

LECTURE XVI.

THE DEBT OF LIVING LITERATURES TO THE BIBLE.— INTRINSIC SUPERIORITY OF BIBLICAL MODELS.

IF the relation of the Scriptures to the future of Oriental civilization should seem to be a distant motive to biblical culture, let us observe one which is more immediate in its influence, in the fact that the Bible is, to a large extent, incorporated into all the living literatures of the world; not into all of them in equal degrees, but into all sufficiently to be felt as a power. When we speak of the literary sway of European and American mind, we speak of the conquests of the Scriptures. The elemental ideas of the Bible lie at the foundation of the whole of it. Christianity has wrought such revolutions of opinion, it has thrown into the world so much original thought, it has organized so many institutions, customs, unwritten laws of life, it has leavened society with such a potent antiseptic to the putrescent elements of depravity, and it has, therefore, created so much of the best material of humanity, that now the noblest scholarship can not exist but as a debtor to the Christian Scriptures.

The debt of literature to the Bible is like that of vegetation to light. No other volume has contributed so much to the great organic forms of thought. No other is fusing itself so widely into the standards of

libraries. Homer and Plato and Aristotle were long since absorbed in it as intellectual powers. This volume has never yet numbered among its religious believers a fourth part of the human race, yet it has swayed a greater amount of mind than any other volume the world has known. It has the singular faculty of attracting to itself the thinkers of the world, either as friends or as foes, always, everywhere. The works of comment upon it of themselves form a literature of which any nation might be proud. It is more voluminous than all that remains to us of the Greek and Roman literatures combined. An English antiquarian, who has had the curiosity to number the existing commentaries upon the Scriptures, or upon portions of them, found them to exceed sixty thousand. Where is another empire of mind to be found like this?

Here is a power, which, say what we may of its results, has set the Christian world to thinking, and has kept it thinking for nearly two thousand years. The unpublished literature of the Christian pulpit surpasses in volume all the literatures of all nations. "If the sermons preached in our land during a single year were all printed," says a living scholar, "they would fill a hundred and twenty millions of octavo pages." The Bible is read to-day by a larger number of educated minds than any other book. The late revision of the New Testament in our own language is not yet one year old; yet its circulation amounts to two millions and a half of copies. This sale, unprecedented in the history of any other volume, indicates an immense *reserve* of interest in the book, which, till now, has had no such means of expressing itself. The mind of the English-speaking races must have been saturated with

biblical thought, and to a great extent with biblical faith, for a long time, to account for such a phenomenon. Multitudes are poring over the book, and are feeling its elevating influence, who never think of it otherwise than as an authority for their religious faith.

Our own language owes, in part, the very structure it has received to our English Bible. No Englishman or American knows well his mother-tongue till he has learned it in the vocabulary and the idioms of King James's translation. The language first crystallized around this translation as the German language did in less degree around Luther's Bible. In English form the Bible stands at the head of the streams of English conquests and of English and American colonization and commerce. It must control, to a great extent, the institutions which are to spring up on the banks of those streams the world over.

It is interesting to observe how the influence of the Bible trickles down into crevices in all other literature, and shows itself, at length, in golden veins, and precious gems of thought, which are the admiration of all observers. The late Professor B. B. Edwards, in illustration of this fact, notices the following details; viz., "An essay has been written to prove how much Shakspeare is indebted to the Scriptures. The Red Cross Knight in the 'Faerie Queene' of Spenser is the Christian of the last chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The 'Messiah' of Pope is only a paraphrase of some passages in Isaiah. The highest strains of Cowper in the 'Task' are an expansion of a chapter of the same prophet. The 'Thanatopsis' of Bryant is indebted to a passage from the Book of Job. Lord Byron's celebrated poem on 'Darkness' was founded on a passage in Jeremiah."

Wordsworth's criticism of Milton, that, "however imbued the surface might be with classical literature, he was a Hebrew in soul," is true of very much that is most inspiring and most durable in our modern poetry. Wordsworth's "Ode on Immortality" could never have been written but for the creative effect upon the poet's imagination of such Scriptures as the fifteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians and the eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. Pantheism has a cool way of appropriating a great deal of Christian poetry. Thus it claims Wordsworth. But the most autobiographic passages in "The Excursion," descriptive of the communion of his soul with nature, could never have been conceived but by a mind which was permeated by the inspiration of the One Hundred and Forty-eighth Psalm.

"In such access of mind, in such high hour
Of visitation from the living God,"

is the language in which he himself describes that communion.

