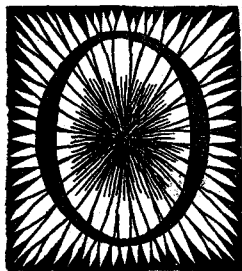


# The Bible as Literature<sup>1</sup>

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NE of our old dramas bears the somewhat remarkable title, "A Woman Killed with Kindness." It would seem as if a similarly constructed title might well describe the Bible in the hands of its English readers; it is a "Literature Smothered by Reverence." Of course, as a source of spiritual life the sacred Word has its full vitality and vitalizing force. But the Bible is something besides this; the very name "Bible" may be translated "Literature," and, considered as literature, it must be confessed that the Bible is exercising little influence upon those to whom it is familiar. Moreover, it would seem that it has been reduced to this state of inanition through an extreme reverence, which, being divorced from intelligence, has proved mischievous. It has been felt that, in the case of so transcendent a message, the very sentences containing it were sacred. But, in thus doing homage to the separate sentences, readers have lost that linking between sentences and sentences which gave to them all their real force; to the devout reader the Bible has become a storehouse of isolated texts, of good words. He scarcely realizes that it exhibits the varieties of literary form familiar to him elsewhere—essays, epigrams, sonnets, stories, sermons, songs, philosophical observations and treatises, histories and legal documents. Even dramas are to be found in the Bible, and also love-songs; nay, so far does dumb show enter into the ministry of Ezekiel that some of his compositions might fairly be described as tableaux-vivants. The distinction between things sacred and things secular, which exercises so questionable an influence upon our times, seems unknown to the world of the Old Testament. Its literature embraces national anthems of Israel in various stages of its history, war ballads with rough refrains, hymns of defeat and victory, or for triumphant entrance into a conquered capital; pilgrim songs, and the chants with which the family parties beguiled the journeys to the great feasts; fanciful acrostics to clothe sacred meditations or composed in compliment to a perfect wife; even the games of riddles which belong to such social meetings as Samson's wedding. With the single exception of humorous literature, for which the Hebrew temperament has little fitness, the Bible presents as varied an intellectual food as can be found in any national literature.

But the anxious inquiry will be made by some: Will not this literary treatment of Holy Writ interfere with its higher religious and theological uses? The question ought to answer itself: if the Divine Revelation, which might have been made in so many different ways, has in fact taken the form of literature, this must be warrant sufficient for making such literary form a matter of study. But this is an understatement of the case; not only is the literary study of the Bible permissible, but it is a necessary adjunct to the proper spiritual interpretation. No doubt edification of a kind may be drawn from an isolated verse or a brief succession of sentences; but it is only when each literary section has been understood as a whole in its plain or natural meaning that it is safe to go forward to the deeper spiritual signification. The neglect of this principle is responsible for many of the fanciful and even grotesque interpretations of the old commentators. To take an example, Solomon's Song contains the following passage:

By night, on my bed,  
I sought him whom my soul loveth;  
I sought him, but I found him not.

<sup>1</sup> This will be followed by articles by the Rev. Dr. Henry Van Dyke, whose subject will be "The Hebrew Psalter," by Professor J. F. Genung, of Amherst College, who will write upon "Job," by Professor A. B. Bruce, of Scotland, who will treat of "The Mosaic Law," by the Rev. W. E. Griffis, whose subject is "The Song of Solomon," by the Rev. J. M. Whiton, Ph.D., who will write on "Jonah," and by other articles the authors and subjects of which will be announced later.

A commentator like Quarles was ready from this single verse to plunge into mystic interpretation. His book of emblems represents a female figure, conventionally signifying the human soul, standing with a flat candlestick in her hand by a bedside; she is turning down the bed-clothes, and appears surprised to find nothing inside them; while on the floor, hidden from her but visible to the reader, is the figure of the Saviour, in the attitude of one who has tumbled out of bed. No irreverence, of course, is intended; but such ludicrous literalism would be impossible to any one reading the poem as a piece of literature, who must see that the words quoted are the beginning of an exquisite dream of the heroine losing and again finding her lover. Nor when the dream has been fully caught is there any loss of mystic symbolism. All sections of the poem are a celebration of conjugal love. But the Old and New Testament alike apply the imagery of Bride and Bridegroom to the relations between the soul and Christ, or the Church and its Head, and thus all the thoughts and emotions of the poem can have their spiritual applications. First in order of time is that which is natural—the plain literary interpretation—and afterwards that which is spiritual.

