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## The Bible in Tennyson.<sup>1</sup>

BY THE REV. HENRY J. VAN DYKE, D.D.

It is safe to say that there is no other book which has had so great an influence upon the literature of the world as the Bible. And it is almost as safe—at least with no greater danger than that of starting an instructive discussion—to say that there is no other literature which has felt this influence so deeply or shown it so clearly as the English.

The cause of this latter fact is not far to seek. It may be, as a discontented French critic suggests, that it is partly due to the inborn and incorrigible tendency of the Anglo-Saxon mind to drag religion and morality into everything. But certainly this tendency would never have taken such a distinctly biblical form had it not been for the beauty and vigour of our common English version of the Scriptures. These qualities were felt by the people even before they were praised by the critics. Apart from all religious prepossessions, men and women and children were fascinated by the native power and grace of the book. The English Bible was popular, in the broadest sense, long before it was recognised as one of our noblest classics. It has coloured the talk of the household and the street, as well as moulded the language of scholars. It has been something more than “a well of English undefiled;” it has become a part of the spiritual atmosphere. We hear the echoes of its speech everywhere; and the music of its familiar phrases haunts all the fields and groves of our fine literature.

It is not only to the theologians and the sermon makers that we look for biblical allusions and quotations. We often find the very best and most vivid of them in writers professedly secular. Poets like Shakspeare, Milton, and Wordsworth; novelists like Scott, and romancers like Hawthorne; essayists like Bacon, Steele, and Addison; critics of life, unsystematic philosophers like Carlyle and Ruskin—all draw upon the Bible as a treasury of illustrations, and use it as a book equally familiar to themselves and to their readers. It is impossible to put too high a value upon such a universal

volume, even as a purely literary possession. It forms a bond of sympathy between the most cultivated and the simplest of the people. The same book lies upon the desk of the scholar and in the cupboard of the peasant. If you touch upon one of its narratives, everyone knows what you mean. If you allude to one of its characters or scenes, your reader's memory supplies an instant picture to illuminate your point. And so long as its words are studied by little children at their mother's knees, and recognised by high critics as the model of pure English, we may be sure that neither the jargon of science nor the slang of ignorance will be able to create a shibboleth to divide the people of our common race. There will be a medium of communication in the language and imagery of the English Bible.

This much, by way of introduction, I have felt it necessary to say, in order to mark the spirit and purpose of this essay. For the poet whose works we are to study is at once one of the most scholarly and one of the most widely popular of English writers. At least one cause of his popularity is that there is so much of the Bible in Tennyson. How much, few even of his most ardent lovers begin to understand.

I do not know that the attempt has ever been made before to collect and collate all the scriptural allusions and quotations in his works, and to trace the golden threads which he has woven from that source into the woof of his poetry. The delight of “fresh woods and pastures new”—so rare in this over-explored age—has thus been mine. But I do not mean to let this delight misguide me into the error of trying to crowd all my gathered treasures into a single article. There are nearly three hundred direct references to the Bible in the poems of Tennyson; and simply to give a list of them might tax the patience of the gentlest magazine reader so heavily that it would vanish clean out of existence. It will be more prudent merely to offer, first, a few examples of scriptural quotation, and then a few specimens of scriptural illustration, and then to trace a few of the lines of

<sup>1</sup> *The Century*, August, 1889.

thought and feeling in which Tennyson shows most clearly the influence of the Bible.

## I.

On the table at which I am writing lies the first publication which bears the name of Alfred Tennyson—a thin pamphlet in faded grey paper containing the “Prolusiones Academicæ,” recited at the University of Cambridge in 1829. Among them is one with the title “Timbuctoo: A poem which obtained the Chancellor’s Medal, &c. By A. Tennyson, of Trinity College.”

On the eleventh page, in a passage describing the spirit of poetry which fills the branches of the “great vine of Fable,” we find these lines:

“There is no mightier Spirit than I to sway  
The heart of man; and teach him to attain  
By shadowing forth the Unattainable;  
And step by step to scale that mighty stair  
Whose landing-place is wrapt about with clouds  
Of glory of heaven.”

And at the bottom of the page stands this footnote: “Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

This is the earliest biblical allusion which we can identify in the writings of Tennyson. Even the most superficial glance will detect its beauty and power. There are few who have not felt the lofty attractions of the teachings of Christ, in which the ideal of holiness shines so far above our reach, while we are continually impelled to climb towards it. Especially these very words about perfection, which He spoke in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. v. 48), have often lifted us upward just because they point our aspirations to a goal so high that it seems inaccessible. The young poet who sets a jewel like this in his earliest work, shows not only that he has understood the moral sublimity of the doctrine of Christ, but also that he has rightly conceived the mission of noble poetry—to idealise and elevate human life. Once and again in his later writings we see the same picture of the soul rising step by step—

“To higher things,  
And catch a glimpse of those vast altar-stairs  
That slope through darkness up to God.”