Shakspeare's conception of woman is another illustration to the same effect. De Quincey claims it as an absolute original by no other genius than Shakspeare. But in the last analysis Shakspeare's ideal is only the Christian ideal, which suffuses with refinement our modern life. We owe it ultimately, not to poetry, nor to the drama, but to the biblical fact of the atonement. Nothing else has made the conception possible of a Desdemona or an Ophelia growing out of a sex degraded in all other than Christian literatures.

The hymnology of all modern languages has been absolutely created by the Hebrew psalmody. The

ancient classics have not, so far as I know, contributed a stanza to it. Not a line of it lives, through two generations, in which the genius of the Psalms of David does not overpower and appropriate all other resources of culture. The old English and Scottish ballads never exerted on the national mind a tithe of the influence of the Hebrew psalm. The commonwealth of England owed its existence, in part, to the psalm-singing of Cromwell's armies. On the continent of Europe, also, the whole bulk of the despotism of the middle ages went down before the rude imitations of the Hebrew psalmody by Clement Marot and Hans Sachs. The battle-song of Gustavus Adolphus was originally published with this title, "A Heart-cheering Song of Comfort on the Watchword of the Evangelical Army in the Battle of Leipsic, Sept. 7, 1631. God with Us."

The Bible has also formed the best standards of deliberative eloquence in modern times. The Earl of Chatham was sensible of his own indebtedness to it. Patrick Henry and James Otis were often likened in their lifetime to the Hebrew prophets. Lord Brougham and Daniel Webster both acknowledged their obligations to the same models. Webster was for years the biblical concordance of the United-States Senate. His ablest opponents, in preparing their speeches, used to resort to him to furnish them with scriptural passages and metaphors to point their weapons against him. Such was his command of the same resources, that he could afford to give them liberally, and without upbraiding.

To all departments of modern literature the Scriptures have been what they have been to modern art.

It has been said that the single Christian conception of a virgin and her child has done more for the elevation of art than all the exhumed models of Greece and Rome. It is a well-known fact that nothing in art itself succeeded in crushing out the moral abominations which many of those models expressed until the Christian religion flooded the whole realm of beauty with more intense ideas; so that, to the purest taste, the Greek Venus has become imbecile by the side of the Christian Madonna. So are the literary models of the Scriptures working, as germs of power in modern literature, beyond the depth of Greek and Roman thought in its choicest and most durable forms.

I will name but one other form in which the obligations of modern literature to the Scriptures is illustrated: it is that of the unconscious debt of infidelity to biblical resources. The infidel literature of our times owes nearly all the vitality it has to its pilferings of Christian nutriment. It lives by its unconscious suction from Christian fountains. "The Cotter's Saturday Night" is not more palpably indebted to the Scriptures than are some of the finest passages in Shelley's "Queen Mab." The "Paradise Lost" and the "Pilgrim's Progress" are not more really the outgrowth of the old Hebrew soul than are some of the sublimest conceptions of Lord Byron's "Cain." No man could have written "Cain" or "Queen Mab" whose genius had not been developed by a Christian civilization, and whose infidelity had not been fired by collision with the Epistle to the Romans. The power to be so blasphemous grew out of Christian knowledge; and the power to express the blasphemy with such lurid grandeur sprang from the culture which Christianity had created.

The atheism of Great Britain, which is working so disastrously among the artisan classes of the kingdom, owes its chief resources of power over the popular mind to the fact that it holds on to so much of scriptural thought. Its capital ideas are biblical ideas. Strip it of these, and it would have no chance of a hearing in the workshops of Birmingham. What else than Christianity ever gave to the human conscience *spring* enough to enable it to conceive of such a thing as a practical religion without a God? Yet this is English atheism to-day. It is not vice; it is not conscious blasphemy; it is not moral nihilism: it is an aim at morality, moral culture, moral principle, moral progress, even moral worship, after its kind,—all which it audaciously proposes to support without a God for the center of the moral instincts. When did the human soul ever before get force enough of moral instincts to conceive of such a project as that?

Similar to the lesson taught by the atheism of Great Britain is that taught by the most powerful phases of infidelity in this country. It would be entertaining, if it were not too painfully solemn, to observe the depth to which Christian thought has penetrated, and the extent to which Christian colorings of speech have suffused the culture exhibited by the most brilliant of the infidel lecturers and writers among us. Mark it anywhere,—on the platform, in the newspapers, in magazines, in books: the materials of thought which these men are wielding, to the saddest hurt of an unthinking faith, are at bottom Christian products. No other class of literary men are so profoundly indebted to the Scriptures, yet so profoundly oblivious of the debt.

