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The Best Best-Seller

BY JOHN W. THOMASON, JR.

THE BIBLE, DESIGNED TO BE READ AS LIVING LITERATURE. Edited by Ernest Sutherland Bates. \$3.75.
Simon & Schuster.

THE English Bible, as read in churches and elsewhere, is not the least of the monuments to the memory of that enlightened prince, King James the First of England. Of him, they relate that he failed to inherit the personal charm of his mother, the fair and fatal Queen of Scots; and that in habit and appearance he was excessively unattractive. But even his contemporaries pay tribute to the beauties of his intellect. To his attainments in the English tongue, which he spoke with a broad Scots accent, he added profuse knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. For all this, he was no scholar to follow blindly. He was critical of the fragmentary and various versions of the Scriptures which had begun to be circulated among the laity, and very early in his reign he took steps about them. In 1604 he called a conference of the best

minds in the English Church, both High and Low, and in the universities, and directed them to make him one uniform translation of the Bible into English. He designated four-and-fifty of the most learned doctors, gave them their directions, and let them alone. His chosen servants dived into the seventeenth century's accumulation of ancient Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, and Latin texts, and the numerous common or vulgate versions from the same, and emerged in the year 1611 with a compilation set forth in form and diction pleasing to the King. He set the seal of royal approval on their labors; Master Robert Barker struck it off on his London press; and good King James placed his name on the title page of the best-selling item in the history of the publishing business.

There were translators before

James the First, but it was for some centuries a perilous undertaking. Mother Church never felt that the flock should be permitted to browse at will in the pastures of Holy Writ, and Rome spared no corrective measure to discourage that tendency. Yet, in spite of the thumbscrew and the rack, and other severe comment, there was a printed translation in German in the year 1456, which ran through seventeen reprints before Martin Luther began to fulminate. These, with other European versions, formed the basis of several partial English translations. Erasmus printed an Old Testament in Hebrew and a New Testament in Greek about 1516. It remained for William Tyndale, called the Apostle of England, to render the Bible completely into English, using not only the German and Bohemian texts, but the original, or at least, ancient codex made available with the flowering of the Renaissance. Official criticism of Tyndale's literary effort took drastic form: he was burned at the stake. Into the fire, in the years after him, went also the saintly Cranmer, and many other devoted men. But the printing press had established itself, and times were changing. The astute King James merely gave official

sanction and elevated form to something that had already become a fundamental institution of his people.

The King James Bible is the most important book in the English language. Its impress on literature and on common law has been decisive. Its precepts have guided the purest and most useful of people throughout the scale of human life. From it have proceeded movements to alleviate the hard condition of the children of men; and movements, also, that have added much misery to many lives and times. Such antipodal institutions as Slavery and Foreign Missions have sought justification in the Bible, and proved the same to the perfect satisfaction of each party. Successive generations have found in it, and I believe still find in it, a way of life and an attitude towards life as adequate as man has yet devised. Such things differ, of course, in application: it depends upon which part you read and believe. Thus in the field of literary style alone, three very diverse worthies come to mind: the late Mr. Rudyard Kipling, Mme. Pearl Buck, and Mr. Ernest Hemingway. As to Kipling, read his *Collected Verse* with the Old Testament at your elbow. He owes much to the minor prophets and

to Kings and Chronicles. Mme. Buck's narrative method is the method of the Old Testament, unmistakable in its rhythm and balance. Mr. Ernest Hemingway, who, if he ever sees this comment will probably be annoyed, has the hard lapidary verbiage of the Book of Joshua.

For three hundred years the fiercest light of criticism has beat upon the King James compilation. Scholars and commentators in every age and land, ranging from the sonorous to the shrill, have examined and dissected and sifted the matters of origin and source, translation and transcription, truth and falsehood. The invaluable *Encyclopædia Britannica* devotes forty-two pages to these considerations, and several handsomely engraved pictures. It only points the way to a vast literature, wherein this codex is played against that one, and the Syriac syntax of 300 B.C. checked severely against the Masoretic text of the sixth to eighth centuries, and the existence of any original New Testament autographs devastatingly disproved. Consider the Exodus as a case in point: liberal-minded historians are agreed that some such movement of low-priced help occurred: and some such man as Moses doubtless existed as a labor

agitator in Lower Egypt, because there are cross-references. But, with the best will in the world, the event cannot be pinned down. The Pharaoh who saw the Nile banks full of blood, and heard the dreadful wailing for the first-born of the land, and (possibly) lost his Expeditionary Force by some phenomena of wind and tide in the Red Sea—who was he, that Pharaoh who hardened his heart? Evidence of equal weight indicates a king of the Hyksos or Shepherd Dynasty, 1800–1600 B.C.; Amenhotep III or Amenhotep IV, 1411–1386 B.C.; or Ramses II, about 1290 B.C., or even Merneptah, after him. And it makes no difference. Twelve generations of our people have read of Moses, the lawgiver and soldier, the patriot and seer, prototype of national hero in his high fixity of purpose and courage, and in his petulance and anger and humility most convincingly human, who talked on Sinai to Almighty God among the thunders. And that is good enough for them.

