

The Democracy of the Bible

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Last Sunday I spoke of the Democracy of God, calling attention to the fact that all through the age men have been making their gods as a picture of their interpretation of the universal realities, and the significance of human experience in life. The point which I had in mind especially was to bring home the truth that the essence of life is not to worship the God that our fathers made, but to worship the God that we are making, and to remember in doing this, that in the handiwork of our craft is our prayer.

We have to confess with regret, that when we come to such a subject as we are dealing with today, that we are hardly able to treat it fairly and without prejudice on account of the fact that the use and place of such books as the Bible in human life have been so perverted and distorted by overzealous friends that we are not able to free ourselves from a certain prejudice against it. In point of fact, the wail of complaint sent out by these same would-be friends to the effect that the Bible is being left to ignominious oblivion by the on-marching world is just what they deserved, and what they ought to expect. The truth is that we have been bibles to a point of nausea by these pious ranters. In fact, many who have taken these people at their word concerning the Bible, in simple disgust have laid the book aside among the useless trash that humanity has outgrown. This is a lamentable fact, for in so doing we are casting aside a great treasure. It is true that if all the bibles in the world should be suddenly destroyed, and all trace of them should be forgotten, the world would still go on, and humanity would not go to ruin and perdition as many think, yet it would be a great loss to humanity, for it is a great human document. The Bible, as an arsenal of dogma and theological texts, has come very close to destroying the Bible as a very valuable human book, for our generation at least. I hope that none of us will fall

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911.

victims to their evil teachings. That we may have some understanding of the real value of the book as a human document and a nourisher of human effort and achievement, I am saying what I have to say this morning.

I was interested to note the other day that Ibsen, the great Norwegian writer and dramatist, whom no one would accuse of ecclesiastical inclinations, was a great reader of the Bible.² During the months when he was producing his great plays dissecting modern society, and laying bare its impossible hypocrisies, the only book that he ever looked into was the Bible. It was to him what it apparently was to the Puritan revolutionist, a help and a guide in doing a great and laborious task. If, in the tasks before us, there is any light to be gleaned from its wisdom, any stimulation and inspiration to be had from its noble passages, any encouragement and strength to be derived from the personalities embodied in its pages, it would be a shame that we should lose that help because a lot of people, more loud spoken than wisely spoken, have disgusted us with their interminable tirade about the word of God. If we may not be led to sins of commission by their false and foolish teachings, let us also not be led to sins of omission.

Let me state briefly what the Bible is. It is a five-inch shelf of books of the Jewish race. It contains the gleanings of their historical and poetical writings. It contains the best of their fiction, their orations, their religious aspirations, their laws, customs, and it is by no means free from their religious dogmas. Out of a great background of material, by a natural process of selection, we have in the Bible the gleanings of the literary remains of a great people. About all that we know of the evolution of a great race, from the days of barbarian culture to the state of civilization, is to be found in this library of their life. Their legends, their mythology, more or less accurate records of their history, the struggles of their growth, the records of a human family are there. Now if you have any faith in the great principles of modern life, that through the experiences and reflections of men in their life struggles comes wisdom, and truth, and the approach to justice, then you must see that in this record of the growth of a people

² Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828-1906) Norwegian playwright and theatre director, a founder of modernism in theatre, also referred to as "the father of realism."

from the dim vapory days of prehistoric times down to the collapse of ancient civilization, and the beginning of medievalism, it must be a storehouse of that which is valuable for us today. Such a book as that we must not throw away lightly because some overzealous persons try to make of the book a thing which it never was and never can be.

