

THE WORLD'S BEST SELLER

Today is the day of the best seller. Whenever it is a question of reading merely for entertainment that favorite of fictiondom seems to have first claim upon the public. So it must have occasioned somewhat of a surprise, and a little disappointment as well, when one of our prominent booksellers, who had for some time made it a custom to apportion the more prominent place in his show-window to the exploitation of the latest best seller, allowed that proud position to be usurped by a heftier, leather-bound tome whose gilded title read—"Holy Bible." Of course this does not imply that the clientele of the latest best seller does not reverence and revere the divinely inspired word of God. They do,—for the most part. But the fact remains that the reading public, if not so much in words at least by implication, does not consider the "Good Book" as "good reading."

Rare indeed is the family library, however modest its proportions, that cannot boast a copy of the Bible; nevertheless as a general rule, the only part of the household that can boast anything like a familiar acquaintance with the sacred book is the feather duster. People talk about the Bible, discuss its contents, quote from it, defend it, everything in fact, but read it! If one should wish to spend a pleasant hour or so among the pages of a friendly and entertaining book does he ever think of selecting the Bible? No, it is too dull and wearisome. The present day fiction reader wants a book full of life and action, a tale of adventure, high romance or alluring mystery. When the Bible is taken down from its quiet and unobtrusive place in the bookcase the prospective reader, so it is believed, must be in a religious mood, must prepare to be preached to; must be ever ready to feel a heavy dogmatic hand weighing upon his shoulder, and see the pedantic forefinger shaking in solemn warning before his face.

With the best seller, however, it is quite a different story. With what a marked contrast this book is approached! The mental attitude is completely different from that in which the Bible is approached. We settle down comfortably before we open the book, we feel a treat is in store for us. Our imagination is already active; we are ready to be thrilled; ready to laugh at the humor, sympathize with the misfortunes and rejoice in the final triumph of the men and women we shall meet be-

tween the covers of this best seller. They become for us living, breathing human beings. So much like ourselves in many ways, having the same aspirations and hopes, loves, hates and jealousies. And not until we close the book, perhaps, do we actually realize that it is only a story, the imaginings of a clever writer.

Here we have the reason why the best seller is read with avidity and, inferentially, we arrive at the reason why the Bible is not read,—the criminal fallacy that the Bible doesn't possess all the assets that go into the make-up of agreeable and entertaining reading. In point of fact, the Bible not only has all the assets of which the best seller can boast but, in practically every instance, it has them in a preeminent degree. The fault is not with the Bible but with the reader, who, even before opening that greatest of books, affects an unimaginative, unsympathetic and reluctant frame of mind which is diametrically opposed to anything like appreciation or enjoyment.

If we limit our consideration to the mere matter of sales there can be no shade of a doubt as to which book is, and ever has been, the world's best seller. Last year alone there were over 30,000,000 volumes of the Bible published. A figure which all the best sellers put together can but remotely approach. A best seller that is honored with translation into a foreign language is the rare exception; the Bible, on the other hand, has been translated into every known language many of which are now dead or obsolete. Literary men point with rapture to the fact that Dante has been translated into 140 tongues and Homer into one more; up to the present the Bible has been translated into 725 languages and dialects. We find it in tongues ranging "from Albanian, Arabic and Bulu to Yiddish, Zapotec and Zulu," besides being published into six systems of embossed type for the blind!

But not only its stupendous sales give the Bible, and the Bible alone, the title of "the world's best seller," but its subject matter as well entitles it to this exceptional and unique distinction. Taking it simply "as a noble and impassioned interpretation of nature and life uttered in language of power and simplicity, touched with the vivid color of human personality and embodies in forms of enduring literary art," the Bible is unexcelled by any other literary production in the whole range of the world's history.

