

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## The Bible as Literature.

A WRITER in a daily paper welcomed the edition of the Bible "designed to be read as literature," on the ground that in these days, when the reading of the Bible is so much less practised and encouraged in the homes of the people, children are growing up in ignorance of this great literary treasure of the English-speaking peoples.

Alongside his comment we may set the fact that twenty years ago the Professor of English Literature at the University of Cambridge was making a plea that no attachment to the Bible for its spiritual significance should stand in the way of its being a subject of study for the English tripos.

We are accustomed to study the Bible because of its importance for our religion. It is for us the Word of God, the rule of our faith, the fountain of our inspiration. It is one of the staple supports of our devotional life, one of the great avenues to knowledge of and personal relationship with God Himself. The primary significance of the Bible for us is its spiritual significance, but that is no reason why we should neglect the fact that the Bible is a great work of literature. In this respect it has a claim upon our attention in at least two directions. In the first place, a great part of the Bible is the literature of a people whose significance in world history is infinitely greater than either their numerical strength or their geographical importance. In the second place, the Bible in its English translation is a great classic of the English language, a book that has a unique place in the history of English literature. It has made its influence felt both directly by its effect in shaping the style of other writers and indirectly by the part it has played in moulding the thought and culture of the English mind. The significance of the Bible for the spiritual life is enhanced by the fact that the medium through which the greatest of all messages comes to us is in itself supremely great. In the Bible we are not only dealing with a unique message, we are receiving it expressed in surprisingly beautiful and moving language.

### I.

The Bible is a library that enshrines a rich variety of literary forms. It presents us with history, such history as was then known and written. It is not history with the objective accuracy that we are accustomed to expect from a modern historian. The record of events as we have it is very often a compilation by the scissors and paste method, with extracts from legal documents, court and temple records, narrative accounts by writers of different schools, all strung together on an editorial thread.

At times it is fitted into the framework of a particular theory, as when the Book of Judges illustrates the recurring cycle of national sin, disaster, repentance, and deliverance by the strong hand of God through His chosen warrior. It is history often written out of proportion to the passage of time and to what we would consider the relative importance of events. It is history written as all history must in some measure be, selectively, and for the Jew the factor determining his selection was his insight into, and his desire to record, God's providential dealing with his nation. The Old Testament historian is concerned with more than events on the human plane. He gives an interpretation of these events as far as his mind can grasp that which God is doing through them.

There is again a rich vein of biographical material. Thos. Carlyle says that the history of what man has accomplished in this world is at bottom the history of the great men who have worked in it. Canon Streeter endorses that judgment when he describes the history of humanity as the roll-call of its famous men. Our earliest memories of the Bible are often centred in such peak figures in the unfolding purposes of God, the dramatic story of Joseph, the tales of the shepherd king, and the loveliness and wonder of the Biography of biographies. Later, we learn to set beside these, character studies which we snatch in fragments from other material, or miniatures of those who pass momentarily across the stage, like Paul's skilfully etched portrait of Demas.

We have the literature of Israel's law, the codified law of various stages in her history which so many of us are tempted to skip in our reading of the Bible, as though "passing through a dry and thirsty land where no water is." In contrast we have dramatic narrative and poetry ranging from great hymns of devotion to the sagas in which national history was handed on from generation to generation. There are sermons and speeches and those political-economic-social tracts which set down the volcanic utterances of the prophets as they spoke the word of the Lord for the situation that confronted them. There are echoes of the philosophic mind, though the Jew turned philosopher laboured under a double handicap; on the one hand because his mind was cast in a mould of practical things, and on the other because the ultimate unquestioned fact of God in his universe prevented his asking ultimate questions.