In the poem entitled “Isabel”—one of the best in the slender volume of 1830—there is a line which reminds us that Tennyson must have known his New Testament in the original language. He

says that all the fairest forms of nature are types of the noble woman whom he is describing—

“And thou of God in thy great charity.”

No one who was not familiar with the Greek of St. Paul and St. John would have been bold enough to speak of the “charity of God.” It is a phrase which throws a golden light upon the thirteenth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians, and brings the human love into harmony and unison with the divine.

“The May Queen” is a poem which has sung itself into the hearts of the people everywhere. The tenderness of its sentiment and the exquisite cadence of its music have made it beloved in spite of its many faults. Yet I suppose that the majority of readers have read it again and again without recognising that one of its most melodious verses is a nearly direct quotation from the third chapter of Job:

“And the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.”

This is one of the instances—by no means rare—in which the translators of our English Bible have fallen unconsciously into the rhythm of the most perfect poetry; and it is perhaps the best illustration of Tennyson’s felicitous use of the words of the Scriptures.

But there are others, hardly less perfect, in the wonderful sermon which the rector in “Aylmer’s Field” delivers after the death of Edith and Leolin. It is a mosaic of Bible language, most curiously wrought, and fused into one living whole by the heart of an intense sorrow. How like a heavy, dull refrain of prophetic grief and indignation recurs that dreadful text—

“Your house is left unto you desolate!”

The solemn associations of the words lend the force of a superhuman and unimpassioned wrath to the preacher’s language, and the passage stands as a monumental denunciation of—

“The social wants that sin against the strength of youth.”

Enoch Arden’s parting words to his wife contain some beautiful fragments of Scripture embedded in the verse:

“Cast all your cares on God; that anchor holds.”<sup>1</sup>  
Is He not yonder in those uttermost  
Parts of the morning? If I flee to these?<sup>2</sup>  
Can I go from Him? and the sea is His,  
The sea is His: He made it.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter v. 7; Hebrews vi. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm cxxxix. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm xcvi. 5.

The "Idylls of the King" are full of delicate and suggestive allusions to the Bible. Take, for instance, the lines from "The Holy Grail:"

"For when the Lord of all things made Himself  
Naked of glory for His mortal change."

Here is a commentary, most illuminative, on the sixth and seventh verses of the second chapter of Philippians. Or again, in the same Idyll, where the hermit says to Sir Percivale, after his unsuccessful quest,

"Thou hast not lost thyself to save thyself,"

we are reminded of the words of Christ telling us the secret of all victory in spiritual things: "He that loseth his life . . . shall find it."

In "The Coming of Arthur," while the trumpet blows and the city seems on fire with sunlight dazzling on cloth of gold, the long procession of knights passes before the king, singing its great song of allegiance. The Idyll is full of warrior's pride and delight of battle, clanging battle-axe and flashing brand—a true song for the heavy fighters of the days of chivalry. But it has also a higher touch, a strain of spiritual grandeur, which, although it may have no justification in a historical picture of the Round Table, yet serves to lift these knights of the poet's imagination into an ideal realm and set them marching as ghostly heroes of faith and loyalty through all ages.

"The king will follow Christ, and we the king."

Compare this line with the words of St. Paul: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." They teach us that the lasting devotion of men is rendered, not to the human, but to the divine, in their heroes. He who would lead others must first learn to follow One who is higher than himself. Without faith it is not only impossible to please God, but also impossible to rule men. King Arthur is the ideal of one who has heard a secret word of promise and seen a vision of more than earthly glory, by virtue of which he becomes the leader and master of his knights, able to inspire their hopes and unite their aspirations and bind their service to himself.

And now turn to one of the last poems which Tennyson has given us—"Locksley Hall Sixty Years After." Sad enough is its lament for broken dreams, dark with the gloom of declining years, when the grasshopper has become a burden and desire has failed, and the weary heart has grown

afraid of that which is high: but at the close the old man rises again to the sacred strain:

"Follow you the Star that lights a desert pathway, yours or  
mine—

Forward, till you see the highest Human Nature is divine.

"Follow Light, and do the Right—for man can half-control  
his doom—

Till you find the deathless Angel seated in the vacant  
tomb."