Undoubtedly, the most neglected portion of the Bible is the Old Testament. It, especially, is rated as "dry-as-dust" reading. As a matter of fact, no other literary masterpiece presents such a broad human appeal with such universal significance. As a work revelatory of the grandeur and folly, the nobility and baseness of human nature, it surpasses the very best that profane literature has ever produced. Its short stories (and the Old Testament is full of them) have a fascination, an appeal and a reality to which the very best of our modern best sellers can not hold the proverbial candle. Every story in the Old Testament is told in an intensely interesting manner, in a most vivid and powerful style, with a simplicity and beauty of diction that has no peer. The narrow confines of geographical surroundings, the fact that characters are of a racial lineage different from ourselves are mere accidentals to the subject matter of the Bible. These Hebrews are not plaster saints; they were not unlike men and women today. They have the same emotions and passions that well up in every human breast. We find the same impulses of selfishness and self-sacrifice dwelt side by side in their hearts as they do in our own. If the setting were shifted from Jerusalem to Chicago the same events would take place.

The Bible is supreme in the art of characterization. Every emotion that has ever vibrated in the human heart has been chartered there. The characters of the people we meet in the Bible are not revealed to us so much in descriptive phrases but rather by their own words or characteristic deeds. How vividly the rage and anger of Moses is pictured when after seeing the chosen people adoring a golden calf and dancing before it the Bible tells us: "He threw the tables out of his hand, and broke them at the foot of the mount: And laying hold of the calf he burnt it, and beat it to powder, which he strowed into the water and gave thereof to the children of Israel to drink."¹ Again what a sublime expression of generosity and broad-mindedness we find in the character of Abraham when, after hearing of a strife that arose between his own herdsmen and those of Lot, he said to the latter: "Let there be no quarrel, I beseech thee, between me and thee, and between my herdsmen and thy herdsmen: for we are brethren. Behold the whole land is before thee: if thou wilt go to the left hand, I will take the right: if thou

¹ Exodus XXXII, 19-20.

choose the right hand, I will pass to the left."² We can see the cunning, the criminal craftiness and dastardly villainy of Cain and Saul: we feel the afflictions, trials and sorrows of Joseph and Job; we are thrilled by the nobility and patriotism of Esther and Judith. It is all a vivid throbbing reality, provided we put ourselves in sympathy with the book and allow our imagination to play its part.

Let us take for example the story of one of the great personalities we find in the Old Testament,—David. Here we have all the elements that go into the making of a best seller; courtship, adventure, friendship and romance; ambition, hate, love and intrigue. And they are all used with the most telling effect, making one of the most intense, and at the same time, one of the most interesting and entertaining portrayals of human life that has ever been recorded. When we have finished reading the eventful history of David we have been not merely interested and entertained but we have been convinced that happiness does not always go with wealth and affluence; that there is a feeling of emptiness and impotence that comes after even the mightiest achievements of this world, and that great weariness follows defeat; we realize that faith and faith alone can sustain a man in the great crises of life; and finally, we learn that love and truth will always triumph in the end. We have added to our moral stature when we have read this story thoughtfully, for we have acutely experienced those things which ought to be done or else left undone. We have become better acquainted with human nature and better acquainted with ourselves. We have filled our minds with good thoughts,—“thoughts that will sing to us when we are sad and dance in our memory when we are weary.” In brief, we have become better, happier and nobler men for having read thoughtfully and attentively from the pages of this great “Book of Books.”

The fact that David is the hero of the story, the father and head of a great and royal house from which our blessed Savior was descended was not used as an excuse for shielding his faults or palliating his offences. There is only One perfect character in the Bible, and He is divine. David is presented to us as he really was, as are all the characters in this sacred book. This is why they should be so interesting to us in contrast with some

²Genesis XIII, 8-9.

of those impossible creatures whom we meet in even the better class of best sellers.

The story of David, however, is just one of several of this type which we find in the Old Testament. The story of Joseph is just as interesting and fascinating. The Book of Ruth is unequalled in all literature for idyllic beauty of language. Esther remains one of the greatest heroines of all times.