The New Testament gives us its own distinct contribution. The Gospels are a literary innovation, brief memoirs written with a purpose. Although there are parallels to them in Jewish and Greek literature, they are really, as Dr. Moffatt indicates, a new thing in literature, new in subject, and new essentially in form. The other substantial contribution is made by the

epistles. The letter as a literary form is an ancient device and is familiar to this day. It may be anything from a letter intended for private use, which afterwards was committed to "the dreadful perpetuity of print," to a letter ostensibly written for one person, but used as a vehicle to express in public form the mind or message of the writer. The New Testament letters fall somewhere between these extremes, varying from the more private letter to Philemon to the general address of the letter to the Romans, which is something more in the nature of a tract. Such, then, is the range of the literature enclosed within the covers of our Bible.

## II.

The Old Testament is the literature of a people, the people of the Hebrew race. It does not exhaust that literature. It makes reference to books which are now lost (Joshua x. 13, II Kings x. 34, Numbers xxi. 41 ff), and there may be other writings of which we have no knowledge. But it adequately represents that literature because, as far as we can judge, it includes the major part of what was written. It gives us examples of the varying forms of literature the Hebrew produced. It reveals to us the highest and finest flowering of the literary art of his nation. It mirrors the Hebrew spirit. To be steeped in it is to understand the mind and spirit of the Hebrew race. It reveals the intensity of feeling of a people of oriental passion. It shows the sensitiveness they developed to their significance as a race, the growing flame of nationalism, and their attachment to all that was symbolic of it. With what beauty they have expressed the nobler side of their pride in the national and religious heritage they enjoyed:

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down;  
Yea, we wept when we remembered Sion.  
We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst  
thereof.  
For they that carried us away captive required of us  
a song;  
And they that wasted us required of us mirth,  
Saying, Sing us one of the songs of Sion.  
How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?  
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget  
her cunning.  
If I do not remember thee let my tongue cleave to the  
roof of my mouth;  
If I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy."  
(Psalm cxxxvii. 1-6.)

The Old Testament is also significant as literature, because it represents one of the foundation literatures of our European civilisation. Along with the ancient classical literature, it has moulded and affected the mental climate of Europe and of our Anglo-Saxon thinking. Behind the Puritanism and the strength of moral sanctions that the Puritan spirit wrought into English character is the old root of moral discipline that grows out of the Hebrew religion and is mirrored in its literature. If there are times when the Greek strain in our make-up responds to the verve and vivacity symbolised by the thought of "Merrie England," there are times no less when the prophet gains a hearing and a response to his words about personal discipline and social righteousness that draws its strength from a spirit fed by people who heard the solemn injunction, "Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy."

Like all great literature, the Bible reflects and mirrors human life, human sin, human nature, in its most universal aspects and characteristics. Nothing human is alien to it. All the great motives of life are found in its pages. All the great subjects of literature are there. Across its pages moves the pageantry of human types. Its heroes are men of flesh and blood, and not mere puppets. Their greatness and their goodness are touched with human frailty and even human shame. Life is portrayed in its joys and sorrows, its loves and hates, its hopes and fears. We see unrolled familiar facets of human experience, the life of home, the world, of business, of toil and markets, the affairs of State, the clash of nations. We are introduced to heroes and fellows of the baser sort, kings and counsellors and common folk. We see the throbbing life of the city and hear the quiet voice of nature in the country. The range of interest in this literature is infinite. It is as wide as life itself, and it keeps pace with all that is essential in the onward march of life and time.

### III.

The Bible is a treasure house of stories. They repay study not only because they present "truth embodied in a tale," but because they reveal the skill with which this literary medium is employed by the sacred writers. Jesus Himself has given us some of the most perfect examples of the short story that the world knows.

The characteristic thing about this form of literature is that it seizes some brief moment of life, some complete sequence of action, and gives us an impressionistic picture of it. There are, of course, exceptions to this generalisation, stories that belong to the literature of emotion rather than of action, but in the

main the short story is built up around a situation, a plot, that presents a unified picture of some transcript from life.

The Hebrews were born story-tellers. Their language lends itself to graphic narrative. It responds with peculiar aptness to the demands of the folk tale, the colourful picture, the swift-moving scene, the dramatic event, or the steady sequence of happenings.

