

means at their disposal of ascertaining the original text of each biblical document and the meaning its author intended to convey. That is why, too, except in times of extreme danger from current erroneous interpretation, she has always encouraged the faithful at large by study to make the Scriptures the primary basis of their devotional reading and prayer, always with the proviso that they must be guided, both in prayer and in scientific study, by the voice of authority which is the final arbiter of truth and error in matters of faith and morals.

Non-Catholic biblical study, in spite of the great contribution in scholarship it has made towards the elucidation of the literal meaning of the text of the Bible, has fallen into chaos as far as the nature and authority of the Bible itself is concerned, because it has knocked away the foundations of that authority by its rejection of the traditional doctrine of biblical inspiration and the corollary of inerrancy that follows from it. This has led to the setting up of a fatal division within the Bible itself between God's Word and the word of man, a division which only the authority of the Church is capable of eliminating, because, in the long run and finally, only the authority of the Church, by Christ's ordinance and the leading of the Holy Spirit, can judge what in the pages of Scripture is an assertion and what it asserts.

The present number of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* is devoted to articles which deal with the study of the Bible as the source of doctrine and the basis of prayer. These articles will be continued and concluded in the August number. The theme therefore of both numbers will be *GOD'S WORD WRITTEN*.



## ON READING THE BIBLE: I

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**T**HE Bible is a book, or rather the book above all others, to which we feel that we need no introduction. It is found lying everywhere; we all know of it; and still more, have so many of its phrases and personalities in our everyday talk, that we can be quite surprised to find they are 'from the Bible'; and begin to wonder just how much we do take from it.

But perhaps it is unfortunate that we have no introduction; for the Bible is not only well known and quoted, as Shakespeare's works are among English-speaking people; but has a special place in our minds, unlike any other book. It is venerated, or ridiculed; held up, for respect or derision; and it has that position because of what is said about it. The Bible, it is said, is the Word of God.

If we were to ask anyone, or better still even, ourselves, what we thought of the meaning of this, I think we should be asking a most difficult question. It is difficult, because the Bible is a book that we may never actually have read, it is so long and often so unattractive in appearance; but if we have read it, we have at least found it too full of life—in fact, full of lives—to dismiss, however small our understanding may be; whether we know it and like it or not, our heads are filled with its imagery and characters. We all know of Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark, the Tower of Babel, Moses and the Ten Commandments, David and Goliath, Job, and Job's Comforters, Daniel in the Lions' Den. Whatever we may think of them, we know them; which is, in one way, what matters. Then of course there is the person, Jesus Christ; with Mary, and Peter, John, Paul, and the rest. We are probably named after someone in that company.

It will be best, if we are going to make up our minds about this book, to decide at the start why we read books at all. We read books of any sort, from romances to cookery books, to find what the author has found: what the author has found, that is, both in 'experience' and in 'experiment'. There must be experience; for we like to think that the lady who wrote the cookery book has tried all her recipes, or that the author of the novel has felt, for himself, what he describes; but also experiment: that she has found new recipes and not simply copied others', or that the author describes feelings or situations that are new for us, and does not repeat familiar ones unless he can somehow renew them. In other words, a real author has found something to tell us; he can tell us, we might say, in both senses of the phrase, just what *can* be done.

Now the Bible is a long story. There are lots of interpolations, poems, scenarios, dissertations and letters, everywhere; but all the time there is the story. Looked at from the human side rather than from God's, as we are doing in this article, it is the story of a

people and their dealings; not just their dealings with each other, or with other peoples; but their encounter with God, and the dealings which resulted from that encounter.

These dealings with God were something of an experiment: new and unusual situations into which they were brought by great leaders—Moses, David, Isaias; but they were also real experience, in all their lives and thoughts, giving them much to tell us. They can tell us, that is, what *can* be done about God; because they tried and found it; they found how to get on with God; so much so, that they could come to a 'deal' with him. Of course the initiative was in fact always God's; the story is first of all the story of God's dealings with a people, and because of that the story of that people's dealing with God.

That, at least, is what we Christians believe; because Christians believe the story ended successfully, in Jesus Christ; so that we have a *whole* Bible, one that concludes the story; while the Jews themselves are still waiting for their ending. The Bible, for them, ends (in the books of Paralipomenon, or Chronicles) with the Jews as favoured subjects in the Persian Empire; and then falls silent. We know what favoured subjects they are today.

