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## THE ENGLISH BIBLE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE.

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For more than three hundred years the style and diction of our poets and prose writers have been influenced directly or indirectly by the English Bible. Long before the appearance of the Authorized Version in 1611, the influence of the earlier translations on English literature had been considerable: as far back, indeed, as the Anglo-Saxon period the prose and poetry were colored by biblical diction through contemporary versions of parts of the Old and New Testaments; from the Wyclif version near the close of the fourteenth century, on through the versions of Tyndale and his successors in the sixteenth century the influence is of course much more marked. The culmination of these attempts to produce a standard English Bible was the so-called King James, or Authorized Version, which has contributed more than any other one book to the making of English prose. This version, as is well known, owes something to each of its predecessors, but far more to Tyndale's than any other. Tyndale's consecration to his task and his final martyrdom, his ambition to "cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures" than theologians themselves, his fidelity and humility, gave his translation such worth and such sacredness that it became a model for all subsequent versions in English. To these sixteenth century versions, Elizabethan literature is deeply indebted; of these, we must remember, Shakespeare made use; but so closely does the King James Version resemble them, that when we speak of "the Bible in Shakespeare" we unconsciously imply that he made use of the Bible in 1611. It is well, then, at the beginning of this discussion on the influence of the Authorized Version in English literature to be reminded that in its essentials the standard English Bible for the last

three hundred years is the same as that of Tyndale and succeeding revisers.

The Authorized Version, the crowning achievement of almost a century of efforts to give the people a national Book, came very close to the minds and hearts of the masses; it was learned by heart; maxims for the conduct of life were taken from it; it was devoutly read and quoted as the final authority on matters of faith and practice; it became indissolubly associated with the most sacred institutions of life, and thus in time it grew into a nucleating center of blessed memories and traditions. In it the nation saw reflected the aspirations of great English leaders as well as those of the humblest individual towards right living and purity of heart; from it they gained strength for daily conflicts and in it they found comfort for the sorrows of life; generations were brought up on it, knowing the language and the imagery of the Bible as one comes to know an intimate friend by constantly reading his features and hearing his familiar tones. Huxley has paid tribute to the English Bible as a national book in these memorable words:

“Consider the great historical fact that, for three centuries, this book has been woven into the life of all that is best and noblest in English history; that it has become the national epic of Britain, and is as familiar to noble and simple, from John-o'-Groat's House to Land's End, as Dante and Tasso once were to the Italians; that it is written in the noblest and purest English, and abounds in exquisite beauties of pure literary form; and finally it forbids the veriest hind who never left his village to be ignorant of the existence of other countries and other civilizations, and of a great past stretching back to the furthest limits of the oldest civilizations of the world.”

Aside from its religious value, the Authorized Version has therefore come to be one of the supreme classics of literature; and before considering specifically its influence on English literature, including American, we will name several literary characteristics of the English Bible through which it has made

an appeal so compelling to our writers of prose and poetry. "Literature", says Lord Morley, "consists of all the books—and they are not so many—where moral truth and human passion are touched with a certain largeness, sanity and attraction of form". Let us add to this inclusive definition of literature this assertion as a criterion: *Any book is literature which makes a lasting appeal to the emotions.* Such a book would belong to what DeQuincey calls the "literature of power" as opposed to the "literature of knowledge" which is essentially scientific. Considered as literature, the Bible belongs primarily to "the literature of power", appealing as it does to the emotions, the imagination, and the will, more directly than to the mere intellect.

