

## The Problem of the Bible

*The Story of the Bible, by Hendrik Willem Van Loon.*  
New York: Boni and Liveright. \$5.00.

MR. VAN LOON, who wishes his children to know their Scriptures and fears that most boys do not, has made a compendium of their contents for Hansje and Willem. That some simplified, possibly expurgated version of the Bible would be of value to youthful readers may be conceded. Here is a series of documents, produced over a long period of time. Their several parts took shape under varying economic, political, social conditions; they reflect the manners and morals of successive stages of national development. It requires, then, an historical imagination, informed by considerable knowledge both of Semitic history and the Mediterranean cultures, to perceive what these books meant to those who wrote them—which is the first step in that just understanding without which there can be no true appraisal. But this is a task no less difficult than valuable. To accomplish it one must not only discard the interwoven overlay of editorial, allegorical and theological interpretation but be careful, in the process, not to lose the ethical and spiritual distinction that lies beneath it.

Such a task needs, then, some familiarity with the assured results of Biblical criticism and although Mr. Van Loon's general knowledge in this field has failed him at specific points, yet, granted the scope and purpose of what he is trying to do, such lapses may fairly be considered minor deficiencies in his undertaking. It is more important for Mr. Van Loon's special task, however, that he be something of a poet and humanist as well. Why recast these ancient stories unless one can reinterpret them in the process? Anyone can tell the Bible stories; they tell themselves! But can one so retell them that the youthful mind can distinguish between the accidental and the essential in them, perceive that stories which are not factually "true" nevertheless contain truth; half insensibly reject the apparatus of the prodigious and the inexplicable and fasten on the moral insight, the religious passion, beneath?

Surely to accomplish this one must have some just principle of selection and some consistent method of interpretation. "As a matter of fact," Mr. Van Loon says, "I am not trying to interpret the Bible." Yet the first thing such an "introduction" as this should do is so to present its material to young minds as to minimize their future difficulties with the original; so to interpret that material that inherited prepossessions which are no longer tenable, or that nonchalant indifference which is sheer stupidity, should be dismissed before ever they had been accepted. In this, it seems to me, the book fails.

For instance: One might retell the Bible as a Book of Revealed Law, different in kind and hence in authority from all other literature, its uniqueness proved by theophany, miracle and prophecy. One may still do this with popular effectiveness, appealing to that "itch for certainty," as James called it, which is a constant factor in the race. Mr. Van Loon is too sophisticated to take this point of view yet he does not precisely reject it. He says regarding miracles:

... wherever we turn we meet with strange records of supernatural feats which have been common among the earliest inhabitants of far away lands. This proves

that the need for an imaginary world, in which the impossible becomes the self-evident, is very general and not restricted to a particular country or race.

But to many of us the influence which Jesus exercised upon the world was so astonishingly profound and inexplicable that we are willing to accept him without the doubtful embellishments of conjuration and exorcism.

In this we may be entirely wrong.

Perhaps Mr. Van Loon is trying here to teach his boys the value of the suspended judgment. Yet, as to "miracles," the world those boys will live in has already passed from suspended judgment to a conclusion. Moreover, when he deals with the Old Testament, the most mechanical of the miracles are related, without comment, as though taken at their face value. Yet it would not be difficult to explain to boys the nature of even the most miraculous myths, to show them that myths are neither lies nor "fairy tales" but the prescientific hypotheses, the crystallized ideals of early peoples which have a rich and intelligible meaning alike for the historian, the moralist, the believer.

Or the book could be retold as a literary creation of magnificent proportions. Here are the passion and pain, the sorrow and heroism of men reflected as in a mirror; here the analysis of conduct, the shrewd perception of motives, the sure operation of cause and effect in the moral order, the wistful pondering on nature and on man who is of nature and yet apart from it. Here is the short story, the elegiac poem, the lyric cry, the rustic idyll; here is dramatic dialogue, impassioned reasoning, sententious and pragmatic wisdom, all cast into that slow perfected form which comes from centuries of retelling. But here Mr. Van Loon fails again partly through selection of material. In the Exodus stories he relates all the plagues of Egypt and passes over the great narrative of the Bush that Burned and was not Consumed. Yet what a story it is for youthful minds! The tale of a young man who said, "I will now turn aside to see *why*." Who took his shoes from off his feet when he approached that Bush, filled with both curiosity and reverence as he tried to understand it. Who brooded over the wrongs of his people until he saw a way of escape for them and then was afraid to have faith in his own vision, to trust the validity of his own experience, who wanted to dream but not to do! Yet this story is ignored and we hear about the plagues of blood and flies! Worse than this the great tales which are recast lose, under Mr. Van Loon's interpretation, both their poetic glamour and their subtle insights—only their surface happenings, prosaic or incredible as the case may be, remain.