This is why, if you take our Bible and look at it, the first thing you notice is that it is in two parts: the Old, and New, 'Testaments'. (A 'testament' is an alliance, or 'deal'; something fixed between 'partners'.) We call the second part the 'New' Testament because of Christ's words at his last meal with his disciples; when he offered them his blood to drink in the cup of wine he passed round to them, and called it the 'blood of the New Testament'—the 'New Testament' they would know, from the book of the Prophet Jeremias (chapter 31, verse 31), that God promised. The former Testament, then, *the* Testament as it was, which was celebrated in animal sacrifice and blood poured out before God in the Temple, became the 'Old' Testament; and the sacrifice of Christ himself, when God and Man 'dealt' with each other again, made the 'New'.

If we turn to the Old Testament first of all, to find out what this 'Testament', with its blood and sacrifice, was, we find a collection of books divided into two main groups, with the others inserted between or after them; the first group of five books with Greek names (Genesis to Deuteronomy), and the other group with Jewish names (Isaias to Malachias), towards the end: the

'Law and Prophets', as the two groups were called. In between there are the histories (Josue to 2 Esdras), brought up to date at the end (in Machabees); and the details: stories of heroes and heroines (Tobias, Esther); songs of praise (Psalms); sayings (Proverbs, Wisdom); and dramatic works (Job, Song of Songs). The Old Testament is a library of books; a library, that is, where we need not start at the beginning and read right through, but can begin anywhere, from the end, or even in the middle, if we like. It is best to begin, I think, in the middle; and in the middle of a book, in fact: chapter twenty of the fourth<sup>1</sup> book of Kings. The reasons will, I hope, become clear.

In this chapter<sup>2</sup> we have a Prophet, Isaias, coming in to tell the sick king Ezechias that he is going to die; when the king has taken to prayer, returning to tell him he will live; healing him with a lump of figs on his sore; and then, no doubt to demonstrate convincingly that his life is lengthened, moving back the shadow of the sun for the king to see on his sundial. All this belongs to a mysterious, as it were 'enchanted' world; but it is followed by a strangely prosaic, 'modern' part, in which the Prophet rebukes the king for showing distinguished foreign guests far too much of the country's wealth: not only strangely modern, but in these days of surprising State visits, disturbingly topical. The prophet foretells disaster, but not in the king's own time; and the chapter ends with a mild shock, we see the king rejoicing at this news, because he himself will not be affected; in unconcern and hopelessness that are themselves premonitions of disaster.

This short passage shows at once every facet of the Bible. It introduces a 'Prophet', one of the men to figure so prominently in the times of trouble ahead; who see the hand of God and hear the voice of God, in events; and are, also, bold enough to declare it. It presents us, too, with the 'enchanted' world of the Bible, where everything is seen in a strange new light. Fig 'plasters' and sundials were common enough, in those days; but not, somehow, for the writer, who sees curing sores with figs, and checking the sun's movement with the sundial, as significant and exciting; so that when the plaster heals, and the Prophet marks a reverse of the sun, he pictures Isaias with direct powers of healing, and control of the sun. Finally, the story of all these chapters is the

<sup>1</sup> For non-Catholics, the second.

<sup>2</sup> The incident is repeated in Isaias 38 and the facts are mentioned in Ecclus. 48.

end of the Jews as a nation; their division into two kingdoms; their falling under the heels of the contending World Powers of East and West; and the occupation which was to last, with brief intervals, under a long succession of Powers, until the 14th of May, 1948—nearly three thousand years, that is; even if today's is not just another brief interval. The whole picture is there; the despair, and the lapses into 'idolatries'; the final chaos of court intrigue and treachery.

But the most important episode is later, in chapter twenty-two, where it tells how the 'Book of the Law' was found lying in the Temple; and how the Jews understood that their troubles came from neglect of this 'Law', so that the king tried to restore its observance, and especially the observance of the *Pasch*, or 'Passing'; and yet how, because of their lapse, God was not with them; the succeeding kings revert once more, and are brought to their doom: we leave the last king of the Jews a favoured servant in the Assyrian court. What was this Law that they realized, too late, to be so necessary, and this Passing, so important to observe?

