

RUTGERS COLLEGE PUBLICATIONS, No. 2

THE ENGLISH BIBLE

ITS STUDY AS A CLASSIC IN OUR COLLEGES


BY

REV. WILLIAM RANKIN DURVEE, D.D.

THEODORE FRÉLINGHUYSEN Professor of Ethics, Evidences of
Christianity and the English Bible

A paper read before the Third Annual Convention of the College Association
of the Middle States and Maryland, at Cornell University,
on November 28th, 1891

For Library Use Only
DO NOT CIRCULATE



PRINTED FOR THE COLLEGE

1892

J208
D969

copy 1

NEW JERSEY STATE LIBRARY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
TRENTON, NEW JERSEY



THE ENGLISH BIBLE.

ITS STUDY AS A CLASSIC IN OUR COLLEGES.

In his essay on Spenser, James Russell Lowell defines a classic. It is "properly a book which maintains itself by virtue of that happy coalescence of matter and style, that innate and exquisite sympathy between the thought that gives life and the form that consents to every mood of grace and dignity, which can be simple without being vulgar, elevated without being distant, and which is something neither ancient nor modern, always new and incapable of growing old." In the application of this scholarly definition to the version of the Bible dear to the vast majority of the English-speaking race, I give the judgment of one of the best students of language and literature our land has produced, the late George P. Marsh. He calls the English Bible "an anthology of all the beauties developed in the language during its whole historical existence." A living critic, Dr. Philip Schaff, declares: "The style of the Authorized Version secures to it the first rank among English classics. It has done more than any great writer, not excluding Shakespeare and Milton, to fix the character of the language beyond the possibility of essential change. * * * It is interwoven with all that is most precious in the history and literature of two mighty nations, which have sprung from the Saxon stock."

Our American colleges, in the brief period of a student's life given to them, can only open the portals of knowledge. In this work, wisdom in selecting certain lines of development must be exerted, and books of certain acknowledged power must be forced upon the attention. We have groups of study, the Classical, the Mathematical, the Course of Physical Science, the Historical and the Philosophical. Each special teacher calls for more time, and to divide the limited time among a score of teachers becomes more and more difficult. I recognize these facts, but I claim for the

Bible a place of *first* importance. It is the GREAT CLASSIC, amid all the world's treasures of recorded knowledge. Let me briefly state some facts which to my mind establish this position.

1. It is *absolutely unique in the character of its contents*. It contains a line of history, limited, indeed, by its ethical purpose, yet of a wondrously profitable nature to the student of the course of nations. But it is more than a history. It contains lyric and dramatic poetry which claims an antiquity beyond Homer, and has secured an interest among men of our own age which the Iliad has never gained. But it is more than poetry. It brings to use the wisdom of far-distant years, applied to the individual and the social life, but it is more than a legislative code or a mass of proverbs. It culminates in a wonderful biography, where four leading writers, in an unsurpassed simplicity, tell the course of a life, which, beginning at Bethlehem, ended, as far as this earth goes, on the Mount of Olives. Then follows what is claimed as an inspired unfolding of the meaning of the life of this great Teacher, as well as the brief record of the beginnings of the witness-bearing of his chosen Apostles. In other words, this Book, like some indestructible vessel riding stormy waves, bears to us across a score of centuries a mass of information of supremest interest. To investigate the value of this treasure, has been to thousands of the noblest minds of our race, not only a duty, but a high privilege.

2. But the *absolutely unique effect on the intellect* of faithful study commends the Bible. I am sure I speak no over-enthusiastic words. I am sure I fully recognize the intellectual forces springing from other sources. This, however, I affirm boldly: Whenever the Bible is really studied the result is the stimulus of thought on the most interesting and profitable subjects with which humanity can be concerned. *The Bible means war*. It means conflict with ignorance and indolent indifference, as well as with the fatal supremacy of appetite and passion. It makes peace only on the terms of "unconditional surrender." It flashed not only on Roman luxury and vice, but on the world of Greek Pantheism and debased thought, and the yawning philosophy of the Agora was agitated and disturbed as Socrates had disturbed its sophistry and indifference with his God-given truth four centuries before. The pride of intellect refusing its demand, went down.