Open one of their books, turn to its most captivating pages, sift its style, weigh its thought; and what do you find of good sterling worth? Wherever you find clear ideas held in honest Saxon grip, you find them vitalized by something or other which they owe to Christianity. Here it is a truth as old as Moses; there it is the power to conceive of the opposite of a truth: again it is an antithesis of half-truths; farther on it is a dislocated quotation, or a warped and twisted allusion: now it is a fungus overgrowing a germ of truth which gives it its power to grow; then it is a Pantheistic turn to language which Pantheism never originated, but which, in its original, Christian souls love. Even down to the indefinable ingenuities of style, you find at work the alert and sinewy fingers of a Christian culture. The very sentences which express or imply semi-Paganism in theology, but the structure of which makes them play in the very heavens of beauty like the coruscations of the northern-lights, are, as specimens of style, the product of our Oriental yet Saxon Bible. Are Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, at the root of the thoughts and the forms which you feel in such pages? No: it is Moses; it is Isaiah; it is David; it is St. John; it is Christ. Take away the elements of culture which these have contributed to such literature, and no man would care what heroes or philosophers might claim the residuum.

The most striking illustration, in my judgment, which has exhibited the truth of the fact before us in our own country, is that given by the Rev. Theodore Parker. For twenty years the most vital infidelity in this land was personified in him. He brought to the solitary altar at which he ministered in Boston a gen-

erous scholarship, a mercurial genius, a versatile command of thought, and a fascinating style. Taking him all in all, his was a more earnest character than that of any other man who has gained any thing like equal eminence in the ranks of active hostility to what he called "the popular theology of New England." The purity of his life was almost ascetic. For one, I am compelled to concede the power of the man in his lifetime, whatever may be true of it now. I do not think that any candid man among us who knows the classes of mind which were reached, and the momentum given to them, for twenty years, from that Twenty-eighth Congregational pulpit, will feel, that, as a friend of truth, he can afford to ignore that power, or to underrate it.

But it was not the power of his infidelity: it was the power of his unconscious obligations to truth. His vital and vitalizing ideas were Christian ideas. He owed them to the Book which he disowned. He drank them in from all the living literatures which he mastered. He maligned religion as we conceive of it. He ridiculed Scriptures which to us are sacred. He denounced as barbaric the ground-work of our hope of heaven. He scoffed at our ideal of a Redeemer. He uttered words which from our lips would be blasphemy. Yet the interior forces which bore up as on an oceanic ground-swell this mass of error were forces every one of which sprung from that ocean of inspired thought whose great deeps were broken up in the civilization around him.

What were some of those forces? In what ideas did they find their origin? They were such as these: the fatherhood of God, the unity of the human brother-

hood before God, the dignity of manhood, the intensity of life as the prelude to immortality, and, more than all else, the application of these ideas to social and national reforms. These were the forces which he wielded. Without them the world would not have heard of him. Yet these are, every one of them, biblical forces. He owed them to the Christian Scriptures; and he owed the susceptibility to them in the popular mind on which he worked so disastrously to that interpretation of the Scriptures which has expressed itself in our New-England theology. Thus it is with every development of infidelity which has force enough to make it respectable. It feeds on Christianity itself, and grows lusty *therefore*.

To the views thus far advanced respecting the literary claims of the Bible should be added the fact that the Bible contains within itself models of thought and expression which are intrinsically superior to other literature. What do we mean when we speak of the literary pre-eminence of the Scriptures? This involves two inquiries.

The first is, What is the bearing of inspiration on literary merit? I answer, It is not such that pre-eminence in literary *forms* follows from inspiration as a thing of course. Inspiration does not save from literary defects even. It does not necessitate uniform excellence in taste, the most perfect conciseness, force, purity, precision, beauty, of style. It does not even protect against false syntax. The Scriptures are open to criticism in these respects, like any other book. It is in the substance and the spirit of the volume chiefly, that its supremacy appears. Literary defects arise necessarily from the freedom of the inspired mind.

In the laws of inspiration God has exercised the same care for human freedom that is displayed in all other divine adjustments. So jealous is the divine mind of the integrity of that inclosure within which a human mind is itself a *creator*, that, even in the anomaly of inspiration, the human mind is not automatic. In the process of constructing a revelation the inspired mind is left to act out itself. A human coloring suffuses the material of the inspired production, because a free, self-acting will is concerned in it. Hence come literary defects.

The central fact in this matter is, that, in the inspired record, God has secured the best literary forms possible to the instruments he chose to work with. He has inspired St. Paul to write as well as, under the conditions of his work, St. Paul could write. He has inspired David and Isaiah to speak as well as, under the conditions existing, they could speak. In neither case has he taken from the man his identity. It is no irreverence, therefore, it is only a recognition of the divine plan of procedure, to say that the Bible makes no claim to immaculate excellence in classic forms.