To understand we shall have to go back to the five books of the Law; back through the earlier histories, Josue, Judges and the books of Kings, describing a Golden Age, before this later murk and gloom; which began with the triumphant entry of the People into the land they were promised; then with the Kingdom: the story of Samuel the Prophet, Saul the first king, David, and Solomon 'in all his glory'. But the glory is never quite untarnished; there are always shadows, Saul's disobedience, and jealousy of David (1 Kings 18), David's sin with Bethsabee (2 Kings 11), and the revolt and death of Absalom (18); Solomon's infidelities (3 Kings 11); and the rebellion and division into two kingdoms, on Solomon's death.

The whole story reinforces the feeling of the Law that is lost and that should have been kept; the Law which emerges in the first five books of the story. These books describe the People: the Jews are the 'people' who left Egypt under Moses; and as a Family: because they were all considered to be of one 'family', the twelve sons of 'He-follows' (*Jacob*), called also 'He-forces-with-God' (*Israel*) in the strange dream-story of his crippling struggle with God (Genesis 32). He is the son of 'He-laugh's' (*Isaac*), called after his aged parents' laughter at the news of his future birth (Genesis 17); which was promised, for his faith, to

the 'Father-of-multitudes' (*Abraham*); whom we meet answering a call from God in old age, to leave his country and family, and to depend upon God for his future, and his own family's to come; in Genesis 12, where the story begins.

But it is not quite the beginning; in the first eleven chapters we have some pictures to 'illustrate' the whole story; of a fantastic world, with men of gigantic ages; a Tower of Babble; a Flood, and the man Rest (*Noah*) who alone survived it because he rested trust in God and messages of God; even a message to build a huge watertight box or Ark; two tragedies, of Smith (*Cain*) and young Vanity (*Abel*), and of Man (*Adam*) and the woman he later calls his Life (*Eve*), who are driven from Pleasure (*Eden*) and kept away from the tree of Life. It is all difficult to understand and follow; for instance, we are clearly meant to approve of *Noah*, even if of method in madness; but with the others, our feelings have to turn. We are to sympathize with the murderer Smith when he kills his younger brother Vanity. God does; he protects him, vigorously. And what are we to make of the other two stories? Building a tower up to heaven, if it could be done, would be a wonderful thing to do; taking knowledge of good and ill, too, is surely laudable, and necessary, for Man; yet God opposes both; he stops them building up to heaven; and expels Man from Pleasure, and from Life, for taking knowledge of good and ill.

We are looking into the very beginnings of our experience, simple and vivid as they are. God stops us doing things: things that simply cannot be done, like building a stairway to heaven. He confuses our talk: as our talk about this must be confused—our heavens lie in such different directions. He scatters us—as our divisions and oppositions on this must do, making us incomprehensible and at odds with each other. So, too, God, setting Man in an enclosure of Pleasure, commands him not to take knowledge of good and ill, telling him that if he does he will die. Of course, a worldly-wise old snake prompts the taking of it. There passes from snake, to woman, to Man, an inevitable, tragic, 'ritual' disobedience. Man becomes conscious, in experience, of good and ill in the only way he can. At the depth of the story this is not an inevitability, but a choice, presumptuous and disobedient. Man, it is shown, cannot assume full knowledge of good and ill; that is God's prerogative. It is always beyond man's capacity; to attempt to attain this knowledge is to claim moral

autonomy and is a denial of man's condition of creaturehood. When he makes the attempt Man is taken from Pleasure, and still more from Life. He 'takes' his life. The force of the story is to make us see our good-and-ill consciousness, thus obtained, as death and loss of pleasure; inevitable apparently, in our lives, yet in fact neither inevitable nor final. Death and sorrow are penalties of a wrong, but they themselves have power to set the wrong right. Posing the enigma of our brief pitiful human lives in its few lines, the story points forward to an alternative, that is unperceived in fact, until it is in fact taken; once and for all taken, by the end of the whole story.

The very next passage in the book then illustrates this turn our thoughts must take; turning, that is, towards poor jealous Smith in his dreadful murder of young Vanity. God is to judge this good and ill, not we. He threatens terrible vendetta on those who do: 'for Cain . . . sevenfold.'