Through the Middle Ages some of the brightest lights on the path of the world's progress flashed from the cloistered homes of Biblical students. Away from the clash of swords, and in spite of conservative persecution, this Book upheld the hearts of those who strove to reform and upbuild the individual and the State. At last the printing press gave it wings, and the people read the Bible for themselves. Historians like Green have told the result. The latter writes: "The disclosure of the stores of Greek literature had wrought the Revolution of the Renaissance. The disclosure of the older mass of Hebrew literature wrought the Revolution of the Reformation. But the one Revolution was far deeper and wider in its effects than the other. * * * From the middle of the reign of Elizabeth to the meeting of the Long Parliament 'England became the people of a book, and that book was the Bible.'" As a mere literary monument the English version of the Bible remains the noblest example of the English tongue, while its perpetual use made it from the instant of its appearance the standard of our language. Philologists know what Luther's version did for the speech of the German. The English Bible has done no less for the style of the English. The simplicity and directness of its strong Anglo-Saxon words impress the mind and erect a barrier against the "slipshod vulgarism" of the passing hour. As Faber, the religious poet, has written, in words often attributed to Cardinal Newman, so the vast majority of his countrymen have believed of the English Bible, "its felicities often seem to be almost things rather than mere words. * * * Its intrinsic beauty pleads availingly with the man of letters and the scholar." Less than three hundred obsolete words have been found in its pages. While it holds popular tendencies in check, its poetic imagery and marvellous supernaturalism have made it the stimulus and guide of men of imaginative and creative genius. We trace such effects in the minds of Bacon, Milton, Dryden, Addison, Pope, Hawthorne, Tennyson, and scores of others whose writings are our English treasures. Wherever it comes it throws down its gauntlet to ignorance, indolence and folly, the foes of intellectual advance. The strongest supporters of its worth may sometimes be accused of undue conservatism, but as the light falls on the Past, I fail to find support for charges of intellectual inferiority. The seals of our earlier colleges tell a different story. We have nobles in the ranks of Physical Science who may not have cared for Biblical teaching,

but by their side are others whose love for the Book of books has been supreme, and who certainly stand the equals of any who have disowned it.

When you wish to stir the very depths of personality introduce this Book and intellectual activity follows—the activity which means life and progress for humanity.

3. As to the *ethical result* attendant on a careful study of the Bible I do not care to reason. It seems to me that in the great battle with selfishness and vice, the verdict has been rendered by the foes as well as the disciples and friends of the Great Teacher, in whom all the nobler disclosures of the Book centre. There are flowers whose fragrance seems to belong to their very being. There are books where the influence is marked in one direction or another from introduction to close. There is one Book the vicious dread, and the man looking for a better life here and hereafter prizes beyond expression. The words of Sir Walter Scott, in his departing day, recur to us: "There is but one Book now." But this point receives such a wide advocacy, as the American pulpit holds forth the religious claims of the Bible, and more than two-thirds of the American people understand these claims, that I need only refer to the moral force the Bible exerts. The men who sincerely study the life and principles of the great Redeemer, around whom Prophets and Apostles gather, are not the men who curse a present world and cloud the hopes of humanity.

But, granting these points, the *Church* may be said to be the proper organization to take charge of Biblical instruction. There are some bodies of Christians who take a very positive stand on this, and refuse to modify their belief in this matter. In colleges controlled by them their own teachers can be selected as representing their own ideas. Of course, I cannot present their views. In other colleges where exceptional cases are found of students objecting to Biblical study, on account of parental feeling, the excuse may be readily granted. I look at the matter from my own freer standpoint, and refer to the larger number of American colleges where no special religious position is taken beyond that of the essential Christian belief. And in these I press the study of the Bible on account of:

4. *A widespread ignorance* of its full power. In spite of Churches and Sunday-schools, there is still remarkable ignorance, even among the better-educated, of the "great classic." The chief effort of

churches is to press the religious and ethical truth upon men. The best "lessons"—those contained in the *Episcopalian Prayer-Book*, that noble "well of English undefiled"—are read without comment and without change from year to year, and only show the main currents of the volume. To one who attends a Church regularly, the instruction is on certain leading topics, and on these the community is quite well informed. In schools on Sunday, where one hour a week is yielded to Biblical instruction, sections are chosen here and there. But the minds of the young are rarely fixed upon the remarkable literary, historical and philosophical features of the whole Book. The teachers employed are usually concerned, and rightly enough, with the religious condition of those under their charge, and aim to bring immediate pressure on their conscience and heart.

