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# THE BIBLE, BOOK OF DESTINY

JOHN A. MACKAY

IT is an impressive coincidence that the opening of this one hundred and forty-first session of our Seminary should coincide with a triple celebration which centers in the Bible.

Christendom is celebrating in these days the five hundredth anniversary of the first book ever printed, the *Gutenberg Bible*. Tonight there is being celebrated in many parts of this country the remarkable achievement of the new American *Revised Standard Version* of the Holy Scriptures of which one million copies have been issued and are now available. Most interesting of all, perhaps, is the fact that in these same days has appeared, for the first time in literary history, an official Roman Catholic version of the Bible in English, translated directly from the original Hebrew and Greek. I suppose, therefore, that it is natural, and even inevitable, that I should say something this evening about the Bible.

I cannot speak personally about the Bible without straightway becoming lyrical. The earliest memories of my boyhood in the Scottish Highlands cluster around the Bible. How vividly I remember, when I was the merest child, how my Father would say, at a certain hour each evening, "Children, it is time to take the Book." Family worship followed. There was prayer before and after the reading of the Book, and the singing of the Scottish metrical version of the Psalms. In the morning after breakfast, before we went

our several ways, the Book was "taken" again.

A good many years afterwards, while I was still in my boyhood, the Book really began to speak to me personally, and I began to speak to God in terms of it. But the practice of "taking the Book," morning and evening, whether for private devotions or in the family circle, has continued with me as a basic habit from that day to this.

I do not propose to speak in historical terms regarding versions of the Holy Scriptures. My colleague, Dr. Kuist, did that in a most admirable way last Sunday evening for those of us who were privileged to hear him in the First Presbyterian Church, when he described and appraised the several English versions of the Bible. What I say this evening will be, I feel, no more than an appendix to what he said at that time.

I would make two affirmations about the Bible. Around each there cluster a certain number of reflections, very personal thoughts, which I would share with you at the beginning of this new Seminary year.

## I

The first affirmation is this: *The Bible is being acclaimed as a monument of human literature*. It has a right to be so acclaimed, for the Book is most certainly an incomparable literary achievement. Where in the world's letters do we have, for example, a greater variety of literary forms? In our Bible there is prose and poetry, history and drama, allegory and parable. Here, too, are lyric and ode and

<sup>1</sup> Address by President Mackay in Miller Chapel on September 30, 1952, at the opening of the one hundred and forty-first session of the Seminary.

epic, prophetic oracle and most intimate personal letters. No book, moreover, has been more translated in whole or in part into the languages of earth than has this volume. It has appeared to date in more than one thousand tongues, and the impressive thing is that in many instances the translation of the Bible into a vernacular fixed the literary language and style of that vernacular, while the translation itself became a literary classic.

Certainly the Bible is the Book which is most quoted and most quotable, the volume which has made the deepest imprint upon the literature of our Western World. The Bible is also the most sublimely eloquent book ever written. In a literary coterie in the City of Edinburgh in the Seventeenth Century, the Scottish philosopher and sceptic, David Hume, challenged anyone to parallel a certain magnificent passage in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. The passage is this:

"The cloud capp'd towers, the  
gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great  
globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall  
dissolve;  
And, like this insubstantial pageant  
faded,  
Leave not a rack behind."

The Christian poet, George Buchanan, took up the challenge and, amid intense stillness, quoted from the Apocalypse the passage which begins: "And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them." (Rev. 20:11) All were agreed that the Biblical passage was sublimer than the Shakespearean.

Now such sublimity in a literary sense is natural because the Bible is a religious book. As such it has been designated the crowning achievement of religious genius. But as religious literature the Bible is also unique. The books of the Bible do not belong to Israel, and are not continuous with the genius of the Hebrew people, in the way that Greek literature emerged from, and is continuous with, the genius of the Greek people. Plato's *Republic* is a truer expression of the Hellenic race than the Prophecies of Isaiah and the Four Gospels are a native creation of the Hebrew race. Why? Because the greatest things in the Bible are not things that emerged naturally out of Israel; they were things that were spoken to Israel, things that thwarted Israel, contradicted Israel, molded Israel. It is simply not true to say that the Bible is a monument of religious genius which the Hebrew people gave to the world. It is truer to say that we have in the Bible what God spoke to Israel and to the world. That is to say, sounding in the pages of the Bible is the Word of the Eternal God.

Because that is so, it is extremely perilous to think of the Bible only as a monument of human literature. Some contemporary men of letters, who are both Christians and outstanding thinkers, have sensed this. They are concerned about the obsequious respect being shown to the Bible at the very time when in the English-speaking world, as Dr. Marjorie Nicolson, the distinguished teacher of English literature at Columbia University, has said, we have the first generation of writers since *Beowulf* which does not know the Bible. Charles Williams, an English writer, speaks of the offensive, condi-

tioned reverence which is being shown to the Bible, a kind of reverence which in his view is both uncritical and irreligious. The poet, T. S. Eliot, emphasizes the fact that the Bible has had an influence upon literature, not because it was regarded as literature, but because it was accepted as the Word of God. Where, on the other hand, there is no more than conditioned respect for the Bible, the Book becomes a monument over the grave of the Christian religion.