But the first chapter of all in the book is the story of God, the Creation story; pictured in the form, it seems, of the day: as it begins with the vast, empty darkness of night, the stirring breath of dawn, and the coming of light, to end night and start day; with the blue sky appearing like an inverted ocean above our heads, held up, mysteriously, in a vault; and with the increasing light distinguishing the gleaming water from land, which next shows, green with spreading vegetation. The sun itself now appears, the greatest of lights in the sky, which, with moon and stars, marks out days and nights, months and years. Then begin to stir fish and fowl, creatures of marvellous power, that can reproduce their kind, and multiply; after them, animals; and Man, last of all, almost like God, dominating all the others and fitting everything to himself; set, with the animals, to gather his food. At last, the sun sinks, and all returns to lifeless and empty darkness, waiting for the creation of a new day: God 'rests'.

The fundamental form of the poem is the Day; or a God seen mirrored in the daylight; that beams approval, 'sees it is good', 'declares' everything to be. But it is not only a Day; the beautiful phrase celebrating recurrence, disappearance and re-appearance,

—and there is dusk and there is dawn—

added perhaps as a refrain, helped to make of it a Week of Creation (as we still have, differently and faintly, in Sunday,

Monday), with seven days; a God above the sun, which he makes appear in a middle or fourth day, and whose setting becomes the resting (*Sabbath*) on a seventh day; when God, and we with him, can rest from our labours. (Our Sunday is not the Sabbath, but a festival, the Lord's day, celebrating in the rising of a new week the Rising of Christ.)

We begin the Bible, then, with seeing God in creation, presented every day of the week; and then pass to our dealings with him; seeing him always beyond us, beyond our deciding of good and ill; our attempt to do so drives us from him, his Pleasure, and Life. We must not judge, even with fratricide; but rest entirely on God and the message from him, ready like Noah, if that is the message, to take everything in a box and float on the flood; accept the world we are in, and not babble about towers to heaven. Now that we know God a little, we can understand the story of Abraham and his family; and how God became the God of Israel. He became God of Israel because he promised them land, if they 'walked before him'. Abraham, an old man, is promised a son—to his amusement—and yet believes it; is then asked to sacrifice him—and is ready: only, at the last moment, is allowed to save him by substituting a ram; then the family story continues, in the shadow of that sacrifice, as a story of faithfulness and unfaithfulness to that promise; ending in the first book, with the family going down to Egypt and finding the despised and rejected younger son in the favour of its ruler and in charge of the country.

The next book is the story of the exodus from Egypt and the return to the promised land: the making of the Jews as a people, stamping them with the marks they always bore. We are shown more of God, first of all, in the story of Moses, while watching sheep, hearing God in a flame in a thorn bush. Moses asks his name; 'I am who I am', he is told; and must be satisfied, for a name, with 'He is'. There follows the command to escape from Egypt; the plaguing of the Egyptians until they have to let them go, which is not until the very worst calamity happens to them, the death of all their eldest; from which the Jews themselves are saved only by another sacrifice, their rite of the 'Passing Lamb'. They kill, for each family, a lamb, to smear their doorposts with its blood—the life-blood of the poor lamb that is to keep off death stalking outside, keep it 'passing' over them; and also as



what to eat up for the journey to freedom they are to make, their own 'passing' out of Egypt. This sacrifice of a lamb, perhaps a touching and striking necessity, at that time of the year, came to hold much of the significance of their history for them; the death that seems always unavoidable. In their later ceremonies there was an orgy of bloodshed, culminating in the High Priest's entering the empty sanctuary with a basin of blood, which he splashed there before the Presence; to acknowledge an attribute in God we do not always recognize; for God not only gives life; he also takes it. There follows the story of the escape through the desert; with the pillar of cloud and fire always before them; the sea opening a way, and closing to drown their pursuers; the wonderful white food dropping from heaven; the burning mountain from which God's voice is heard; and the Commands written on rock—all weird and wonderful, Travellers' Tales they no doubt look; except for the strange truth of them all. In their escape to freedom, any unusual occurrence they might meet was not simply 'unusual'. What may often have been natural happenings were yet under God's providence the means of their guidance and safety. Movements of the shallow Red Sea, which could expose stretches of dry land before them, they would see, at that moment, as a marvellous demonstration of vast, unseen concern. What would, in other circumstances, have been a volcano, with smoke and noise, was the mountain of God, its column of smoke and flame their Guide on the way, and its unbelievable thunderings the voice of God. Something they met on their path, perhaps unfamiliar snow, or the gum of insects, was food rained on them from heaven; and stone inscriptions, which we are still finding in that part of the world, were Commands on rock. In their dash for freedom all these were overwhelming assurances, visible interventions of mighty care and concern; for they were in circumstances where men no longer look on nature with interest, or puzzlement; but with hope and dependence and insight; the insight that nothing merely happens, but is meant to happen; and that is what they have pictured in the epic they have left us.

