'Histoires Religieuses*, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> *Epistla ad Paulinum*, No. LIII.

dides and Tacitus cannot be compared to Moses. The Laws of Exodus and Leviticus are far superior to those of Lycurgus and Numa. Even before the Gospel, Socrates and Plato had been surpassed by Solomon, who left us in the Cantic of Canticles, the most astounding song of divinely inspired love ever uttered by human lips, and in Ecclesiastes, the eternally pathetic hymn of fallen humanity. At last the Gospel, completing its teaching, stamps and seals the Bible with a beauty hitherto unknown."<sup>4</sup>

Not only does the Bible possess literary beauties far superior to those of other literatures, but it has had a greater influence than any other literature. We need but examine the literary productions of any nation to see how tremendous this influence has been. The Bible has not only inculcated in the writers of the world the noblest ideals, the purest motives the highest aspirations and the deepest yearnings of the soul, but it has ever been a potent force in shaping their style and their language. Goethe's *Faust*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *The Messiah* of Klopstock, Racine's *Esther*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, are but a few outstanding examples showing the influence exerted by the Scriptures on the great writers of the world.

English literature may well serve as an example of the force and influence exerted by the Bible on the literatures of the world. Dr. Phelps, a wide student of both the Bible and English literature, declares that, "the Bible has had a greater influence on English literature than all forces put together."<sup>5</sup> Professor Gardiner, compares it to the keystone of an arch, and says: "If the whole range of English style was figured in the form of an arch, the Bible would be the keystone."<sup>6</sup> These statements give us some notion of the large place which the Bible holds in English literature. To determine exactly its power and influence would doubtless be an impossible task. For there is perhaps no other book which has become so thoroughly fused, so completely interwoven with the thought and style of the English language as the Bible. It has filled our language with the loftiest thoughts and sentiments as well as with examples of every virtue. It has enriched our language with innumerable expressions that have long since become the common currency of every-day speech. Such phrases as "the pride of life," "in season and out of season," "tread the wine-press alone," "thorn in the flesh," "root of all evil," and

<sup>4</sup> *Oeuvres*, VI, 67.

<sup>5</sup> *Reading the Bible*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> *The Bible as English Literature*, p. 389.

hundreds of others have become part of the very being of the English language.

The works of English authors concretely and constantly exemplify the influence of the Scriptures on English literature. There is scarcely a single great writer who does not show some trace of Biblical influence in point of subject and style. Chaucer, "The Father of English Poetry," uses many quotations from and references to the Bible especially through the mouths of his characters in the *Canterbury Tales*. "Shakespeare most readily expresses his mind in Biblical phrases and allusions,"<sup>7</sup> says Carter, who purports to have read every line of the poet's works. Six large volumes, written by different authors on Shakespeare and his use of the Bible, convince us of the truth of this statement. Milton made a classical drama out of *Samson*, and his *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, besides having Biblical themes, are replete with allusions to Holy Scripture. Browning and Tennyson, two of our more familiar and popular poets, go to the Bible for much of their thought and their expression. Browning's poem, *Saul* is founded directly on the Bible, and his greatest work, *The Ring and the Book*, reveals even to the superficial reader, hundreds of Biblical references. Van Dyke, a student of Tennyson's works, says that they contain more than five hundred references to the Bible. Byron alludes very frequently to the Bible in his poems, while his twenty-three Hebrew Melodies are based on Bible stories. Many of these lyrics, such as *She Walks in Beauty* and the *Destruction of Sennacherib* are well-known to most readers. We see a similar familiarity with Biblical thought and phrase in the writings of Dryden, Keats, Burns and other great English poets.

Among prose writers, Ruskin admitted that he owed the best part of his taste for literature and essential part of his education to the Bible. The fruit of his training is seen in his singular ability to weave Biblical phraseology and thought into his writings. Scott, in one of his works, makes the statement that the more he read and studied the Scriptures the more he realized their inestimable value and their high place in English literature. His novels containing many references to the Sacred Book. Addison likewise shows considerable acquaintance with the Bible throughout his works, as do also Burke, Macaulay and a score of others.

It is interesting to note that the literary influence of the Bible is manifest not only in those English writers who have shown no hostility towards the Bible or revealed religion, but also in those who

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<sup>7</sup> *Shakespeare and the Scriptures*, p. 4.

have displayed little respect for either, e. g., Swinburne, and in our own day, George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells. For unbelievers may deny the authority and inspiration of the Bible but they cannot deny its supreme place as literature.

It might justly be said then, that so great has been the power of the Bible on English thought and style, that a familiarity with it is not only valuable, but absolutely necessary for the intelligent reading of English Literature.

So much for the Bible as literature. Our first motive in reading it should be to drink deeply of its sublime thought and heavenly doctrine. But we should not become unresponsive to and unappreciative of the rare beauties that meet our eyes on every page. A love and acquaintance with the literary forms of Biblical writing will awake within us a keener and better appreciation of the substance of Holy Writ itself.

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## *Life*

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*BRO. CAMILLUS BOYD, O. P.*

Like waves that beat the patient shore  
In frenzied madness, rush and roar,  
    The years of life roll on.  
No human hand can stay their sweep,  
Nor waiting, youthful hours keep  
    Until the end is come.  
But God Who rules the ocean's breast  
Will give to time and tide full rest  
    When Heaven's port is won.