The point to be pressed upon the reading world at the present time is that the Bible is, above all things, an *interesting* literature. No class of readers can afford to neglect it, for—with the single exception noted above—every variety of literary interest is represented in the books of the Old and New Testaments. And, in marvelous manner, all these kinds of literary beauty are concentrated in a single work—the Book of Job. This has an epic story for its basis; if it has less of lyric than of any other form, yet this lyric element—the Curse—is among the most famous passages in all poetry. The bulk of the book is a drama, in which there are characters finely discriminated and meeting in sharp contrast, an open-air scene and chorus of spectators, and a plot which has its dénouement in a thunder-storm—the overlooking of which scenic touch has led to misunderstanding of the speeches attributed to God. The matter of the poem embraces ethical questions, and even questions of social science, which are still the themes of our philosophers; while so artistically are the various elements blended that each stage of the drama—from prologue to epilogue—has the function of stating or shadowing a different solution of the world's great mystery of pain. Such a blending of all kinds of interest in a single work cannot be paralleled in any other of the world's masterpieces.

Among the separate branches of literature the lyric poetry of the Bible ranges from the early Songs of Deborah, or of Israel by the Red Sea, danced by answering choruses of men and women, to such ideal and deeply spiritual meditations as the Hundred and Thirty-ninth Psalm. Critics by no means partial to the religious side of Scripture have recognized that in lyric poetry the Hebrew leads the literature of the world. Of epic poetry, on the contrary, it has been the custom to say that the Bible has no example. But the truth is rather that the definition of epic poetry needs enlarging to take in the stories of Scripture; the ignoring of these has led to the common mistake that "epic" is equivalent to "fiction." Except in this one matter of being part of the national history, these Biblical stories produce upon our minds just the effect of epic poems. Such a story is that of Joseph, with its ironic situations and poetic justice; or that of David and Saul, brimful of adventure; or the mixed verse and prose that make up the story of Balaam; or the exquisite idyl that unites in so sweet a bond the melancholy beauty of Naomi and the shy grace of Ruth; or the crown of them all, the Book of Esther, which is saved from being an exciting novel with a double plot only by the accident of its being historically true. These stories are epic gems in a setting of sober history. And this setting will appeal to a

different literary taste, presenting history in all its forms, from the archæology of Genesis, or the constitutional history of the following books, to the ecclesiastical digests of Chronicles.

It is impossible here to name all the departments of Biblical literature. A nation's whole philosophy—in that picturesque dress which has given to Hebrew philosophy its name of "Wisdom"—may be read in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and the Apocryphal books of Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom of Solomon; read in their proper order, they display the whole development of that philosophy, from the brief, disjointed observations that make up Proverbs, to the first troubled attempt to read the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes, and the recovered serenity when, in the Book of Wisdom, a wider survey of life harmonizes analysis and faith. The literature of oratory is splendidly represented in Deuteronomy; and no collection of speeches in secular literature has the interest which is given to the orations of Moses by the dramatic setting of the book, which presents the pathetic situation of Moses at Pisgah, until pathos becomes triumph and rhetoric gives place to song. Philosophy and oratory belong to all literatures; but the Bible has all to itself the department of prophecy. This gathers into one distinct literary form sermons and political speeches; burdens on hostile peoples that suggest the satires of secular literature; the mystic poetry of visions; dramatic dialogues like Micah's controversy before the mountains, or Jeremiah's intercession in a season of drought; while all ordinary literary forms are transcended when Joel and Isaiah present advancing judgment in a spiritual drama that has all space for its stage and all time for the period of its action.

In intrinsic worth, then, the Old Testament is second to none of the world's great literatures. Moreover, it has, in common with the literature of Greece and Rome, been the main factor in the development of our modern prose and poetry. For the English-speaking people, no liberal education will be complete in which Classical and Biblical literatures do not stand side by side.



## Did the Millerites Have Ascension Robes?

By Jane Marsh Parker

Miss Wilkins, in her Millerite story, "A New England Prophet," published in the September "Harper," gives what the majority of her readers will accept, because coming from her, as a true realistic picture of the fanaticism in New England, a glimpse of what has been called the great spiritual cyclone of the century. To those who have personal reminiscences of "the tenth day of the seventh month" excitement of 1844, the story is one of peculiar interest.