The rest of this book, and the remaining three others, give details of the Law, the way of life that they then found with God; a way strangely ritual, moral, political and hygienic in one; rules for every side of life, laid down in great detail; rules which

many Jews observe to this day, and which have come down in essentials to us, in our liturgy and practice.

The books of history which follow describe the triumphant entry—after the death of Moses within sight of the promised land; and the Golden Age, with its atmosphere from the beginning of failing and decline; the captivities; and the spasm of revolt under the Machabees.

The other writings, before the Prophets in our Bible, fill in the corners of the picture. There is the devotion of the heroines, of Ruth to her family, which led to King David, then later, that of Judith and Esther, one acting the prostitute and the other the artful concubine in order to save the people; suggesting, by the desperate remedies, the desperate straits to which they had come.

There is the book of *Job*, the 'Adversary' of God, who is humbled before him: that is, whom the Accuser (*Satan*) attempts to pit against God, but who in fact champions him. Unaccountably stricken with every adversity, he refuses his wife's advice to despair, as well as his three friends' advice to accept it guiltily or grovellingly. A fourth friend tries to help solve the problem, and hints humbly and piously that God is really beyond us, in every way; as all must feel, who have looked towards infinity, endlessness of purpose. God breaks in to Job, speaking out of a whirlwind:

*Who is this obscuring thought, in senseless words?*

*Brace yourself up like a man! I will ask you, and answer you me:*

*Where were you, when I founded the earth . . . ?*

shattering question after question; when Job gallantly admits defeat; his adversary generously restores him, and as a result, Job realizes what he has 'seven times' over, or endlessly.

There is the book of Psalms, songs to God for every occasion: of praise or complaint, thankfulness or loyalty. They show us, if we read them, our real sorrows, and solitude; and our genuine joys and desires.

There is, too, the sensuous and exotic Song of Songs, expressing the experience of human love in language, when it is read, that can never be forgotten: a human love in which the deeper meaning of the divine love is typified:

*Rise, my love, my lovely, and come,*

*For, see! the winter is past, the rain is over and gone,*

*The flowers appear, on the land: the time of singing is here,*

*And the murmur of the turtle-dove is heard, on our land. . . .*

It is very difficult to understand the scene: a Dialogue for a young bride of Solomon, perhaps, of love's experiences, advances and withdrawals; lovers calling, and describing each other in language that strikes home,

*—press me like a seal to your heart—*

and that sees human beauty strangely, and intensely, in the richness and goodness of things, flocks and fields and towers; or—it is hard to decide—the other way round, the richness itself as beauty; in a way that baffles comment; but is striking, strikingly funny at first:

*—your stomach like a mound of wheat—*

yet the fun passes, the striking remains; and we can never see the human body, or the fields and forests and flowers, apart, in the same way, again.

This is poetry; and this is what it does.

With the later books we go further, out of this world, with writing feeling towards ideas we perhaps come round to, too easily—or never come round to, at all; in the beautiful passage, for instance, about the apparent end and failure of life:

*But the lives of just men are in the hand of God,*

*and torment does not touch them;*

*In the eyes of the unwise they seem to die,*

*and their departure is taken as misfortune,*

*And their going away from us, utter destruction;*

*but, they are in peace.*

Death, and judgment, hell, and heaven, begin to be felt here.

There is the wonderful description of the wisdom of God's creation, with the Wisdom seen so distinctly, almost personally, as separate, a consort, along with him everywhere in everything, touching everything for him; as someone who

*—reaches from end to end, and sweetly orders all things—*

or, as she later says of herself:

*Alone I go the round of heaven; and go to the bottom of the ocean;*

*Walk, on the waves of the sea; and stand, over all the earth . . .*

And so we come to the Prophets, and then to the end of the story which culminates in the life and message of the greatest of all the Prophets, Jesus Christ himself. But this we shall speak of in a further article to appear next month.

*(To be concluded)*