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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

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Why I regard the Bible as mankind's holiest book, 1926.

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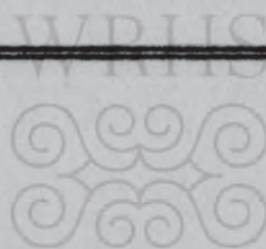
"WHY I REGARD THE BIBLE AS MANKIND'S HOLIEST BOOK."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

JANUARY 3, 1926, CLEVELAND.O.

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A thing, my friends, may be holy for its associations. It may also be holy for its own innate qualities which sanctify it. The Bible has been a holy book both for its memories and associations as well as for its intrinsic worth and hallowing value. Half of mankind has loved the Bible, and Israel, above all, has loved it with a surpassing love. To Israel the Bible was its life's treasure, its sustaining influence. The Jew turned to the Bible in all the varied and troubled moods of his life, in his hours of exaltation and in his days and years of despair. His ritual retains the echo and the theme and the text of the Bible. In every one of his prayers one hears the voice of the sacred book. The Bible was for him the source of his speculation, of his study, of his meditation. The law of the Bible governed his life; the ethics of the Bible guided his life; the proverbs of the Bible counseled his actions, and the history of the Bible instructed and informed him.

He lived for it, he fought for it, he died for it, and when he died the words of the Bible were upon his dying lips. Some of our people, and most of our people, during the Middle Ages loved the Bible so supremely and regarded it so divinely that they came to look upon every phrase of the Bible, every word, every letter, every accent, every vowel, as possessing recondite, profound, esoteric wisdom, revealed only to the searching eye and to the pure of heart. Our

forefathers had a five-fold method of interpreting every sentence and every word of the Bible. They had the . . . the literal meaning of the text; they had the ramus, the implied meaning of the text; and they had the . . . the homiletical meaning of the text; and they had the soul, the mystic meaning of the self-same text; and they had the gematria, the method of interpreting the numerical value of every single letter and the permutations and combinations of letters within a word or within a phrase, and out of such interpretation they derived an additional meaning out of the sacred text. For don't you see, the music of the Bible had its half tones and its over tones even as it had its theme readily recognized by all.

So that the Jewish mystic--most of our people were mystics in the Middle Ages--the Jewish mystic never found himself in opposition to the sacred text. Other mystics did. We find, for example, mystics in Christendom who fretted under the restraint of the letter--the "letter which killeth." They looked upon the Bible at best as an external, outer thing, as being able to impart knowledge but not revelation. Real truth, these mystics maintained, comes not from a book but from the inner life, the spirit within.

But the Jewish mystic, who was able through this five-fold method of interpreting the text to dissolve even the very letters into spirituality.--the Jewish mystic never found his freedom restricted by the text of the Bible, whereas the yearning for direct revelation, for spiritual

autonomy drove, let us say, the Christian mystic away from the book. It drove the Jewish mystic into the book. The Jewish mystic repeated that marvelous phrase of that ancient Rabbi: "Turn it about and about and about, for everything is in it." So that to our forefathers the Bible was not a part of reality; it was the whole of reality; it was the Living Word. And it was to them, as it is still to many of our people, more than a book. The Torah, which legend says was created before the earth was created, and which is God-eternal with God himself,--the Torah, to the Jew, was more than a book. It was a way of living; it was a program of living; it was a means of salvation and grace. That is why for twenty-five hundred years he meditated upon it day and night; that is why for twenty-five hundred years the words did not depart from his lips nor from the lips of his children; that is why his whole theology derives from the Bible, and his whole law developed through twenty-five hundred years finds its authority, its sanction, in the Bible.

The Jew wanted people to know the Bible. The supreme duty of the Jewish parent was to teach the Bible to his children. It was not so, let us say, in Christendom up to the time of the Reformation. The Bible was unknown to the peoples of Europe. In the first place, the Bible could be read only in the original Hebrew or in the authoritative Latin, and the masses of the European people could read neither. In the second place, the church was not anxious to have the people read the Bible. It preferred to give the

Bible unto them piecemeal with the ecclesiastical interpretation of the church; so that the peoples of Europe remained ignorant of the Bible.

