

THE BIBLE—A SYNTHESIS OF LIFE

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IF it be true that the Catholic people of today are really trying to better themselves by being well versed in spiritual matters, it is especially hard to understand why the Bible has been almost relegated to the realm of forgotten books. Though they might search all the books of all our libraries, in none will they find the harmonious vista of life so well portrayed as in the Holy Bible. The authors of this volume, under the directing hand of God, have plumbed the very depths of man's soul and envisaged his inmost thoughts and aspirations. Saints and sinners march side by side through its pages, and as the reader contemplates the scenes, a little better understanding and appreciation of God's dealings with His master-piece of creation begins to form itself in his mind. With the Biblical portrayal of man before one's eyes, life takes on a vaster meaning. At last, if never before, the whole panorama of life unfolds in one scene as if one stood for a moment in the Eternal Now looking over creation.

I

The first time anyone reads the Bible, the vastness of its subject matter is sure to impress itself upon his mind. It contains everything that ever has been of interest to man. One is apt to wonder at this and try to reason out how an ancient people, whose record is the Bible, could have known so much that is ordinarily considered as modern. But were they to come back to life now, they would wonder that man has changed so little since their time. There is scarcely a single aspect of man's life today that was not extant and dealt with in their day.

During the past few years, the constant harping on the wonders of science might lead some easily to imagine that Science is entirely new. Just how false this idea is one can gather from the most cursory reading of Sacred Scripture. Undoubtedly the manifold branches of science which have developed during the last few centu-

ries were unknown to the ancients; but this does not mean that they did not have a keen appreciation and knowledge of the science of their day, general though it was. In the Bible, the reader will find many delightful side lights on such subjects as philosophy, history, law, literature, astrology, etc. A proper understanding of the science of the Bible must be grasped, however, for in the past, many difficulties have arisen from an unscientific examination of this aspect of the Sacred Scriptures.

II

In almost every book of the Bible enlightening touches of history appear. A considerable number of its books are given almost exclusively to this subject. Many important events of the history of the ancients, which through their neglect in keeping records would otherwise have been lost to us, are preserved in the Scriptures. In its very first pages there is found a story of man's origin that evolutionists have unsuccessfully attempted to disprove. It was extremely difficult for a long time, to synchronize the Biblical account of man's origin with the various theories of evolution. However the Church, as the official interpreter of the Bible, has permitted such reasonable latitude in interpreting the Mosaic account, that the seeming incompatibility of the theories has now been reconciled. So long as the Catholic historian or scientist hold that the soul of man is created immediately by God, he is permitted to follow some of the less radical theories regarding the evolution of the body. This apparent contradiction of theories should not cause one to estimate Bible History as unreliable, for on the contrary, modern research has repeatedly confirmed as true many statements which scientists have hurriedly rejected as false. But of the many vicissitudes of the Jewish race—how they were first chosen by God and separated to themselves in the person of Abraham; enslaved by the Egyptians; emancipated under Moses; ruled by the mighty Judges and Kings; led off to captivity by the Babylonians and after seventy years restored to their own country; or how after a bitter struggle for liberty they were finally brought into servitude by the mighty Caesars; we leave to the reader to peruse as his interest and leisure prompt.

III

To psychologists and anyone interested in character study, the Bible will be a veritable treasure chest. Every type of man ever to inhabit the globe, from the noblest to the basest, will be met there.

Of necessity when dealing with so ancient a race of people as the Jews, whose history covers such a period of time, mention of many important personages must be omitted. For the moment then, examine a particular group of this privileged people. We refer to those solitary, warning, pleading and appealing figures, the prophets. Extraordinary men were these. They were raised up by God to lead and help His chosen people. What dazzling splendor is manifested in their lives as we behold them now lifted up to the heavens in transports of joy or now cast down to the very mouth of hell in anguish and sorrow. How pathetic do they appear standing in the gates of Jerusalem pleading with kings, princes and priests to change their evil ways; or again exhorting the people to leave idolatry and return to God. Where will such heroism be found as theirs, when under the protecting hand of Jehovah, they go forth leading a mere handful of men to rout a vast army! Among the individuals of paramount importance, Abraham their Father is unquestionably foremost. The names of such men as Isaac, Jacob and Moses, the law-giver, next catch our attention. King David, from whom sprang Christ and Solomon are so familiar to all as to be household words. Then there is Judas Machabeus, a military genius far superior to such leaders as Washington and Napoleon. Nor were great women lacking. St. Joan of Arc had her prototype in Judith. St. Elizabeth of Hungary compares not unfavorably with Queen Esther who was noted for her wisdom and beauty throughout the great kingdoms of the Medes and Persians. These are but a few of the greater names of Jewish history but they give a glimpse of what might be expected from a careful study of the Bible. Surely there will be discovered many a traitorous and villainous character, the counterparts of Absalom and Judas who are part of the heritage of all nations. Were no mention made of life's darker side, it would be a potent argument against the true historicity of the Bible. These things are mentioned for a very good reason, for from them we should learn how not to act.