I want to state as simply as I may some of the ways in which the book helps me, not alone this book, but all great books, and after all, this is all that I am trying to do, is suggest its real use in life. In the first place, it must be noted that the book is not merely Jewish, it is human. The race that produced it is one of the human family. Their experiences are like other human families except for the accident of form and circumstance. So, it is a human document, and humanity is not unlike today what it was then. Some men will say, "What use and time have I to read about the past, when there is so much in the present? Why should I devote myself to the ages that are gone, why should I pour over the pages that record the life that is no more, when the living present demands so much of my attention, and absorbs all of my time?" The answer to that is very simple. The roots of gold and veins of honor that are feeding the present, have their tips back in the ages that have gone. We are today what we are by virtue of the past. In order to understand the present, to discern clearly the direction and tendencies of modern life, and to make a valuable and faithful contribution to the work of our own times, we must know [the] soil in which the roots of the living plants of today have taken their nourishment. We need the sense of historic continuity, not continuity of form, but continuity of spirit, and purpose, to give us the requisite poise, determination and intelligence in the face of our own life problems. You have presented to you a great problem, you have to meet it, struggle with it, and solve it. We have before us today, in our own national life, a tremendous problem caused by the revolution in religious thought. On the one hand, we have the tremendous drift towards what some are pleased to call agnosticism, and away from the traditional forms and standards of religious thought and moral conduct. You have the radicals and the conservatives. One will tell you one thing and the other the other. You are interested in the great problem that you face, you want to do sincerely and fairly what you can for its solution. But you hardly know which way to turn. On the one hand, the conservative will tell you that the only hope of humanity is to go back to the traditions of the fathers, to

accept and believe what the fathers accepted and believed, whether you can or not. All this radical teaching is a menace to society, and is only the precursor of disintegration, and the destruction of all life values. Then you turn to the radical, and he tells you all hope is in the future, that the water which has turned the mill is passing on to the sea. He will tell you that the conservative is treasuring the memory of things that have been but can never be again. You must decide between the two, you must work either in one direction or the other. Which are you going to do? If you have any sense of historic continuity, if you know anything of the past, you will have a basis for making an intelligent judgement and decision. You will see that the situation which you face is similar as men have been facing all through history. Take for example, a situation in Jewish history whose records are left in the Bible. When the great prophets came to the front with their astonishing condemnation of the oppression and inhumanity of Israel, when Amos left the flocks of sheep in the fields of Tekoa, and came to the city of the king, with his stinging denunciations, declaring that their worship of God was the most obnoxious mockery, that their sacrifices, their solemn assemblies, and the noise of their songs God hated and despised, and he would not be satisfied until justice should roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.³ Then what happened, when this prophet of social righteousness started his crusade against the iniquities of his time? The conservative element rallied to the old cry of the glory of God and the great work done in former times by the nation and its priests and Levites, and condemned the great Amos for his denunciations and attempted to drive him out of the land. The logic of history has shown that justice and truth were speaking in the voice of Amos, and that iniquity and selfishness and greed were speaking in the voice of the pious priests and hunkers who condemned him. In that day, when Amos spoke, there was born a new era unto Israel, the greatest and most glorious of its history. History has found its judgement of condemnation, those forgotten and unnamed servants and slaves of an iniquitous and greedy generation, while Amos has been accorded the position of the first great moral leader of historic Israel. Again, in the middle ages when feudalism had done its work, and the conventional life of Europe, both state and ecclesiastical, was honeycombed by the rottenness and filth of its greed and oppression, there arose a great cry throughout

³ See the Book of Amos, and in particular Amos 5:24.

the nation, the rumblings of revolution were heard, then followed great wars, and turmoil, and strife, the fight of justice against injustice, of humanity against the power of greed, avarice, and privilege. Out of it all came a great people, freed from the heel of feudalism. Their book of instruction all through this period was the Bible. From it came their ideals and inspirations, with it they supported their arguments, and under its banner as a symbol of eternal truth, they fought their way through the dark days of their conflict. And when the struggle was over, they gave the book a place of honor and reverence in their lives. But in time they too became overlords, and the book which they had used as a weapon of offense, they now used as a weapon of defense. It became a fetish to them. They worshipped, and that which had been their servant now became their master, and held them in the grip of a devoted superstition. If you know those facts, it gives you a tremendous advantage in determining your own conduct in the face of your own problems. Truth is not conservative, justice is not conservative. Greed is conservative, privilege is conservative. If you want to ally yourself with truth and justice, the history of humanity tells you where you belong, and your cold reasoning head can then confirm the sentiments and longings of your human heart, that is always stirred by an ingrained love for truth and justice. If you love humanity, if you are interested in justice, in truth, in progress, in humanitarian uplift, do not let a prejudice, brought about [by] superficial retailers of platitudes, deprive you of the use of a book that contains the records of one, two or more great historic struggles for freedom and justice, and was the arsenal of facts in a second great reformation. Do not be deceived by its accidental forms. Do not become subservient to it but use it as an invaluable weapon in the eternal fight for justice and humanity. It is human. Its spirit is democratic, its real essence is humanitarian. Parts of it are worthless, but parts of it will survive on the merits of their intrinsic worth long after much of the up to date writings have disappeared.