I do not here discuss the “kiver to kiver” Bible readers. One such was that statesman in the Deep South who ran for governor, and submitted to the questioning of the voters after a speech he made. “Judge,” said a Hardshell from

Big Sandy, "how do you stand on this here higher education? Do you believe that the people's good money ought to be spent on such things?"

"Brother," said the Judge, "I'm right glad you asked me that. My answer's sort of Yes and No. Education, in its place, is all right — and you may quote me as being in favor of it. But I don't believe in squandering the taxpayers' hard-earned dollars on teaching our splendid young Americans foreign languages. Languages like Greek and Latin, now! I'm against it. The language spoke by Jesus Christ, my Lawd an' Marster, is good enough for me!"

The thing is, that the Bible, whether you consider it as a collection of fables transmuted through the golden mists of an elder time, or as a system of ethics, or as a profession of faith, is the most convincing and comprehensive record of human experience and aspiration that exists in our world.

Messrs. Simon and Schuster, enterprising publishers, recognize this, as they say, angle, in a compilation newly on the market, *The Bible, Designed to Be Read as Living Literature*. The edition is arranged and edited by Mr. Ernest Sutherland Bates, and it is wholly

pleasing. King James and Master Robert Barker dealt with a more leisurely clientele in a less exacting age. Their print was trying to the eyes, and their system of numbered paragraphs and annotations not facile in the reading. Furthermore, they included chapters interesting only to persons with a passion for genealogies, or for masochism. Modern research in history and ethnology have indicated reasonable presumptions as to the extremely important relation between Biblical literature and events contemporary to such literature. Mr. Bates, with a free hand and some little courage, has proceeded along lines indicated by these considerations. He has arranged the several books chronologically and according to subject — that is, the histories are together, and the short stories, and the drama, and the poetry. The text is conventionalized. Footnotes are omitted: a brief essay introduces each book, orienting it in the general arrangement: and the essays are simple and scholarly, and might be expanded for the edification of every reader.

The version is, quite properly, the King James rendering; except in certain of the poetical sections, where the revised version is followed with, I think, not the best

judgment. The volume is admittedly sizeable for tabloid readers, yet it is not so thick and heavy as *Anthony Adverse*, and is about the dimensions of *Gone With The Wind*. The type is large and clear.

And it lives; it lives for all time. Looking at random, there is the Book of Joshua, the able general and administrator who succeeded Moses and brought the Israelites into the Promised Land. The editor finds Joshua a lay figure; but Joshua's record and his style are of the accomplished staff officer, impersonal behind war, statecraft, and government. The military operations reports should be models for every army in the world. The incident of Rahab and the spies is a flash from the zone of action that Floyd Gibbons might envy. The apprehension of the Canaanites as the Chosen People began to appear on the Southern horizon is strikingly reminiscent of representations before the League of Nations, when one of the Great Powers begins to follow Manifest Destiny; and the Gibeonites are worthy of note: the stratagem whereby they outsmarted Joshua and his advisors saved them from destruction and embalmed them in a proverb.

Going on to Judges, you read

how Israel neglected her defenses, and was in consequence oppressed for twenty years by Sisera and his nine hundred chariots of iron; and how the termagant Deborah dealt with Sisera, hideously; and of the great triumphant song she made on the battle by the waters of Megiddo, over a terrain exactly described where British Territorials and Australian Cavalry fought another battle, not so long ago. There is the story of Gideon, and his selective service scheme; and the fine sad story of Jephthah's Daughter: to this day, travelers report, the girls of the region around Mizpah, which was Mizpah in Gilead, go wailing in the Springtime for Jephthah's Daughter. There is the story of Samson, who had no luck with his women; and the cruel chronicle of the Benjaminite War, how scandalized Israel dealt with Benjamin; and how Benjamin got his wives thereafter, a thousand years before the Rape of the Sabines. There is much reading in Judges and in Samuel and in Kings, improving for a people of short memory who shut their eyes and dream of a world without violence. Whether in the bleak hills outside of Madrid this week, or on the mountains of Gilboa in King David's time, blood shows the

same upon the ground. And the chant of Isaiah's, which begins:

*Woe to the land shadowing with
wings
Which is beyond the rivers of
Ethiopia . . .*

might well be a lyrical rendering of General Graziano's final report on the operations of his Southern Column.