## II.

When we come to speak of the biblical scenes and characters to which Tennyson refers, we find so many that the difficulty is to choose. He has recognised the fact that an allusion wins half its power from its connection with the reader's memory and previous thought. In order to be forcible and effective, it must be at least so familiar as to awaken a train of associations. An allusion to something which is entirely strange and unknown may make an author appear more learned, but it does not make him seem more delightful. Curiosity may be a good atmosphere for the man of science to speak in, but the poet requires a sympathetic medium. He should endeavour to touch the first notes of well-known airs, and then memory will supply the accompaniment to enrich his music. This is what Tennyson has done, with the instinct of genius, in his references to the stories and personages of the Bible.

His favourite allusion is to Eden and the mystical story of Adam and Eve. This occurs again and again, in "The Day Dream," "Maud," "In Memoriam," "The Gardener's Daughter," "The Princess," "Milton," "Geraint and Enid," and "Lady Clara Vere de Vere." The last instance is perhaps the most interesting, on account of a double change which has been made in the form of the allusion. In the edition of 1832, the first in which the poem appeared, the self-assertive peasant, who refuses to become a lover, says to the lady of high degree:

"Trust me, Clara Vere de Vere,  
From yon blue heavens above us bent  
The gardener Adam and his wife  
Smile at the claims of long descent."

In later editions this was altered to "The grand old gardener and his wife." But in this form the reference was open to misunderstanding. I remember a charming young woman who once told me that she had always thought the lines referred to some particularly pious old man who had for-

merly taken care of Lady Clara's flower-beds, and who now smiled from heaven at the foolish pride of his mistress. So perhaps it is just as well that Tennyson restored the line, in 1873, to its original form, and gave us "the gardener Adam" again, to remind us of the quaint distich :

"When Adam dolve and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?"

The story of Jephthah's daughter is another of the Old Testament narratives for which the poet seems to have a predilection. It is told with great beauty and freedom in "A Dream of Fair Women;" "Aylmer's Field" touches upon it; and it recurs again in "The Flight."

In "The Princess" we find the Queen of Sheba, Vashti, Miriam, Jael, Lot's wife, Jonah's gourd, and the tower of Babel. And, if your copy of the Bible has the Apocrypha in it, you may add the story of Judith and Holofernes.

Esther appears in "Geraint and Enid," and Rahab in "Queen Mary." In "Godiva" we read of the Earl's heart—

"As rough as Esau's hand;"

and in "Locksley Hall" we see the picture of the earth standing—

"At gaze like Joshua's moon in Ajalon."

The sonnet to "Bonaparte" recalls to our memory

"Those whom Gideon schooled with briers."

In "The Palace of Art" we behold the hand-writing on the wall at Belshazzar's Feast.

It would be impossible even to enumerate Tennyson's allusions to the life of Christ, from the visit of the Magi, which appears in "Morte d'Arthur" and "The Holy Grail," down to the lines in "Balin and Balan" which tell of—

"That same spear  
Wherewith the Roman pierced the side of Christ."

But to my mind the most beautiful of all the references to the New Testament is the passage in "In Memoriam," which describes the reunion of Mary and Lazarus after his return from the grave. With what a human interest does the poet clothe the familiar story! How reverently, and yet with what natural and simple pathos, does he touch upon the more intimate relations of the three persons who are the chief actors. The question which has come a thousand times to everyone who has lost a dear friend,—the question whether love survives in the other world, whether those who

have gone before miss those who are left behind and have any knowledge of their grief,—this is the suggestion which brings the story home to us, and makes it seem real and living.

"When Lazarus left his charnel cave,  
And home to Mary's house returned,  
Was this demanded—if he yearned  
To hear her weeping by his grave?"

"Where wert thou, brother, those four days?"  
There lives no record of reply,  
Which telling what it is to die  
Had surely added praise to praise.

"From every house the neighbours met,  
The streets were filled with joyful sound,  
A solemn gladness even crowned  
The purple brows of Olivet.

"Behold a man raised up by Christ!  
The rest remaineth unrevealed:  
He told it not: or something sealed  
The lips of that Evangelist."

Then follows that marvellous description of Mary—a passage which has always seemed to me to prove the superiority of poetry, as an art, over painting and sculpture. For surely neither marble nor canvas has ever contained such a beautiful figure of devotion as that which breathes in these verses:

"Her eyes are homes of silent prayer,  
Nor other thought her mind admits,  
But, he was dead, and there he sits,  
And He that brought him back is there.

"Then one deep love doth supersede  
All other, when her ardent gaze  
Roves from the living brother's face,  
And rests upon the Life indeed.