Take the Joseph story. Here is a masterpiece in plot, in contrasted characters, in probable adventures, in understanding of motives and consequences. It is a tale of adventure on heroic scale with conflicting human emotions to give it poignancy and power; it deals with pastoral simplicity, the splendor of an ancient court, the high finance which then, as now, knew how to turn a free, land-holding people into tenant bondage. The first chapter is an immortal picture of a spoiled, selfish yet high hearted boy; the second chapter shows this same boy, tempered by adversity, his gentle breeding issuing, under temptation, in the cold and vigorous chastity of the man. When Joseph is solicited by Potiphar's wife the record reads:

And it came to pass, after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me.

But he refused and said, Behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand;

There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?

Here is Mr. Van Loon's version:

And so Joseph became Potiphar's house slave and, ere long, he was the captain's right hand man, kept his accounts, and was overseer of all the other workmen on the estate.

Unfortunately Potiphar's wife thought the handsome, black-haired boy much better company than her own dull Egyptian husband. But Joseph, who knew that too great familiarity between masters and servants invariably leads to trouble, kept at a respectful distance.

Finally, one may retell the Bible as the record of the social evolution of a people, paying due attention to its literary form and poetic beauty in the process. This would seem to me the most rewarding approach. For here is the most complete literary record extant of the deepening and enlarging of the human spirit through successive stages of culture, pastoral, agrarian, urban and industrial. Here is the clue to the evolving social practice and religious changes of the book's various parts. What a wealth of illustrative and illuminating material is here for helping a boy to understand our own changing and confusing order! And Mr. Van Loon gives many hints of it. He clarifies the meaning of a theocracy by reference to the doctrine of the divine right of kings; shows by contemporary examples how easily names and dates are altered and confused by translation and oral transmission. Yet he does not succeed in treating the Bible as a living record of that human spirit of which Goethe said that while mankind was always progressing man himself remained ever the same.

Mr. Van Loon has "rationalized" the Bible. He has done all that can be done to show how like to all other books it is and he has been very able in doing it. There is great value in this; the Bible has been made unreal and magical by the lack of rational approach to it. But he has, so to speak, done it too well; he has fallen into the characteristic snare of the intellectualist, he has tried to make all things alike. And they are not all alike. It is essential to try to understand the problem of the One and the Many; it was never more essential than now. But one cannot resolve that problem by saying that, after all, there isn't any! It is important to show how like the Bible is to all other books; it is more important, if we are to understand it, to show its differences. These have been, and are, the major source of its authority.

Here is Mr. Van Loon's essential failure and it is most clearly revealed in the treatment of the life of Jesus. The gracious tales of healing which offer small difficulty to the modern mind, indeed can be understood by us as they never have been before, are all commonized. "Jesus was undoubtedly able to help those who came to him in the agony of imagined distress . . . people who thought they were lame . . . When it became known that the young Nazarene could give people a temporary relief from their ailments . . ." The story of the last night in the Garden of Gethsemane Mr. Van Loon gives as follows:

At that moment Judas slipped quietly out of the room.

They now all knew what was to come.

They could no longer stand it in that little room.

They needed fresh air . . . and opened the wicket to a garden which a friend had told them to use whenever they wished to be alone. . . .

It was a warm night.

They were all very tired.

After a while Jesus walked away from the little group. But three of the disciples who were closest to him followed at a distance.

He turned around and bade them wait and watch while he prayed.

The time had come for a final decision. Escape was still possible but escape would mean a silent confession of guilt and defeat for his ideas. . . .

He made his choice.

He stayed.

He went back to his friends.

And behold! they were fast asleep.

That is all. Mr. Van Loon does not show us the motives that actuated that conflict, he does not pierce to the heart of the struggle. Whatever the term means, none would deny that in Jesus we see consummate genius. Three things are true of genius. First, that it can largely be explained in terms of social inheritance and environment. Second, that there is a residuum in genius which cannot be so explained. Both these things are true of all of us. But, third, in genius, it is the inexplicable part which is the more important. It is here, if we are to try to understand genius that attention must fasten. If our confused and troubled world, bitterly conscious of its moral perplexities, its spiritual poverty—is ever to have a fresh interpretation of the Galilean it will be when free and candid minds cease bending all their energy to showing us how like Jesus was to all the rest of us and begin to try to understand just where and why and how he was unlike the rest of us. It is this aspect of the life of Jesus that those, who want to be wise and kind for the boys of the next generation will magnify. Mr. Van Loon has minimized it.

ALBERT PARKER FITCH.

## Oxford and Cambridge

*The Older Universities of England: Oxford and Cambridge, by Albert Mansbridge. With drawings by John Mansbridge. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. \$2.50.*

A REMARKABLE book, both for what it is and what it is not. For the American who wants a guide to "quaint old Oxford and Cambridge," this is not the thing; although Mr. Mansbridge's illustrations embody more truly the character of those ancient fabrics than any we have seen since Loggan's. It is not primarily a history, although the history of English university education has never been so well done in so little space. It is not a dry Department of Education report, although the author was on the last Royal Commission on the Universities. It is not a manual for Rhodes scholars, although the appendix contains more clear practical information as to what an American may study and had better not try to study at Oxford and Cambridge, than he can find between any other two covers. Although devastatingly frank about the shortcomings of its subject, the spirit