The stories of the Bible answer to the conditions that a good story must fulfil. We feel about them that simplicity and naturalness that come from clear thinking and well-disciplined use of language. They have the effectiveness that is secured by the economy, especially in adjectives, that marks the true artist. It is an economy that strengthens the story by engaging the imagination of the reader to supply what has been left out. How easily a story may be ruined by digressions into the un-essential, so that by the time we come to the really important point of the narrative it is submerged in a mountainous wave of triviality and loses its power to excite us. Think how the story of the prodigal son would have been spoilt by a prolonged account of the kind of life he lived before the day when the wanderlust laid hold of him.

The story-tellers of the Bible had an eye for colour and pictorial clarity. We see Joseph as he moves from stage to stage in the unfolding of his story against the background of changing sights and scenes; the familiar encampment, the pasture grounds, the dank, muddy pit, the broad Nile across which he travels into the rich, unfamiliar land of Egypt, the slave market, the prison, the splendour of the court, the rich colours of his own official residence.

The Hebrew love of the concrete word and imagery helps us here. It gives us the vivid, swift, narrative of Mark, the earliest gospel. The scenes and characters of Jesus' parables are as real and alive for us as most of the events and living figures in the gospel story itself.

\* \* \* \* \*

We have become increasingly sensitive to the disservice done to us by the way in which the printed Bible is presented to us. This is especially true with regard to those sections of it that are in poetic form. The printing of the Bible has hidden from us the grandeur and the beauty of its poetry and the aptness with which, not infrequently, solid prose melts unexpectedly into poetic cadences.

Poetry is the oldest form of literature. Folk poetry exists in all races and is handed down by oral tradition before any form of literary activity takes place. Memory is the original book of a nation. In the case of a primitive people, all discourse that

is intended for publicity or for memorial purposes will be found clothed in poetic form, and will include such things as records of history in odes, wedding songs, lamentations for the dead, significant religious poems. These things survive for us in the Old Testament, as for instance in the song of Deborah, which records a memorable tribal victory (Judges v.), or in the "Song of the well" (Numbers xxi. 18), which gives us a glimpse of the ritual of dedication for such an occasion.

It is never easy to translate literary excellence from one language to another, and nowhere is this difficulty more felt than with poetry. To attempt to translate poetry into poetry and preserve the rhyme is to put an additional strain on translation. It is to our great gain that Hebrew poetry does not depend upon rhyme, and that the parallelism which is its fundamental feature can be preserved in translation. We can still read in our English version with understanding and appreciation the Hebrew poetic forms. They achieve their effect by a certain symmetry of thought and expression. The Psalms that move us deeply gain something of this rich impressiveness from the varying forms of this parallelism, with its underscoring of an idea, or its power to make it live in the light of some contrasting, or qualifying, or complementary phrase. We can find a new delight in many a familiar passage when we have learned to trace out the skilled architecture with which it has been built up.

Dr. Moulton has shown us how effective this basic principle of Hebrew poetry is, by the interesting device of re-writing a passage from Psalm cv. with the omission of the parallels.

"He hath remembered his covenant for ever.  
The covenant which he made with Abraham  
And confirmed the same unto Jacob for a statute.  
Saying, unto them will I give the land of Canaan.  
When they were but few men in number  
And they went about from nation to nation.  
He suffered no man to do them wrong, saying,  
Touch not mine anointed ones."

Compared with the poetic form, this is tame and emasculated.

It is of great moment that Jesus Himself speaks as a poet. He not only looked out on the world with a poet's eyes and saw and expressed the truth He came to teach, with the insight and instinct of a poet; His aphorisms, so memorable, so easily transmitted by oral tradition before they were written down, are themselves examples of Hebrew poetry. He used the most sublime heights of language to express divinest truths, and in that knowledge we have an added key to the understanding of His teaching.