Again: a pretended revelation, of scholastic origin, would have been very apt to claim absolute perfection. Mahomet did this for the Koran: Jewish bibliolatry did this for the Pentateuch. It is an incidental sign of the divine origin of the Scriptures, that they never do this for themselves. The Scriptures, therefore, come to us in forms of very unequal literary merit. They resemble in this the works of uninspired genius. Genius elsewhere never claims perfection. It never thinks of its own work as literature. It throws itself into its creations with self-abandonment. In its noblest

works it is unconscious of its nobility. The very intensity of its conceptions creates defects when crowded into human language. So it is with inspiration acting through the agency of a human mind: if the Scriptures did not exhibit these diversities, the strongest possible philosophical argument would be established that they are not the work of the men who profess to be their authors.

The second of the two inquiries suggested is, What are the things in which the Bible does exhibit the superiority claimed for it? You will readily recall them. I name them only to give definiteness to them as excellences in literature, and not as moral virtues alone, involved vaguely in the gift of inspiration, and therefore outside of our scholarly regard.

The fidelity of the Bible to the loftiest ideals which the human mind can form of *truth* and *purity* is a literary excellence. It is a requisition of good taste, as well as of the moral instincts. That the Scriptures utter no falsehood, minister to no vice, truckle to no conventional corruption, do not ignore the moral affinities of the intellect, never confound moral rectitude with beauty, but, in a word, subordinate intellectual to moral integrity,—these are exponents of literary dignity which the cultured taste of the world must sooner or later learn to esteem as it does not now. They would give to any other literature a dignity which would command the admiration of all scholarly minds. ✓

The *intensity* of the biblical style of thought is a literary excellence. Contrast this with the immense amount of frivolous and aimless thought in all other literature. Inspiration never trifles, never dallies with

truth, never sports with "the eternities," never perpetrates a pun, never fawns upon great men, never flatters woman, never deals in comedy, never created such a character as that of Shakspeare's "Falstaff," or the universal clown of the modern stage. As a collection of literary productions, the Scriptures look inward to a great central tragedy. An intellectual intensity, therefore, broods over them, which is altogether unique. Those portions of Shakspeare's dramas which exhibit the same quality are those on which, mainly, his fame rests. In him we do not restrict it as a quality of form only: it is the very substance of all that we admire in a great tragic poem. The same is true of it as a quality of biblical thought.

The *originality* of biblical thought is a literary excellence. This we can not appreciate till we throw our minds back of the Scriptures themselves, back of the whole intellectual training for which we are indebted to them, and think of the mass of novel truth which the Bible has given to the world, and the mass of pre-extant truth which it has freshened and vitalized. Contrast it with the paucity of ideas in Homer, and are you not sensible of the magnitude of the one and the littleness of the other? If the Greek mind had had a volume containing such a mass of ideas before unknown and inconceivable, temples would have been built for its teaching as the gift of immortal gods.

As the fruit of its originality, in part, the aptness of the Bible to *germinate in uninspired literature* is a literary virtue. Regarded as a fertilizing power to other products of the human mind, no other volume can be compared with it. It is marvelously reproductive of kindred thought. The germs of epic poems, of systems

of philosophy, of political constitutions, and of the eloquence which sways nations in crises of history, are the common thoughts of the inspired authors. The seeds of such culture as that which effloresces in a Milton, a Bacon, a Chatham, a Burke, are here ideas thrown out by men speaking, as if on the spur of the moment, in friendly letters, in talks, to unlettered minds and to children.

The sympathy of the Scriptures with *human liberty* is an excellence, which, in equal degree, would reduplicate to the echo the fame of any other literature in the world. History is largely made up of struggles for freedom. Free thought, free speech, a free press, free soil, free men, free government, are the objects for and against which the great conflicts of the race have been waged. Much of the scholarly thought of the world has been committed to the service of autocratic and aristocratic privilege. Authors have been, to a considerable extent, the retainers of noblemen. Sometimes they have been, like Horace, the slaves of feudal superiors. Against the main drift of national literatures the liberty of man has often been compelled to contend for its existence. Some of the living standards in our libraries to-day are the product of a muzzled press.