At least four qualities in the English Bible make this literary appeal. First of all, the Bible is a book of strong, simple, concrete words, which convey to the reader a sense of reality and absolute sincerity. Fully ninety-three per cent of these words are of Anglo-Saxon origin and come very close to the primal emotions. Such words wear well; we have been brought up on them in the daily concerns of life, and when we meet them in a book they stand for things and not for abstractions; they are heart-words, if you choose, rather than head-words. Passages in our literature made up of these simple and vivid words we commit to memory and sacredly treasure among our mental possessions—lines from Shakespeare, proverbs from Bacon's *Essays*, lines from Burns, stanzas from our great hymns. The supreme masters of literature prefer the strong, concrete word. In the second place, the Bible is a book of pictures. The truth is presented through parable, allegory, symbol. Consider, for instance, how the medieval painter seized upon this pictorial quality and filled the galleries of Europe with Biblical scenes. No other book, indeed, has so lent itself to translation into art. Bible stories in simple word pictures became our earliest English dramas, the sculptured adornments of mighty cathedrals, the themes of painters and poets. As the greatest of picture-books the Bible has immeasurably enriched the imagination of the mak-

ers of literature. Again, the Bible is a book of wonderful rhythms in the purely lyric parts and of a pleasing cadence even in many prose passages, which fall upon the ear like solemn music. The slight archaism of speech increases the pictorial and musical effect of Bible language, investing the scenes with mystic meaning. An eminent English critic, Professor George Saintsbury, declares that the sixth and seventh verses of the eighth chapter of Solomon's Song furnish the best example known to him of "absolutely perfect English prose—harmonious, modulated, yet in no sense trespassing the limits of prose and becoming poetry":

"Set me a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy as cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would be utterly contemned."

As illustrative of verbal concreteness, pictorial quality, and cadenced effect it would be difficult to find in our literature more striking examples than the story of Joseph, parts of the Book of Ruth and of Job, the lament of David over Jonathan, many of the Psalms, the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes, parts of Isaiah, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, and numerous others.

The fourth of the Biblical qualities which make a strong literary appeal is found in the fact that the Bible is a Book of experiences, a pre-eminently personal book. "Literature is the personal use or exercise of language", Cardinal Newman once said; and no other book better illustrates this fundamental quality of literature than the English Bible. The writers of Biblical narrative, prophecy, and lyric—the three general divisions into which most of the literature of the Bible falls—were too much in earnest to employ mere ornament or even to develop their themes by elaborate argument. Too much depended on what they had to say for any such aesthetic trifling or dialectic subtleties. They went straight to the point, painting a picture with a few masterly strokes, telling their

message without a multitude of detail in direct and simple language assuming that those whom they addressed were as eager to hear as they themselves were eager to speak out what God had revealed to them. This directness and earnestness of statement, this dignity and sincerity, this pulsating vigor, gave to what they said a weight which no elaborate devices of art or exhaustive details of argument could possibly give. They were not at all concerned with the method, but only with the matter, or rather with the spirit; they were on fire with the truth, and their concern may be summed up in the words of the Master: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free". Now, this sense of vivid reality is just the quality which makes great literature, for it renders prose and poetry permanently interesting. Moreover, throughout the Bible there is oneness of purpose together with variety: whether it be simple narrative, impassioned oratory, triumphal lyric, expository essay, a problem-drama as in Job, or a song of penitence and aspiration, or a mystic vision of prophecy fulfilled, one predominant sentiment binds the books into a spiritual whole as unmistakably as do the actual covers. The Bible is one book in a more real sense than Shakespeare or Milton is one book. Variety in unity—this of itself is enough to entitle the Bible to be called great literature; the unifying principle is man's personal relation to a personal God, set forth in a series of experiences actual or potential.

It naturally follows, therefore, that a book with such literary characteristics as these, universally accessible in sinewy and harmonious English prose, would profoundly interest the literature as well as the life of the English people and their descendants in all parts of the world. In what ways, then, has the English Bible of 1611 affected the prose and poetry of our tongue during the last three centuries? What traces of this supreme guide in faith and conduct are discoverable in the thought and expression of the literary masters of our race? Many eminent writers have avowed their debt to the Bible in formal terms; others have quite as effectively shown their obligation through the delicate medium of unconscious imi-

tation; all, indeed, are debtors, directly or indirectly. Ruskin, for instance, declares that the best part of his taste for literature and his ear for the music of words and phrases came from his daily reading aloud of the Bible with his mother in his childhood and boyhood, and from memorizing a number of chapters. This tribute he concludes with the oft-quoted assertion:

“And truly, though I have picked up the elements of a little further knowledge. . . . and owe not a little to the teachings of many people, this maternal installation of my mind in that property of chapters, I count very confidently the most precious, and, on the whole, the one essential part of my education.”