The Church may do the best it can, and yet from the time it can occupy, and the relative value of the topics it presents essential to well-being, the Church must omit much a College can present. And then, outside all churches, what numbers of the young are found, many of whom seek a college education. These last are amazingly ignorant in certain lines of information. Some of them can tell every leading street in Paris, New York, or London, but never heard of a certain road called the "strait," with its narrow portal. Graduates of certain colleges stand and argue whether the story of the judgment of Solomon did not belong to the "Arabian Nights," while leading merchants, keen enough in business, seeing a picture of Jephthah's Daughter, inquire vainly among friends as to who she was or what she did. The newspaper knowledge of the Biblical records is mainly confined to a reading up for editorials on trials for heresy, and an exceedingly scanty recognition of any place for a special creed in the mind of what is termed a "real Christian." Surely there is a demand that some place should be given to this Book of books amid Latin and Greek classics, French and German literature, or manuals of Physical Science. It seems to me that something of its power should be brought by competent teachers to young minds and hearts seeking the development of the whole nature. Let churches work in their own lines. To my mind this Book belongs to humanity, and it has a profit for the intellectual, as well as for those who concern themselves always and everywhere with the moral nature.

The four lines of argument I have so briefly indicated might be extended to greater length did time permit. I would recapitulate. The English Bible, being so unique in its contents, in its stimulating mental effect, and in its ethical results, more than commends itself for a place in a college course, while the general ignorance of its treasures by large numbers of our young men seeking an education, enforces this claim. Let me add a few words as to the relative time to be given to such study.

It seems to me that a single hour a week during the whole or parts of the Junior year among the *required studies* might be enough for any teacher to show his students the value of entering upon a systematic course, and that then it might be made an "elective" with an hour or two each week given to it during the whole or part of the Senior year. To many young men the Bible is a sort of bug-bear from the way it has been presented to them by unwise teachers in the home or in the church. Even where it has been partially studied, as I have said, the religious and ethical side has been alone turned to their gaze, while the historical, literary, and, if I may use the word, artistic features have never been considered. Attention being *required* for a moderate time, I think many of our students who had reached the last years of college life would choose for themselves the further pursuits of Biblical knowledge.

As to the *methods* of teaching they must be left to the teacher himself. The literature on this subject is enormous, and models are not wanting. A man need not have gone, during the past years, further than Yale University if he wished to learn how young men can be brought to enjoy Biblical study. Given a mind filled with the result of modern knowledge, and a heart touched with more than merely intellectual enthusiasm, and our college students will not have to be driven to the careful and constant investigation of the wonderful contents of this Book of books.

There is but one word more. There are very bitter foes of the Bible in many of our high-intellectual circles. I do not see *why* they should be, but as long as the fact remains that they *are*, the question must be met whether a small minority of men are to order the course of what I know is a vast majority of our noblest American leaders. I suppose *that* question must be solved by every college for itself; in a growing number of our colleges it has been settled. But there are also great friends of the Bible who fear that collegiate study of the book may detract somewhat from the reverence which

they always demand for it. To such we can only say, if reverence for the Bible diminishes on intellectual investigation then the Book falsifies itself. If its contents are only to be prized when preserved in the gilded covers which grace the parlor, or when breathed by consecrated lips from a pulpit, then the Bible to-day is not like Him around whom its truth gathers. To my own mind one of the best incentives to reverence for the Book of books is its ability to meet the sharpest treatment humanity can give. If men reject it, the Bible claims it will outlast such rejection. "This anvil has worn out many a hammer." If men will consider and receive it, it claims it will give them the noblest and most lasting years. This is one of its proofs of being beyond the merely human in its great leading characteristics. Any so-called reverence for this Book which decries its constant and careful study by the young is superstitious folly. Any fear for its holding in the future a throne of supremacy as strong and secure as it held in the past, because it is brought into the clearest light and tried by the strongest tests the brain and heart and conscience can apply, is to my mind no proof of a real friendship. For Prophet and Apostle in its pages unite in one grand declaration whose truth eighteen centuries attest. "The grass withereth and the flower falleth, but the Word of the Lord abideth forever." (Isaiah 40; 1 Peter 1.)