After the Judges and the Kings tramp the Prophets, reactionaries to a man, viewing with alarm and pointing with pain, having the certain knowledge and preview of disaster that proceed from much study of the records, and fail always of achievement in any practical line:

*. . . Stand ye in the ways, and see,
And ask for the old paths, where is
the good way,
And walk therein, and ye shall find
rest for your souls.
But they said, "We will not walk
therein."*

That wail would have adorned any recent campaign pronouncement of the late Republican Party. It might not have been efficacious, but it would have raised the literary standard of the Landon boys. Not even the Old Guard have devised such mouth-filling curses against the New Deal as lurk in the chapters of Jeremiah and Lamentations.

The Psalms follow, and the

Proverbs, much music and much homely wisdom. There are the immense spaces and the unearthly melody of Job. There is the sensuous beauty of the Song of Solomon, which is, we are told, a fragmentary wedding idyll; although I find in it neither the bloodless allegory the King James version painfully interpolated with its ardent cadences, nor yet, necessarily, any assurance of legalized and sanctified matrimony.

These lead to the group of short stories, as compact and exactly constructed as any ever written. Ruth is a lovely tale for any time and land, unspoiled here by the editor's remark that it is a piece of propaganda against inter-racial unions. Daniel was clearly a man of talent; and as to Esther, the clever Jewish young lady who, under some pressure from her Uncle Mordecai, saved her people from an early Persian pogrom, the narrative might deal with the anti-Semitic movement of contemporary Nordic Blondes. And there is Judith, that great lady, notable in dignity and in deadliness; and the ingenious Tobit, and the virtuous Susanna, out of the Apocrypha. Finally, there is Ecclesiastes, as cynically wise, and as utterly pagan, as anything that ever proceeded from Grecian groves.

Of the collection of vigorous reporting and correspondence called the New Testament, Tatian, a second-century Syrian rhetorician, commenting on the long-disappeared originals then current, said that their very paucity of style and crudeness of expression were proof of their sincerity. The learned Origen, a little later, conceded his

criticism, but held that the style was suitable to the common multitudes for whom the message was designed. However that may be, the King James version, here followed, is of a noble clarity and simplicity. It would be interesting to observe developments in the world if the ideas the Gospels advance were effectively applied.



INTELLECTUAL

BY EDWARD A. RICHARDS

COLD as the light of stars on ice
His eye sees Winter in the race,
And icicles of thought suffice
To drip cool words. He has the grace

To point stalactites at the crowd
Whose zone is hot or temperate,
But his desires are not allowed
To flow toward such a common fate.

He has forgotten that he felt.
If equatorial heat should come,
He thinks it would not crack or melt
His frozen equilibrium.

But like a berg he may float South
And warming his sagacity,
Yield up the vapor of his mouth
To Summer sun and Summer sea.

THE CHECK LIST

★★★★★ indicate a book of exceptional and lasting merit. ★★★★ a distinguished and valuable work. ★★★ a readable and engaging volume. ★★ a fair performance. ★ an unimpressive book, but with some minor characteristic of value. The absence of stars may be taken to mean the absence of merit.

BIOGRAPHY

★★★★★ GENERAL SMUTS, VOLUME II, by Sarah Gertrude Millin. \$3.50. *Little, Brown*. The concluding volume of one of the ablest biographies of recent times. Mrs. Millin's style is beautiful to behold; her handling of the later events in Smuts' career makes the flesh of history glow with life.

★★★★★ MACHIAVELLI AND HIS TIMES, by D. Erskine Muir. \$3.00. *Dutton*. An able and scholarly study of the Secretary to the Chancery in Cesare Borgia's Florence, with related portraits of the great figures of the day.

★★★ SAM ADAMS: PIONEER IN PROPAGANDA, by John C. Miller. \$4.00. *Little, Brown*. This excellent biography of that able, snarling, unscrupulous man awakes several reflections. One is, how patriotism lends itself to the uses of scoundrels; and another, that politics makes strange bedfellows. Certainly the least attractive of the Founding Fathers, Sam Adams was the most effective liar in the Colonies, and a nuisance to somebody all his days. Almost he reached the heights of the great inspirational liars who grace the present generation: his biographer does him full justice.

★★★ THE WOMEN OF THE CONFEDERACY, by Francis B. Simkins and James W. Patton. \$3.00. *Garrett & Massie*. From such sources, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, now sweeping the country like a brush fire, was assembled. The authors have offered a compilation rather than a presentation, but their material is splendid: it has beauty and pity and terror. The work is indexed and adequately documented. It is a valuable contribution to the reading of an age that knows little of actual misery.

★★★ THE ROOSEVELT FAMILY IN AMERICA, by Bellamy Partridge. \$3.00. *Hillman-Curl*. Competent study of a great dynasty, presented with some humor, and on the whole with fairness.

★★★ ROCHAMBEAU, by Jean-Edmond Weelen and the Vicomte de Rochambeau. \$3.00. *Holt*. Biography of the fine gentleman and good soldier who wrought mightily for American Independence. Anyone doubting the American obligation to France will find sound information here.