Matthew Arnold, who has perhaps written more about the Bible than any other essayist and poet, was particularly fond of Isaiah: “From no poetry and literature, not even from our own Shakespeare and Milton, great as they are and our own as they are, have I, for my own part, received so much delight and stimulus as from Homer and Isaiah.” Macaulay speaks of the Bible as “a book which, if everything else in our language should perish, would alone suffice to show the whole extent of its beauty and power.” Elsewhere, referring to Bunyan, he says: “He had studied no great model of composition, with the exception—an important exception undoubtedly—of our noble translation of the Bible.” Sir Walter Scott’s well known words to his son-in-law, Lockhart, who had asked him from what book he wished him to read, will always bear repeating as the tribute of a dying author who owed much to the Bible in many ways: “Need you ask? There is but one.” Scott’s contemporary, the poet Wordsworth, refers to the prophetic and lyrical parts of the Holy Scriptures as “the grand storehouses of enthusiastic and meditative imagination.” About a hundred years before this Jonathan Swift wrote of the Authorized Version: “The translators of our Bible were masters of an English style much fitter for that work than any which we see in our present writings, which I take to be owing to the simplicity that

runs through the whole." Quotations showing the esteem in which English writers held the Bible as a literary masterpiece might be multiplied, but these will suffice.

More significant, indeed, than these formal expressions are the evidences in the style and diction of leading writers of the permeative influence of the English Bible in English literature. This influence is naturally most obvious in writings on religious themes, such as Milton's poems and parts of his prose, and Bunyan's works. The poetry of Milton is of course full of Biblical imagery, though Milton's diction does not suggest Biblical language as much as his subject-matter does Biblical lore. Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is the only great drama in English literature on a purely Biblical theme put into the form of a Greek tragedy. Milton did not habitually use the King James Version; it appeared when he was three years old, and many years passed before it was absorbed into the life of the nation; to the preceding versions he probably owed more, and these, as already indicated, were not fundamentally different from that of 1611. A study of Biblical allusions and colorings in Spenser and Shakespeare would make this clear. Still, the Bible is so essentially a part of Milton that a dip into any of his longer poems means immediate contact with Scriptural persons and scenes, though they are often curiously interwoven with classical figures and legends. But when we come to Bunyan we find ourselves drinking from the wells of Biblical English undefiled. Brought up on the Authorized Version and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, a dissenter and a Puritan, John Bunyan so thoroughly assimilated the language of Scripture that it became his own natural speech. *Pilgrim's Progress* more nearly resembles the Bible in the simplicity and concreteness of its diction than any other English classic; and there is probably no other prose classic outside of the Bible which has had more influence on popular speech. This religious allegory, with its familiar imagery and quotation and its amazing realism, not only re-inforced the teachings of the Bible in the minds and lives of the people, but helped to democratize



literature and in so doing contributed to the birth of the English novel in the next century.

While Biblical quotation in an exact or modified form is fairly common among secular writers, particularly in that impassioned branch of literature, oratory, it is in the matter of allusion that English literature reveals its immense debt to the Bible. It is hardly too much to say that through allusion much of the Bible is in solution in our literature from Shakespeare to Tennyson. In the plays of Shakespeare there are fully two hundred passages containing Biblical allusions or adaptations; Dr. Van Dyke has found in the poems of Tennyson more than four hundred direct references to the Bible. Of the great poets of the nineteenth century Wordsworth, Browning and Tennyson make the widest use of the Bible, though allusions abound in all of them. It is, however, in the simple cadenced prose of our English and American writers that we find Biblical diction and Biblical allusions most perfectly combined. Several more or less familiar quotations will illustrate this. Here are a few sentences from Addison's *Vision of Mirzah*:

"He then led me to the highest pinnacle of the rock, and placing me on the top of it, "Cast thy eyes eastward", said he, "and tell me what thou seest." "I see", said I, "a huge valley, and a prodigious tide of water rolling through it." "The valley that thou seest", said he, "is the Vale of Misery, and the tide of water that thou seest is part of the great tide of eternity."