The many admirers of Miss Wilkins's most excellent work in the past have always prized its marked characteristic of historical truthfulness, its clear-cut artistic photography. The least betrayal of a lapse on her part in a contrary direction will be noted with regret; such a lapse is her misrepresentation of Millerism as seen in the "New England Prophet," the result evidently of a misconception of the movement drawn from the popular estimate of it—from accepted traditions which cannot be verified. The story seems to deepen many erroneous impressions of a movement which, disastrous as it was, did much to clarify the theological atmosphere. Had Miss Wilkins lived fifty years ago, had she been a child in a home where great charts with their grotesque portraiture of apocalyptic beasts, Nebuchadnezzar's image, and many zoölogical eccentricities and mathematical demonstrations were conspicuous upon the walls, and where the coming of the Lord on "the tenth day of the seventh month" was talked about in a matter-of-fact, positive way, she would have made her story other than it is in several particulars, and the ascension robe, if woven in, would not have been indorsed as a fact, as it certainly is. She would remember

how bitterly she suffered as a child when jeered at by her schoolmates for having such a garment, how they used to importune her for a look at it, and how many of them actually believed, because their parents told them so, that the Millerites went up to the graveyard at night in their robes, and that she had been with them. With all that in her remembrance, Miss Wilkins would never have woven an ascension robe into a story, as if all that her playmates accused her of in those dreadful days had been really true, after all.

The movement needed something to give it a picturesque air, and until the camp-meetings began in the woods, the ascension robe was about all that it had in the way of picturesqueness; and that was loaned by the scoffers. To know the fanaticism as it really was, one must read the original literature of the movement—the leading organs of the sect (which in this country numbered over fifty thousand), its many books, and the tracts sown broadcast over the land. It is a most creditable literature, all in all, making due allowance for its iron-clad, unmitigated literalism. We must remember, in reading it, that anything akin to a spiritual interpretation was looked upon with distrust fifty years ago. Verily, did not Universalism and Unitarianism and Swedenborgianism come from the spiritual interpretation? Had Miss Wilkins read much of their publications she would have been surprised, no doubt, at discovering the fair Biblical learning of the leaders of the movement—that they and their followers were not, in the main, illiterate and superstitious—far from it. In turning over the files of the weekly and daily papers published by the Millerites she would have found many allusions to ascension robes. She might have read Father Miller's call for one, asking that one be produced for his inspection, and the reports of those who failed in discovering such a garment. These fanatics were not ashamed of their unpopular and much-reviled faith. If they had provided ascension robes against the last day, they would not have denied that same. But the ascension robe existed only in the brain of the scoffer, and the newspapers made the most of it whenever they could, despite all the protests the Millerites made against the charge of having such garments. Possibly, and probably, the believers would have supplied themselves with ascension robes—that is, some would have had them—only that the first suggestion came from those who jeered at the believers, making them to see how ridiculous ascension robes would appear, notwithstanding their apparent harmony with the general trend of the movement. The only article of the kind that a well-known preacher of the doctrines succeeded in tracking down, after a long and disheartening chase, turned out to be his own—his long night-shirt which his neighbors had seen on the family clothes-line. The writer of this remembers very well hearing as a little child Father Miller (William Miller, not Joseph, as Miss Wilkins has it) talking at her father's table about the ascension robes, and how he wished that, if any of the brethren or sisters ever had been so foolish as to make one, they could be made to see what disgrace they were bringing upon "the cause." In his constant journeying through the country, Father Miller had tried in vain to find some one who really knew of any one who had an ascension robe.

Father Heims, of the diocese of Dakota, the most venerable of the clergy of the Episcopal Church, highly honored and revered by priesthood and laity, was once the chief evangelist—next to Father Miller—of the doctrine of the speedy coming in 1843-1844. His reminiscences of the movement are surely deserving of attention, his word beyond question; and Father Heims (Joshua V. Heims, of the old "Midnight Cry") has about given up trying to dispel the ascension robe delusion, though it still makes him indignant to hear one spoken of as a historical fact, to find it woven in a false light into the song and story of standard authors, and calculated to strengthen an erroneous impression.

If the Millerites had ever arrayed themselves in ascension robes, it would have been when that company of believers went out from Philadelphia some five miles, October 9, 1844, "over the Schuylkill along the Darby