"All subtle thought, all curious fears,  
Borne down by gladness so complete,  
She bows, she bathes the Saviour's feet  
With costly spikenard and with tears.

"Thrice blest whose lives are faithful prayers,  
Whose loves in higher love endure;  
What souls possess themselves so pure,  
Or is there blessedness like theirs?"

It does not seem possible that the changing fashions of poetic art should ever make verses like these seem less exquisite, or that time should ever outwear the sweet and simple power of this conception of religion. There is no passage in literature which expresses more grandly the mystery of death, or shows more attractively the happiness of an unquestioning personal faith in Him, who, alone of men, has solved it and knows the answer.

I cannot bear to add anything to it by way of comment, except, perhaps, these words of Emerson: "Of immortality the soul, when well employed, is incurious. It is so well, that it is sure it will be well. It asks no questions of the Supreme Being."

The poem of "Rizpah," which was first published in the volume of "Ballads," in 1880, is an illustration of dramatic paraphrase from the Bible (2 Sam. xxi. 8-10). The story of the Hebrew mother watching beside the dead bodies of her sons whom the Gibeonites had hanged upon the hill, and defending them night and day for six months from the wild beasts and birds of prey, is transformed into the story of an English mother, whose son has been executed for robbery and hung in chains upon the gibbet. She is driven wild by her grief; hears her boy's voice wailing through the wind, "O mother, come out to me;" creeps through the rain and the darkness to the place where the chains are creaking and groaning with their burden; gropes and gathers all that is left of what was once her child, and carries him home to bury him beside the churchyard wall. And then for her theft she breaks out in a passion of defence. It is a mother's love justifying itself against a cruel law. Those poor fragments which the wind and the rain had spared were hers by a right divine—bone of her bone; she had nursed and cradled her baby, and all that was left belonged to her: justice had no claim which could stand against hers.

"Theirs? Oh, no! they are mine—not theirs—they had moved in my side."

A famous writer has said of this passage: "Nothing more piteous, more passionate, more adorable for intensity of beauty, was ever before this wrought by human cunning into the likeness of such words as words are powerless to praise."

## The Welfare of Youth.

MONTHLY EXAMINATION PAPERS.

AN Examination Paper will be set monthly on the Life of David. The book recommended for use is *The Life of David*, by the Rev. P. Thompson, published by T. & T. Clark, price 6d. The name, age, and address of the Candidate must accompany the answers every month. Prizes will be given to successful Candidates.

## EXAMINATION PAPER, I.

(Answers must be received by the 15th October.)

1. Relate briefly what is told of the life of David up to his victory over Goliath.
2. Describe the meeting with Goliath, especially in the light of the text, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"
3. In what connection do the following persons and places appear in the early life of David: Merab, Ephratah, Ekron, Eliab, Abner, Ramah?

## Pinches of Salt.

FROM THE REV. C. H. SPURGEON'S "SALT-CELLARS."

**A hungry man is an angry man.**

Never collect subscriptions before dinner, for you will get nothing.

**A little pot is soon hot.**

Small minds are quickly in a passion. A good woman, troubled by a quick temper, was helped to overcome the evil by reading this proverb in *John Ploughman's Almanac*. She said that it was like a text of Scripture to her, for often she heard in her ears the words: "Little pot, soon hot;" and she grew ashamed of her irritability, and conquered it.

**All praise and no pudding starved the parson.**

Many are in this danger. No, not quite: they do not get "all praise," they get enough fault-finding to keep them from being clogged with the honey of admiration.

**Feel for others—in your pocket.**

Practical pecuniary sympathy is more useful than mere talk. "I feel for the poor man," said one. "Friend, how much dost thou feel?" said the Quaker. "Dost thou feel five shillings for him? If so, I will put my feelings and shillings along with thine."

**Evil for good is devil-like.**

**Evil for evil is beast-like.**

**Good for good is man-like.**

**Good for evil is God-like.**

There is much sense in these four lines. I well remember learning them as a child, and I know the good effect which they had upon my moral judgment. Let your son and heir get them by heart.

**Everybody's work is nobody's work.**

A horse would starve if it had twenty grooms to feed it; for each groom would leave it to the rest. The people who projected the tower of Babel said, "Let us build;" but as they were all builders, the works have not yet been completed. Noah built the ark, for he was one man; but all the men in the world, when formed into a committee, could not finish a tower.

**Judge not a woman by her dress, nor a book by its binding.**

The best books are generally bound very soberly; while novels, and such like trash, are in flashy-coloured wrappers. As for the grand old Puritans, "They wander in sheepskins and goats' skins;" yet we say of them, "Of whom the world was not worthy."