This is unmistakably reminiscent of Biblical diction and tone, though the allusion is not very direct. The directness of the allusions in the following sentence from Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* has often been noted:

"Their errors have been weighed and found to have been dust in the balance; if their sins were scarlet, they are now white as snow; they have been washed in the blood of the mediator and redeemer, Time."

Matthew Arnold is fond of giving point to a preceding assertion by using in the next sentence a Biblical quotation

or allusion; thus, in speaking of Wordsworth he continues:

"He is one of the very chief glories of English Poetry; and by nothing is England so glorious as by her poetry. Let us lay aside every weight which hinders our getting him recognized as such."

Without multiplying examples, mention may be made of the musical prose of Bunyan, of Dickens, of Ruskin, of Stevenson, of Carlyle, of Hawthorne, of Thackeray at his best, and of Lincoln in the Gettysburg speech and the inaugurals—men of diverse temperaments and training but all more or less revealing in their style and diction familiarity with the wonderful prose of the English Bible on which they were brought up. Some one has of late been counting the Biblical allusions in Edgar Allen Poe, and finds them surprisingly numerous; Whittier of course abounds in them, as do Longfellow, Lowell, and Bryant. Of all American poets, however, Whitman reflects most notably the long swinging rhythm of Bible poetry; indeed, no other poet has caught so well and so splendidly reproduced the strong rolling music of the stately lyric utterances of the English Bible. By dint of reading them aloud, Whitman at last made the sonorous tones his own favorite style of utterance.

Biblical phrases and allusions have become the current coin of our daily speech as well as mosaics in the structure of our more formal literature. Such phrases, for instance, as the following we commonly hear in conversation or see in magazines and newspapers: "a thorn in the flesh", "root of all evil", "heap coals of fire", "the handwriting on the wall", "weighed in the balance and found wanting", "highways and hedges", "broken reed", "the fat of the land", "the dust of the balance", "still small voice", "lick the dust", "repented in sackcloth and ashes", "a law unto themselves", "clear as crystal", "the sweat of his brow", "to your tents, O Israel", "arose as one man", "his brother's keeper", "moth and rust". Numerous others will occur to every reader of this article. Many proper names from the Bible are in common use to connote desirable or undesirable personal qualities: a good

Samaritan, a Solomon, a Methuselah, a Job, a Dives, 'a regular Jezebel', 'a doubting Thomas', a Sampson, 'to raise Cain', a Jehu (coachman), a Judas, maudlin (corruption of Magdalene), 'a perfect Babel of sounds', etc. There are, besides, numerous examples of Biblical allusion and modified quotation in current literature: 'They have fallen among thieves', 'they are looking out for the loaves and the fishes', 'he sold his birthright for a mess of pottage', 'he is a prophet without honor', 'he passed by on the other side', 'the very stones will cry out against such proceeding', 'we are the people'. The titles of a considerable number of present-day novels are Biblical phrases: *The Fruit of the Tree*, *The Road to Damascus*, *The Tents of Wickedness*, *The Way of a Man*, *To Him That Hath*, *A Stumbling Block*, *A Fountain Sealed*, *As a Man Thinketh*, and so on. Professor A. S. Cook, of Yale (to whose well known monograph on the Authorized Version I am indebted for certain details) says that in a recent book on life in an Italian province sixty-three Biblical references were found; in a recent work on the life of wild animals, twelve; and in a novel by Thomas Hardy, eighteen. In Walter Pater's delightful little sketch, *The Child in the House*, I have noted eleven or twelve Biblical references. If space permitted, such illustrations might be almost indefinitely multiplied. Sufficient evidence of the pervasive influence of the English Bible on our language and literature has already been given fully to warrant the assertion of Coleridge in his *Table-Talk*: "Intense study of the Bible will keep any writer from being vulgar in point of style."