Then, in a use that is more personal, I find a great satisfaction and delight. A part of my own personal Bible is in this Bible of the Jewish race. Every man must have a Bible of his own, must have his literature to which he goes in different moods for help, and uplift. Each has to live his life more or less alone. Sometimes we have to do things that grow out of inner convictions, we have to stand out alone, and face the

little world in which we live. We cannot explain, we cannot make our friends see, and they cannot understand. Yes, the thing must be done, and we await the development of events to condemn or justify our action. Such action is not easy. It is easy enough to do what the crowd asks. It is easy enough to do a brave deed amid the hurrahs and shoutings of the crowd, but it is not so easy to cast all you have into the boat and sail away from the moorings of conventionality out into the open, and trust yourself to the unseen and eternal truth, that has not yet been seen by men. It takes a great soul to do that. And when I see anyone doing it and I want to understand the full strength of their heroism, I go to some of the confessions and stories of the Bible, for I find there the outpourings of human souls who have done that very thing. I do not know a more glorious passage in all literature as the expression of the desperate loneliness of the human soul in its loving service for humanity than the story of the Garden of Gethsemane.⁴ If you want to know what the men who have purchased for us whatever of freedom we have, have been through, just go home and read that passage, calling to mind the facts. Here is the lone man, whose life has been consecrated to the good of humanity, who has cast aside all considerations of wealth, of honor among his friends, of comfort, and ease, that he might drive home to a burdened nation the truth that in the secrets of his heart he felt that they must have. Now he had come to the critical time in his life, either all that he had said and done must go by default, and he must be branded merely as a demagogue, and openly deny the truth of his assertions, or he must pay the last penalty of his manhood demanded by the cruelty and injustice of [his] times. All his followers have deserted him, even the three most faithful disciples do not understand, and slept through his agony. Do you wonder that he alone with his convictions, facing the fact that all the world was against him, and clamoring for his life, broke forth into that natural human prayer, uttered alone in the silence of the nighttime, and in the agony of his soul. One of the great human moments of history. I love to read that when I hear of a man or a woman who has done the brave deed, and faces the condemnation of the world alone. Its human. Its divine.

I use this as an illustration of the personal use to which some parts of this book may be put. That passage alone is worth

⁴ See Mark 14:32-42.

all the cost, if all the rest were dross. When you are making up your own personal Bible, your own collection for your own help, I beg of you, do not pass this gem of human consecration simply because some ignorant person tells you that it is the record of a supernatural event staged in histrionic fashion for your pious instruction. It is the outpouring of a human soul. Cherish it. In such human moments humanity is at its best. There would be less of that harsh and ignorant criticism among men if we read oftener such gleanings of human life as this presents. Even in our own commonplace lives there come moments that demand courage and conviction. When you face such a moment as that, read some passage that shows you the acme of human consecration. Leave the world behind, and fight it out.

I have used the two illustrations at some length for the sake of pointing out the social and personal value of a great literature. By natural processes of selection, we are weeding from the literature of the past, and perhaps adding a sentence from our own times, in making our Bible of Democracy. Each age makes its own Bible. To the Jews, it was the Law, the first five books of the Old Testament. To the early Christians it was the Old Testament as a whole, the Law and the Prophets. To the later Christians it was the Old Testament and part of the New Testament. For four hundred years after the time of Jesus the Christian was adding and subtracting from its own contribution. In our own time, we are unconsciously doing the same thing. We are making our Bible of Democracy, from all the great writings of the past, we are selecting those choice bits that appeal to the depths of the human soul in all its varied moods. In this cumulative and selective process, we find our kinship to the past, and realize the true continuity of human history in the continuity of its great hopes, its great struggles for truth, and justice. Through the symbol of language expressing the hope, the thought, the aspiration, and the history of humanity through the centuries, we enter into that deeper and more wholesome idea that we are not merely the children of our time but of all time.