IV

If it be true that simplicity is one of the salient characteristics of good literature, then Holy Writ is a model par excellence. Its beauty has been readily admitted and appreciated, yes and copied too, by the masters of literature. Yet, their best compositions fall far below the quality of many parts of this book. Where for example is

the beauty of style, sublimity of thought or the simplicity of diction to be found among the great masters that can equal that of the Canticles and Psalms or the majestic discourses of Christ? Who would compare the orations of Cicero with the Sermon on the Mount; or who would credit Shakespeare with the conception of such a drama as that of Calvary? Or where perchance is the poet who can rightfully compete with the Royal Psalmist? Painters and sculptors have stood in spirit in the scenes of Sacred Scripture, seeking inspiration for a new creation. The master-pieces of these arts are products of the imaginations and souls of men filled to overflowing from meditation on the spiritual beauty of the Bible, for instance, Michael Angelo's "Last Judgment," or his statue of Moses, Da Vinci's "Last Supper" and Raphael's "Madonna."

V

From the earliest records of man it is clear that he has always been supremely desirous of a satisfactory answer to three vital questions: the what, the whence and the whither of himself. Among the ancient nations of Egypt, India and especially Greece considerable time and thought were given to a solution of these major queries. However, appraising their answers from a Christian point of view, as a rule, what truth they discovered was accompanied by many and diverse errors. Nevertheless these people are of great interest both because they attempted an answer to these questions and because they laid the substratum for the philosophical systems of Plato and Aristotle than whom no greater pre-Christian philosophers lived. Indeed Christianity owes an inestimable debt of gratitude to Aristotle, for upon his system St. Thomas built the now ecclesiastically approved Scholastic System. It has been rightly said however, that Thomas had first to baptize or christianize Aristotle. Though the Stagirite's doctrine approached nearer to the Catholic response to these important questions than that of any other pagan philosopher, yet not until it had been washed in the living springs of Sacred Scripture and Tradition could it be used to convey the true answer given by God. From this it is correct to infer that the Sacred writers gave a better and more satisfactory solution than did the purely rationalistic philosophers. Nor is this difficult to understand; for the latter had reason alone to direct their solutions whereas the sacred writers had the guidance of the Omniscient God, Who is the Whence and Whither of human life and consequently best knows the What of it.

VI

Sacred Scripture, however, finds its broadest and most useful field in Theology. This queen of the sciences, to which philosophy is a handmaid, has for its foundation divinely revealed truths. There are two sources or founts of this Revelation; Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Each is equally important and neither must be so evaluated as to depreciate the other. By making this very mistake the stage was partly set for the open break from the Church of the misnamed Reformers in the Sixteenth Century, as well as their subsequent divisions into innumerable sects. But of these two founts of Revelation, the Bible is the more accessible to the average man and we think it safe to say the more understandable. That it will be of great value then, to anyone interested in the truths of the Catholic Church to read Scripture need scarcely be said. In Holy Writ God has been generous with His revelations, manifesting to the frail intellects of men such sublime mysteries as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist and the Resurrection of His Blessed Son. Again He has divulged through the pages of the Bible such important facts as the creation of man, his fall from grace, his redemption, his judgment, his final end and the resurrection of his body on the last day. Every dogma of the Church has its foundation either explicitly or at least implicitly in Sacred Scripture. Many of these as well as innumerable moral doctrines are there laid down in clear and precise terms and are dealt with at times in detail. The fact is that Theology, in the beginning, seems to have been nothing more than an explanation of the Bible.