One can never forget that famous incident when the Frenchman, Voltaire, a notorious atheist, viewing a religious procession passing through the street, bowed with as much reverence as all the rest. When a friend took him to task for his inconsistency, Voltaire replied: "Yes, I salute, but I do not speak." That is it! The Bible is saluted but it is not listened to; many men who do the Book obeisance do not address the Almighty in terms of it, making use of its incomparable prayer language.

## II

This leads me to my second affirmation. *The Bible is the book of human destiny.* Historically speaking, the Bible has proved to be a decisive element in religion, in culture, in civilization. William Temple, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, used to say that the real difference between religions is Bible or no Bible. Indeed, the most decisive difference between cultures is whether they were influenced or not by the Bible. The truth of this is strikingly illustrated in the Spanish-speaking world. Comparing Hispanic-America with English-speaking America, the decisive difference between the two civilizations is that the civilization down south has

owed nothing to the Bible, neither in its letters, its politics, its sociology, or its philosophy, while in these northern parts, with all our sins, the Bible has been a decisive influence. All that is best in our national life and in Canadian national life we owe to the Book. You have the symbol of this in two key figures in Spanish and English literature who are prototypes, the one of Hispanic-America, the other of Anglo-Saxon America. I refer to Don Quixote and Robinson Crusoe. Don Quixote symbolizes that outlook upon life which would impose upon the motherland of Spain and her colonies in the western world a pattern regarded as divine. But in the great library of Don Quixote, whose books of knight errantry turned the head of the Spanish knight, there was no Bible. Bonfires have blazed in Spain and in Latin America, bonfires of confiscated Bibles. Today it is more difficult for Bibles to circulate in Spain than in Soviet Russia.

Robinson Crusoe was the prototype of the pilgrims who came to these shores from England out of a political tempest. Ashore on his ocean island Crusoe found a Bible in an old sea chest which he had salvaged from the wreck. The Book spoke to his need. Through its words he spoke to Deity. He read, "Call upon me in the day of trouble. I will deliver thee and thou shalt glorify me." He called upon God and he was delivered. One of the forgotten chapters in Defoe's masterpiece deals with the conversion, in evangelical fashion, of Robinson Crusoe through the reading of the Holy Scriptures, which he discovered casually in an old sea chest where he was looking for something else.

There is the true source of the dif-

ference between the two American civilizations. You have on the one hand a civilization which, with all its idealism, has not known the Bible and has suffered in consequence in every phase of its life. And you have a civilization which, with all its uncanny realism and manifold sins, has known the Book and owes its greatness to that knowledge. How luminous and dramatic in this connection is a recent literary occurrence. The first and only Latin American writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature is the great Chilean poetess, Gabriel Mistral. This distinguished woman attributes her literary talent and its development to the fact in her girlhood, as a great exception to the young womanhood of her generation, she became intimately acquainted with the Bible. She has stated unashamedly that the Bible formed her character, refined her sensibilities, and developed her gifts as a writer. In the great lands down south there exists in many circles the awareness that the chief tragedy in their cultural situation, and especially in their religious situation, is the fact the Bible has been an unknown book.

So, historically speaking, the Bible has been, in one way or another, a book of destiny. It has been so because intrinsically, in its very nature, the Bible is *the* Book of destiny. In its pages we listen to the word of destiny addressed to all mankind. When people get beyond reading literary snippets from the Bible, and seriously ask themselves what the Book is all about, they will discover that the Bible is a book about the nature and destiny of man. Here is a view of man's original nature. Here we are confronted with the contradiction which was introduced into that nature; while a large part of the Book is concerned with the

restoration of human nature to its pristine dignity. And right in the center of the whole discussion is a people of destiny, Israel, chosen by God to know Him, to be restored by Him, and to bless the world. But Israel, we know, refused to accept her destiny. She wanted to remain the petted, pampered people of the Lord God of Israel. Refusing therefore to fulfill her mission, she was rejected. When we come to consider mankind in the large, there is no more incisive, no more vivid description of the true destiny of man than in the answer to the first question in the Westminster *Shorter Catechism*. "What is the chief end of man?" What is man for? "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." Man is truly man when he becomes an organ to unveil Deity, what Deity has said, and what Deity has done. When a man becomes in his life part of the unveiled splendor of God, he can never be a mere man. Man's true nature and destiny become manifold when his life is lived in God and for God and when he seeks God's Kingdom and His righteousness.