If the Bible had been translated into the literary language of the early seventeenth century, it would never have so profoundly influenced subsequent literature; fortunately, the scholars who undertook the task, 'diligently compared and revised the former translations', retaining much of the simple and already familiar idiom of the earlier versions. This gave an archaic tinge to the language of the Authorized Version sufficient to make the English "sweet upon the tongue" without destroying the popular nature of the speech. Everybody read

it and came in time to love it, consciously or unconsciously, for its simplicity, harmony and energy. It grew into the life of the nation, became a bond of union among the various branches of the English race scattered over the world, the acknowledged charter of our faith, by whatever name in Christendom we may be called. Certainly this English Bible through long inheritance is in solution in the religious, political, social, and literary institutions of the Anglo-Saxon peoples; more than that, it is in the very blood of the men and women whose ancestors fought for spiritual liberty. This traditional significance of the English Bible in the life of the people accounts for its effect upon our literature. The older generations were brought up on it in the home; the boys and girls heard it read aloud and they were required to read it themselves; the reading and study of the Bible in school and college, as desirable as that is, can never take the place of that older home acquaintance with it. No book is really vital to you and me until we have taken it into our heart as a friend.

The truth is, the English Bible has always remained close to the heart of the English-speaking people through the many changes in literary taste. The tendency has been even in the periods of artificiality in our literature such as the eighteenth century, to swing back to the virile prose of the Bible whenever our writers became preachers of some sort of reform. It is noteworthy, indeed, that most of the great authors in English literature for the last two centuries, and more particularly those of the nineteenth century, were inspired by motives more or less moral and purposeful. This is true to the genius of the Anglo-Saxon, who is at heart a reformer and by instinct a prophet. In the early eighteenth century, for instance, Defoe and Swift, whose sinewy English resembles that of the Authorized Version, were social reformers; so was Addison and so was Steele; so in a more general way, later on, was Goldsmith, while Dr. Johnson was a conscious power for righteousness; and Edmund Burke used the Bible freely in his great speeches. Blake, the mystic poet, was

steeped in Biblical symbol; the early novelists professed to write with a moral purpose; Scriptural references are numerous in Burns, who learned the Bible from devout Scotch parents. In the next century the Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, were aspiring dreamers for social betterment; the novelists, Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Kingsley, Hawthorne, were in one way or another social reformers and conscious debtors to the English Bible; the essayists, notably Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, and Emerson, had traits of the Hebrew prophets; while the poets Browning and Tennyson are conspicuous for their use of the Bible. Thus it will be seen how essential a part of our literature the English Bible has always been; and if we will take the trouble to run through the poetry of Kipling, we may discover how intimately acquainted with its diction and spirit is the author of the *Recessional*. This is indeed a noble cloud of witnesses to the influence of the Bible in English literature.

It is to be devoutly hoped that this three hundredth birthday of the Authorized Version, which is being celebrated so widely wherever the English language is the national speech, will result in a renaissance of Bible reading particularly among the young. Let us lay aside the weight of comment *about* the Bible which now besets us and turn without let or hindrance to that masterly language and literature which formed an essential part of the culture of our fathers. For greater accuracy we would no doubt do well to consult newer translations, but the green pastures and the still waters of the Old Version should be our more habitual abiding-place if we would enter fully into the heritage of our noble tongue and its rich and varied literature. No mere mess of pottage in the shape of magazine or novel should lure the American youth, however hungry he may be, from the enjoyment of his birthright, the English Bible. He should read it until its perfect prose, its sublime imagery, its high harmony, and its divine message become a possession to him forever. So read, the English Bible of 1611 will continue to

ennoble the emotions, enrich the imagination, and mould the life of individuals and nations: its language will 'live in the ear like music that can never be forgotten, like the sound of church bells'; it will remain a 'part of the national mind, and the anchor of national seriousness.'