It is not a matter of surprise then that the great minds of the Church have always esteemed this Volume above all written works. They found there wisdom and truth such as none of the pagan authors could give. Masters of such calibre as Cyprian, Irenaeus, Jerome, Augustine and Ambrose stood constantly by this font, drawing from it the inspiration for their stirring treatises, epistles and letters. Their works, because they are replete with the wisdom of Scripture, have become precious monuments to Christian culture. Gregory the Great and his contemporaries continued the work of their predecessors. In the eleventh Century Peter Lombard wrote his famous "Sentences" which in no small degree was based on Holy Writ. Thomas of Aquin quotes Scripture to strengthen and clarify the doctrine of nearly every one of the three thousand one hundred twenty-five articles of his *Summa*. This is to mention but a few, yet in a sense the more noteworthy of the Church's brilliant minds, who by

their use of the Bible have given testimony of its value. The truth is that the Church in every Century from her inception, has had enlisted in her cause Theologians, Apologists, Doctors and Fathers of universal fame and all of these without exception have used the Bible as a most powerful weapon against her antagonists. Perhaps no more pertinent example of this could be offered than the early Popes who, when dealing with those perplexing heretical disputes, turned first to prayer and then to Holy Writ for their solutions.

VII

Likewise the Bible has played a prominent part in the moulding of the lives of many Saints. Men and women moved by the commandments and counsels of the Gospels have fled from the ways of vice to pass along the perhaps more difficult yet safer way leading to perfection. In the early years of Christianity many such disciples of Christ cut themselves off from all worldly enjoyments and pagentry for the solitude of the deserts and mountains. There these sturdy anchorites and hermits gave their lives to uninterrupted prayer and mortification. An example better known to all, however, is that of St. Augustine. When this genius of Tagaste was wavering between the lusts of the Flesh and the sweet delights of the Spirit, a chance reading of a passage from St. Paul launched him safely on the road to perfection. Of more recent date is St. Theresa, the Little Flower, who says many times in her *Autobiography*, that passages from Sacred Scripture often read at random, had a powerful influence in directing her life.

Up to now the real and fundamental reason for the reading of Sacred Scripture has been only intimated. The reasons given seem sufficiently strong to prompt anyone to peruse this beautiful work. For any book that covers human life and its host of intricate and interesting problems, as does the Bible, is certainly deserving of consideration. So too any book that will throw an enlightening spark of truth on the relations of the Creator to the creature, the Redeemer to the redeemed and the Master to the servant is well worth anyone's attention. Yet underlying these, there is another reason far more vital and important. The Holy Bible has the Infinite Truth for its Author. In brief it is the word of God Himself. The Council of the Vatican has the following on this point:

"The entire books of the Old and new Testament, with all their parts, as they are enumerated in the decree of the Council of Trent, and as they are contained in the Ancient Vulgate Latin edition, are to be received as sacred and canonical. Moreover the Church holds them as sacred and canonical, not

because they are composed by merely human effort, and afterwards approved by her own authority: nor for this reason alone, that they contain revelation without error: but because written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for Author."¹

This has always been the teaching of the Church even from her earliest days. St. Paul emphasized this point in his Epistle to Timothy: "all Scripture, inspired of God," he said, "is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice, that the man of God may be perfect, furnished in every good work."²

If then the Bible is such an exemplary book, it would appear superfluous to urge the educated to read it. If it contains truths so sublime that they have filled the greatest minds of the ages with wonderment, and at the same time, truths so simple and beautiful that even children have been captivated by them, what shall be said if the Bible is disregarded by the present generation. If valuable data on science and the arts are interwoven through its pages, is it not strange if it be unknown? Or if Catholics should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in them and this reason can be obtained by a perusal of the Bible, how shall we explain the fact of their neglect? The sad truth is, nevertheless, that Sacred Scripture is not read or known as well as it should be among Catholics. Today as never before they are expected to be leaders in the world; they are expected to defend and explain their religion to all. How can they fulfill these obligations if they neglect one of the greatest means? During this present revival of evangelization and convert-making, when the privilege of preaching the word of life in the open-air forums has been extended to the laity, surely it should not neglect such a font of wisdom as God's inspired work. Indeed a large percentage of the objections offered against the faith by those not in the one true Fold arise from misconstrued texts of the Bible. Catholics must be prepared to answer these difficulties and certainly one of the best means for this preparation is to be conversant with their source; using, however, an authoritative and annotated edition. Pope Leo XIII wisely advised this in his Encyclical *Providentissimus*. Perhaps no more fitting words could be found to close than his words: "We wish and desire that a greater number should undertake in a becoming manner the cause of the Divine Writings, and attach themselves thereto with constancy: and above all, that those whom the grace of God has called to Holy Orders should daily apply themselves more strictly and zealously (as is most just) to read, meditate, and explain them."

¹ Sess. iii, c. ii, de Revel.

² II Tim. iii, 16, 17.