The Reformation, the Protestant Reformation was, in a sense, a struggle between pope and Bible for supremacy, and the Protestant Church enthroned the Bible in the place of the pope whom it dethroned. And every great movement in Christendom in the last two thousand years, every great heresy which led to what we call modern unitarian Christianity, derived its inspiration and its authority from the Bible; and in fact great political revolutions like the revolution of Cromwell or the American Revolution sought for guidance and for inspiration in the Bible.

So that if only for what the Bible has meant to millions of people throughout these many centuries, if only for its associations, for its memories of struggle and conflict and revolution, for its memories of grace and peace and happiness which it has brought to God's children, the Bible may be regarded as man's holiest book. But even if the Bible were a new book, newly found, it would, to my mind, for its innate, intrinsic value, for what it contains, for what it says, for what it makes the heart say, be regarded as mankind's holiest book. For nowhere in the literature of mankind are the loftiest thoughts of the human race expressed in loftiest strain than in the Bible.

The Bible speaks of the great essential verities of human life, of the great eternal problems of

human life in a great, magnificently sublime manner. The Bible speaks of God; the Bible speaks of man and of man's relation to God, and of man's relation to his fellowmen; the Bible speaks of human ideals and human conduct; the Bible speaks of national and international morality; the Bible speaks of retribution, the reward of the good and the punishment inevitably of all evil. And of all these things it speaks with such profound understanding, with such directness of insight, with such magnificence of sweep and such richness and colorfulness of imagery that it becomes the holy repository of the human heart and mind. Because the Bible's insight is so keen, its understanding so profound, you find that very often its phrase or its word is the one correct and the one inevitable phrase or word that can be the vehicle for that thought, for that idea which it seeks to convey.

Where, for example, in the literature of the world will you find the idea of God as a personal God, living, protecting and guiding, so perfectly, with such sublime simplicity expressed, as you will find, say, in the 23rd Psalm of David. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in the green pasture; he leadeth me beside the still waters; he restoreth my soul, he guideth me in straight paths for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Do you know of anything in the literature of mankind that expresses with such exaltation and such artistry

man's yearning for a personal God--friend, shepherd, guide--  
as here?

And do you know anywhere in the literature of  
the world a definition of religion so perfect, so perfectly  
expressed, as that of the prophet Micah? "Wherewith shall I  
come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall  
I come before him with burnt offerings or with calves of a  
year old? Will he be pleased with thousands of rams or with  
ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I bring my firstborn  
for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my  
soul? Thou hast been told, O man, what is good and what the  
Lord doth require of thee, only to do justly, to love mercy,  
and to walk humbly with thy God."

And God's creation, of the symphonic poem of  
God's wonderful universe, where in the literature of mankind  
will you find descriptions that approach in their solemnity,  
in their sweep and in their grandeur such descriptions as you  
find in the closing chapters of Job? Or in Psalm 104  
beginning with those eternal words: "O Lord my God, thou art  
very gracious; thou art clothed with glory and majesty. Who  
covereth himself with light as with a garment; who spreadeth  
out the heavens like a curtain. Who layeth the beams of his  
chambers in the waters" -- and so down through the beauty and  
the glory of that marvelous psalm.

And where will you find in all the sacred  
literature of mankind such exalted conceptions of man's  
destiny as you will find expressed in those many, oftentimes

fugitive, phrases of the Bible--man made in the image of God? "And thou hast made him just a little lower than the angels." Is there a more sublime conception of human destiny than that? And where will you find the ethical ideals of the race, of man's cravings for justice and truth and peace and kindness, expressed in more lasting and enduring phrases than you will find in such passages as the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Leviticus? Or ringing through all the prophecies of the great, titanic souls of Israel? Of Amos, for example: "Let justice flow forth as water and righteousness as a mighty stream." Or Hosea: "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." And of the prophet Isaiah: "Wash you, make you clean; put away your evil doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice; relieve the oppressed, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." And of the prophet Jeremiah: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him that gloryeth glory in this: that he hath regard to me and knoweth me, for I am the Lord who exerciseth loving kindness, justice and righteousness upon the earth; for in these things do I delight, saith the Lord."