Not a trace of sympathy with such a condition of things is found in the literature of the Bible. The bent of its genius is all on the side of those institutions for which free men have fought, and women have suffered. The Bible is pre-eminently the manual of liberty. Those words which have been the watchwords of sanguinary revolutions for the deliverance of nations from oppression express the favorite ideas of biblical

jurisprudence and song and prophecy. That rulers exist for the people; that the poor are in law the peers of the rich, and the ignorant, of the wise; that mankind are one brotherhood, with equal claims upon the fatherhood of God and the fraternity of each other, —are the familiar and central thoughts of biblical poets, historians, lawgivers, prophets, and apostles. The whole strain of the volume is one long protest against the oppressor, and one perpetual song of cheer to the slave. No other literature is in this respect so uncompromising and so self-consistent. It is an incendiary volume to slaveholders everywhere. Popes place it at the head of the list of books anathematized.

Yet, on the other hand, the Bible is equally the manual of *temperate and bloodless reform*. It gives no place to the malign emotions in warfare against oppression. Fanatics expurgate and denounce it no less bitterly than tyrants. It tolerates wrong, and inculcates long-suffering, rather than to invite convulsive revolutions. It trusts to time, and the omnipotence of truth, for the emancipation of mankind. It subordinates civil to spiritual liberty, —a thing which fanatical reform has never done, and for the want of which it has always failed. If the spirit of biblical literature had held sway in history, there would never have been a servile war, never would a race or a nation have been emancipated by the sword. Yet the cause of human liberty would have been centuries in advance of its condition to-day. The equipoise of opposing truths, and the consequent smoothness and stillness of beneficent revolutions, are characteristic of biblical thought as opposed to the eternal war-song of all other literature. The ultimate culture of the world will

transpose the passive and the active virtues in its literary judgments.

The *symmetry* of the biblical system of truth is a literary excellence. With no system in form, it is everywhere suggestive of system in fact. The biblical scholar degrades his own work who discerns in the Bible no implications of a self-consistent structure of theology. It is in this respect what every man's real life is, — a plan of God. Every thing in it fits every other thing. What other literature not founded upon it has such balancing of opposite truths, such adjustments of the relations of truth, such diversity in unity, such unity in diversity, such a grand march of progress in the evolution of truth? In one sense the Bible is a fragment, made up of fragments; but it is fragmentary as the segment of a circle is fragmentary.

The number and diversity of *literary styles* in the Scriptures deserve mention. Although immaculate form is not one of their claims, yet incidentally to their loftiness of thought, and purity of character, excellence of form often appears as if by spontaneous creation. The style of some portions of the Epistles, art has never tried to improve. Who has ever thought to improve the form of the Beatitudes or the Lord's Prayer? What reformer or censor of public morals has ever attempted to improve the style of some of the Hebrew prophets? The narrative style of the evangelists, the lyric poetry of the Psalms, the epic grandeur of the Book of Job — what adventurous critic has ever assumed to equal these? They are as nearly perfect as human language permits. Poetic, didactic, philosophic, narrative, illustrative, allegorical, epistolary, dramatic, oratorical, prophetic, styles are all

illustrated in the Bible by specimens of the first order of merit.

As the sequence of some of the foregoing qualities, a certain power in the literature of the Bible to *project itself into the future* is worthy of remark. The materials of extant literatures may in one view be classified as literatures of the past and literatures of the future. Some standards of our libraries are only monuments. We admire them, but we never use them. Practically the world has done with them. To high culture the study of them has become a recreation only. They are receding from the earnest life of the world more and more distantly with every generation.

The Bible, as a literary power, is no such monumental structure. Though the oldest, it is still the freshest, literature extant. Covering all the past, it reaches over a longer and grander future. A favorite idea of critics is that of the immortality of literature. The Bible is the only volume which is sure of that. The future belongs to it as to nothing else which the world now reveres in libraries. Its own prophecies are a fair symbol of the prospective vision which illumines it, and assures to it an undying youth.

Such are some of the salient points definitive of our conceptions of the Bible as a literary classic. The majority of them occur to our thought first and most positively as moral excellences only; but good taste approves them as well. The affinities between our intellectual and our moral nature are such, that to ignore either involves deterioration of the other. An eminent English critic says that Lord Byron, in the lack of a keen conscience, suffered the lack of the first quality necessary to a true poet. A more subtle

illustration of the same kind of affinity is seen in the power of a lofty morality to elevate the very vocabulary of a language, and the opposite power of degraded morals to degrade a language also. On the same principle, certain qualities in the Bible which first strike us as moral qualities only, we claim as literary virtues as well. They augment immensely the power of the volume as an educating force in the discipline of a scholarly mind. I do not dwell upon them at greater length, because they are familiar; and to expand them might easily degenerate into unmeaning eulogy.