Once it is established that the Old Testament is good reading matter there is no need of presenting the New Testament under this aspect, for the latter is the completion of the former. It is there that we find a solution and an explanation of all the problems of life. In the New Testament we find Him of whom the prophets spoke so often, the Messiah, the hope and the salvation of Israel. All the heroes that we met and admired in the Old Testament are but silken threads that fall into the weaving of a glorious tapestry that forms His image.

The Bible is one book that will never grow old. It will always be the "World's Best Seller" for it is at home everywhere. "It has learned to speak to the hearts of men through hundreds of different languages." The life of the best seller is, in reality, very short. It is no more than enthusiastically acclaimed when, after a brief day of popularity, another claimant of public favor treads upon its heels and forces it into oblivion on the shelves of some second-hand dealer. The Bible is one book that the second-hand dealer will find difficulty in supplying you with, for it seldom, if ever, comes into his possession. Reading a best seller for the second time, even though it be of the worth while type, produces a thrill somewhat akin to that which we experience when we listen to the same joke for the fourth or fifth time. On the other hand, we get more out of the Bible every time we read it. At the close of his life Lacordaire said to some of the children of Soreze, "I have been studying the Bible for thirty years and every day I find new light and new depth in it. Man's thoughts are soon fathomed and exhausted but God's Word is a boundless fountain. Every word seems to throw a light and a blessing upon my path."

We hear so much today of "practical values." The more practical benefit one can obtain from something the greater is its worth to him. Now the best seller can offer us little more than agreeable and entertaining reading, as even its most zealous devotees must admit. Nothing more is required of it. If a

novel teaches a timely lesson, if perchance, it makes one better and broader for having read it, all this is to its credit. Nevertheless, the public does not demand these qualities as necessary requisites. But the Bible aside from being above all else the inspired Word of God, our norm of conduct, our ethical and moral safeguard; besides offering us the highest pattern of virtue and the greatest incentive to its practice; and besides furnishing us with the most delightful reading considered from a merely human viewpoint, is at the same time of the greatest practical value in everyday life. Professor William Lyon Phelps of Yale says, "Everyone who has a thorough knowledge of the Bible may truly be called educated; and no other learning or culture, no matter how extensive or elegant, can, among Europeans or Americans, form a proper substitute. Western civilization is founded upon the Bible; our ideas, our wisdom, our philosophy, our literature, our art, our ideals come more from the Bible than from all the other books put together. I thoroughly believe in a university education for both men and women; but I believe a knowledge of the Bible without a college course is more valuable than a college course without the Bible. . . . You can learn more about human nature by reading the Bible than by living in New York." In a recent essay on Journalism Charles A. Dana urges that every writer who hopes to achieve success in his chosen profession should make the Bible his "vade mecum"; and he adds, "I am considering the Bible not as a religious book, but as a manual of utility, of professional preparation or professional use for the Journalist." When a statesman like Albert J. Beveridge speaks upon the subject of law he deserves a hearing; in this regard he says, "I have advised every law student who has ever consulted me to study the law of Moses before he begins his Blackstone, and to keep on studying the law of Moses after he has completed his law course. And then keep on studying the law of Moses all during his practice. These ordinances of the eminent Hebrews are not a bit heavy and musty as are most law books. They are bright, keen, condensed and to the point." It was also Beveridge who remarked, "The Bible is the most quotable book in all literature. You may take Shakespeare and Dante together, take Milton and Horace, put in the Koran and Confucius, and then boil them all down, and the quotable things in all of them put together are

but a fraction of the sayings in the Bible that fasten themselves in your mind."

Perhaps while speaking of utility it would not be entirely amiss to recall to our Catholic readers the fact that an indulgence of three hundred days is granted to all the faithful who read the Holy Gospels at least a quarter of an hour; and a plenary indulgence, under the usual conditions, is granted once a month for the daily reading.

The farther we carry our comparison of the "Book of Books" with the best seller of today or, in fact, with any other book in the world, the less ground we seem to have for doing so. The Bible so far excels and is so unique among all the world's literary productions that we must class it by itself, hailing it "the world's best book," and "the world's best seller."

—Bro. Gerald Corbett, O. P.