Further, it is in the Bible that we meet the Person of destiny, Jesus Christ. It is not news for us here to be told that the Bible is really a book about Jesus Christ. In Him appeared man's original perfection. He grappled with the problem of contradiction. Being Himself without sin, He suffered because of sin and for sin. He became the Restorer and the Saviour of mankind in a unique sense. And the early Christians, becoming aware that this Person was both Israel's Messiah and the World Saviour, said, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

Do men ask how they can be free in such a way that freedom is real in their

human destiny? This Person has the answer: "Take my yoke." Do they ask how they can find and fulfill the essential pattern which God designed for man? This Person says, "Take my towel." He says in effect: "Do as I do to you." For the greatness of human nature does not consist in a man's being able to manipulate his fellow men, but rather in serving them in the lowliest guise and in the humblest wise. Do men ask, what is the Truth and what shall we do about it? This Person of destiny answers, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life . . . Believe upon me, and, having believed, be my witnesses." "Go," He said, "Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you." And He added this epilogue, "I, the Companion of your way and the Lord of your destiny, will be with you all the days of your terrestrial life, until the sun go down at the end of the way."

So, too, and finally, *it is through the Bible that the community of destiny, which is the Christian Church, attains spiritual maturity.* It is at this point that Evangelical Christianity has manifested and continues to manifest much deeper insight into the nature of Holy Scripture than the great Roman Communion. For both, the Bible has been the source of Christian doctrine, although the Roman Church first added Tradition, and then a certain theory of her own importance, in which the Church becomes superior to both Scripture and Tradition. While it is not true that Protestantism is the religion of a Book, it is true that Protestantism comes from a Book, which reveals to the Protestant soul the nature of true

religion. It is equally true that the deepest evangelical insight into that Book is that in Holy Scripture we have not only the supreme source of doctrine, but also a permanent medium, the greatest, the sublimest and the most intimate medium of divine-human intercourse. For the Bible is the medium through which God has intercourse with man and man with God. It is because this is so that the very simplest and most unlettered folk can hear in the Bible the voice of Deity, can discern deep spiritual truth, meet the Saviour, and be transformed in their lives.

In the history of contemporary Christianity I know of no more significant development than this, that the Roman Catholic Church is beginning to rediscover the Bible. We cannot disguise from ourselves that there are great Roman Catholic thinkers, and many deeply pious souls, who are profoundly concerned at the traditional attitude of their Church towards Holy Scripture. The plain truth is that, because of the traditional position of the Roman Church regarding Bibles in the vernacular, many men were persecuted for translating the Holy Scriptures into the language of the people. Luis de Leon, the great Spanish mystic, spent four years in the prison of the Inquisition because he had translated into the vernacular the Song of Solomon. William Tyndale, the great English translator of the Bible, was burned at the stake because he presented the Scriptures in current English speech. But, if we except the situation still existing in Spain, things are changing in Roman circles. Beginning with the year 1893 successive Popes have encouraged the study of the Scriptures. That has now culminated, fifty

years later, as I have already said, in the first Roman Catholic translation of Holy Scripture into the English language from the original Hebrew and Greek.

Let me give you two examples of this significant trend. Last year it was my privilege, in the environs of Paris, to spend several hours in very frank discussion with some distinguished Roman Catholic scholars. One of them said to me this: "The reason why our group is so interested in the common people getting to know the Bible for themselves is that in that way it will be possible for them to escape the growing danger of superstition which is inherent in the new Mariolatry."

The other example is this: I recently received from Buenos Aires a Roman Catholic magazine in which appeared an article written by a distinguished German Monk. He speaks in this article of the renaissance of Biblical studies in the Roman Catholic Church. He narrates how in Germany, after the First World War, he himself discovered the Bible, and how the life of Christ in the Gospels opened up a new world to him. And he adds his prayer that the common people may come to know the Bible of which hitherto they have been ignorant. Only in this way, he goes on, will they come to know Jesus Christ and the Christian religion truly. Towards the close of the article he speaks in the most favorable terms of Protestant Christianity, praising the fact that in the tradition of Evangelical Christianity the Holy Scriptures have been central.

Here is a profound change in the Roman Catholic attitude towards the Bible. One can only say to the Roman hierarchy, "Let the Book loose. Give it a chance. Make it possible for the people really to read it." If that happens, we are going to witness a profound change in the religious life of our time. It could easily mean a new Reformation in the Church of Rome.

Here on this campus, on the occasion of a triple celebration, and as we begin a new Seminary year, may the Bible be honored more than ever in our midst. Here, where it has always been loved and studied and taken seriously, let us, of course, "salute" the Book with all due reverence, as do millions of others. But let not the salute be that of offensive, conditioned respect, uncritical and irreligious, of which Charles Williams speaks. Rather, as we hail the Book, let us listen to what it says and hear God's word of destiny for ourselves. May we also, in the incomparable language of the Word of God, and in the fellowship of the saints of every succeeding generation, breathe each one of us a prayer to God in the language of Holy Scripture. As this session begins, let us rededicate ourselves to the supreme task of making Jesus Christ known and loved and obeyed by the men and women of our generation to the uttermost frontiers of the globe. And this let us do in the hope and in the certainty that the day will dawn when the great visions of the Book shall be fulfilled, and all men shall "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."