## IV.

There is a manifest Providence in the timing of the translation of the most widely accepted version of our English Bible. The Elizabethan period in the history of literature represents a fine flowering of literary expression. The Renaissance and the Reformation had stirred the spirit of man, deepened the channels of his life, enriched his experience, liberated his greatest possibilities. It was a period that produced explorers, adventurers, writers, dramatists, scientific pioneers, inventors, in rich profusion. It was one of the great ages of our history. The Authorised Version was a product of the culmination of this age. Its English is the English of Shakespeare's day, a well-sharpened instrument, widely used. Actually, of course, much of the beauty of the Authorised Version was embodied in other versions on which it was based, with particular indebtedness to William Tyndale, who himself had a command of noble English.

The Hebrews had used words that were vivid, pictorial and swift. Their imagery dealt with the concrete. Our English version is in that noble tradition, free from any fondness for abstract words, and delivered from so many of them that have come into popular use since the time when it was produced. How different the Bible would have been had it substituted "the omnipotence of God" for such telling phraseology as—

"Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment;  
Who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain;  
Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters;  
Who maketh the clouds his chariots;  
Who walketh upon the wings of the wind";

or had it been sprinkled with such cold abstractions as "scientific," "humanitarian," "analytical," or the jargon of our psychological vocabulary, instead of with the magnetic quality and stirring power of concrete words.

We may prefer for some purposes to use a modern translation. Just as the writer of a cookery book achieves his purpose by giving us exact information, simply and intelligibly conveyed, to enable us to produce adequate results, so the Scriptures, which are intended to make us wise unto salvation, must be understood; and neither literary grace nor poetic beauty compensates for the obscuring of the primary purpose. Nevertheless, it is a true instinct that turns continually to the enrichment of that "well of English undefiled," where precious truths are clothed in stately and time-honoured beauty of expression. No wonder Faber said of the Bible, "It lives on the ear like music that can never be forgotten."

No one can understand our English literature unless he is



aware of the influence of the Authorised Version of the Bible upon it. Like the mythical schoolboy who was shocked when he first read Hamlet to discover how full of quotations it was, anyone going to the Bible for the first time might be forgiven for raising his eyebrows in surprise at the number of familiar expressions, the amount of common currency of speech he would trace there.

The influence of the Authorised Version haunts our English speech and writing. Sir Arthur Quiller Couch says, "The Authorised Version sets a seal on our national style." From Bunyan to Thomas Hardy, from Milton to Browning, its impress can be traced in the literature that has survival value. Professor McNeile Dixon estimates that that influence can be traced in every English author for the past three hundred years.

But we have to reckon with something more extensive than the part the Bible has played in moulding our literary heritage. Its influence began long before people could read it. It was read to them, explained, interpreted to them. It became the staple food of much of their thought, as well as the pillar on which character was built. No book has been more known and read in the history of the nation. Even to-day, when we deplore its neglect, the number of Bibles published and circulated is immense. But in the days when books were few, the Bible provided the mental food of generation upon generation. It was the source of poetry and romance, biography and adventure, instruction and delight. It has been described as "The people's story book." Its message became the food for the imagination through the early Miracle Plays. To quote Professor McNeile Dixon again, "A book which has been read by millions where other books have been read only by hundreds or thousands of readers, a book which for generations was almost the only book possessed by innumerable households, which was read aloud in churches throughout the whole country week after week for centuries, necessarily sank deep into the national mind, saturated and coloured all its thoughts, wove itself into daily conversation, and shaped in every region of activity the country's history."

We have reason for great thanksgiving in our English Bible and for this place that it has in our heritage of national culture. The Bible has been translated into other languages and makes its impact on the mind of other nations, but in other countries it has often been an obscure book; or it has been the book of the Church, of the hierarchy, the sacred literature. Its place in our nation's life is unique because it is so essentially an English book. an English classic of the English people. It is to be hoped that the new stimulus given to its literary study may open fresh doors to its immortal message.

W. TAYLOR BOWIE.