There are some people who feel that there are ethical codes outside of the Bible transcending the codes of the Bible; there are men who feel that prophets whose words are not contained in the canon of the Old Testament uttered ethical idealism which transcends the idealism of what men

choose to call the Old Testament. I know of no such code. I know of nothing in the whole literature of the religion of mankind, whether it be the religion of Buddha, or Confucius, or Zoroaster, or Jesus, that transcends the ethics of the Old Testament. There are but three ideals new to the ethics of the New Testament. One is pacificism and the other is communism and the third is the love of our enemies. None of these three is psychologically sound, and none of these three is socially operative.

And where do you find the vision of universal brotherhood, of the end of wars, of the coming of peace, of international morality so beautifully projected as in that passage of Isaiah, repeated again in the prophet Micah: "It shall come to pass in the last days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it; and many kingdoms shall go and shall say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us of his ways, and that we may walk in his paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.' He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate among the peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their knives into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

And did you ever stop to think what a wonderfully human book this book the Bible is? How it mirrors almost

every mood of human life. Every mood, every doubt, every perplexity, every groping of the human soul, every need, every ecstasy of human life finds its voice somewhere in the Bible. Just think for a moment of the skepticism of Ecclesiastes; of the blind groping and searching doubts of Job; think of the free and full romanticism of the Song of Songs; think of the utter, utter despair of the Book of Lamentations; think of the sweetness of the ideal of. . . . think of the calm, collected wisdom of Proverbs; think of the passion of the prophets; think of the psalms running the whole gamut of human experience and human emotions from exaltation, from the thrill and vigor of trust and hopefulness to the very deepest depths of despondency and despair, and you have an idea of the kaleidoscopic character of this holiest book we call the Bible; and you have an idea of its marvelous horizontal and perpendicular reach, of its profundity and its grasp.

Think, for a moment, with what delicacy of touch, with what restraint and refinement it approaches those great universal experiences of the human race. Here, for example, is a father dishonored by his child; here is a king against whom his son, his beloved son rebels, and the son has been slain in his rebellion, and news is brought to the king and father, and out of the anguish of his soul there break forth these cries: "O my son, Absalom. Absalom, my son, my son, would that I had died for you, Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son."

Here is another picture, and with what delicacy of touch the Bible brings it to us. Jonathan is dead-- Jonathan whom David loved; the friends who had pledged eternal fealty one to another--David and Jonathan, and now Jonathan is dead and David laments his death in these words: "I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan. Very pleasant hast thou been unto me. Wonderful was thy love for me, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen." Does Milton's or Shelley's Adonais, or Tennyson's Immemorial say more than this?

Or think of the experience of old age coming to a man. Listen to the words of Ecclesiastes speaking of old age: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain; in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened; and the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low; and one shall start up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low; also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and terror shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall drag itself along, and desire shall fail; because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about

the streets. Before the silver cord is snapped asunder, and the golden bowl is shattered, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel shattered into the pit, then the dust returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth; all is vanity."

I wish I had the time, friends, to speak more about this book. Let me but close with this apostrophe to the Bible by the poet Heine. "The Bible," says Heinrich Heine, "is a book large and wide as the world, based on the abysses of creation, and towering aloft into the blue secrets of heaven. Sunrise and sunset, promise and fulfillment, birth and death,--the whole drama of humanity are contained in this one book. It is the Book of books. The Jews may readily be consoled at the loss of Jerusalem and the temple and the ark of the covenant, and of the crown jewels of King Solomon; such forfeiture is as naught when you weigh against the Bible, the imperishable treasure that they have saved. If I do not err, it was Mohammed who named the Jews the people of the book, a name which in eastern countries has remained theirs to the present day, and it is deeply significant that that one book is to the Jews their spiritual country. Within the well fenced boundaries of the book they live and have their being; they enjoy their inalienable citizenship; they are strong to admiration; thence none can dislodge them. . . . They little heeded the changes that were wrought in the real world around them. Nations rose and vanished; states

flourished and decayed; revolutions raged throughout the earth. But they (the Jews) sat poring over this book, unconscious of the wild chase of time that rushed on above their heads."

It may be truthfully said while in olden days the Jew created the Bible, throughout the last two thousand years the Bible created the Jews. What the Jew has given to mankind in the last twenty centuries.--his hopes, his Messianic dreams, his ideals, his cravings for social justice and social righteousness, his piety, his sacrificial loyalty,--all these were etched into his soul and made part of his very life and being by the Holy Book--the Holy Book of mankind.

