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The Villains of the Bible, 1949.

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THE VILLAINS OF THE BIBLE

by

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Our Bible, dear friends, is a Book of Life, not a Book of Saints. Insofar as the Bible is a book of history and narrative - and of course, it is much else - it is a record of living men and women, not of abstractions, artificially created types of total perfection or total depravity, abstractions created for text-book purposes. Such is not the Bible. The fascination of this immortal book is due to the fact that it is a faithful mirror of actual life, of human beings whom we can recognize - human beings who are a compound of good and evil, of strength and weakness - human beings who are caught up in the tangled web of human passions and ambitions. Some of them are more successful than others at mastering these passions and ambitions and these circumstances which surround them. According to the philosophy of the Bible, which is the philosophy of Judaism, none is perfect but God. There is no man living who sinneth not. And no man, therefore, is worthy or deserving of worship or adoration, and in no man does God reveal Himself in His fullness and completion. The noblest heroes of Judaism are portrayed in the Bible not without their moral blemishes, their moral scars, whether it be the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or Moses or David. They all stand in need of repentance and of grace and of improvement.

In this very fact that none is perfect, there is hope, of course, and strengthening for men of lesser stature and weaker moral fiber. It is as if the Bible said to all men that no one should be discouraged because he has failed, because the greatest and the best of men have failed at times. What made them great is that they refused to submit to moral failure. They fell, but they rose again. And they used their failures as rungs upon which to rise. God wants men to rise. This is the very essence of moral experience - that is the very key to the religious life of a man. And that, of course, is the meaning of that profound doctrine of our faith, the doctrine of repentance - of Tshuva. And Judaism always stressed the unlimited efficacy of repentance, of return to the better way of life. There is no more pervasive, no more recurrent theme in the whole ethical literature of Judaism than that of Tshuva,

of repentance. Our literature says to man: Do not stop, do not block yourself, do not check your moral progress because of some sin inadvertently or deliberately perpetrated. The greatest of sins can be forgiven if the spirit is truly repentant. Even in his last hour, man may repent. Even if a man has denied God all his life, if he has been a , one who denied the fundamental teachings of Judaism all his life, and if he repents one hour before his death, he is assured of the world to come, say our Rabbis. "God does not want the death of the sinner, but that he should return and live."

And the Rabbis point to a sinner, the blackest of them all, King Manasseh, as an example of God's never-failing forgiveness. Manasseh was the man who re-introduced the worship of idols - of the Baalim - into Israel, the man who polluted the sanctuary, the man who offered his own children to the god, Moloch, and sacrificed them to this cruel and bestial deity, the man who slew the righteous and wrested judgment and shed innocent blood - King Manasseh, who filled the land of Israel with all the abominations of the heathens, with witchcraft and sorcery. Before he died, he prayed unto the Lord for forgiveness. "Lord, forgive me, for I have grievously sinned. I was blind and did not know the truth." And the Angels in the Heavens appealed to the Lord not to forgive this arch sinner, this arch criminal - King Manasseh. And the Lord said, "If I do not forgive him, then my whole plan of salvation for mankind falls to the ground." And God forgave Manasseh and received him in his compassion and forgiveness.

No sinner, but what he can be redeemed. Rahab, this loose woman who lived in the Walls of Jericho, this notorious harlot - because she repented, because she finally came to serve her God in truth and in faithfulness, became the ancestress, according to legend, of many high priests and of many kings.

The Bible, this immortal document of the inspiring spirit of man reaching out for God - the Bible accepts sin and transgression as a fact in human existence. According to the tradition, that was not always so. It was as Judaism developed and

attained to higher levels of understanding concerning God and His ways in the world that they came to define a different kind of theology. At first, when man sinned, God became impatient with man. When Adam sinned, and the generation which followed Adam, God cursed the earth because of the sins of man. And when the earth became full of violence because of the misdeeds of man, God brought a flood upon the whole world, drowned out his creation. God said, "I repented Myself because I created Man. I will wipe out the whole of the human race and the whole of creation." That is too simple a theology, so Judaism outgrew it after a while. And following the flood, we are told that God makes a rainbow in the skies as a sign and symbol to man that God will never again destroy creation because of the sins of man. There will be no more floods to wipe out existence because men or certain men sinned. "The inclinations of man are by nature, by instinct, evil and imperfect from very birth." It is part of the order of nature, but there is also as part of the order of nature the impulse towards growth and improvement, moral self-purification and ascendancy. Therefore, God is tolerant, forgiving, compassionate of human failure, provided man makes the effort to improve himself.

And just as Judaism accepts the possibility of sin, so Judaism also accepts the certainty of retribution. There is a law of compensation in the world as certain as the laws which govern the physical world. Evil leads to evil, and good contributes to the greater good. We do not know always how this law of compensation works itself out in the destiny of the individual or of the race, and sometimes we are confused and sometimes we become skeptical whether there is really such a thing as retribution in the world when we behold the righteous suffering and the evil prospering. But Judaism warned us not to depend in our conclusions upon our own incomplete and inadequate knowledge of the ways of the world, but to accept in faith the dogma of the inevitability of retribution in the world. Evil is punished, not inexorably, however, because there is the possibility of repentance to mitigate the evil decree.

Repentance and prayer and deeds of lovingkindness - they avert, they tend to nullify the evil decrees.

And so the Bible tells the story, as part of the cosmic drama of the spiritual unfoldment of the human race - tells the story of good men, good women, but also of evil men and evil women, sinners - and of the varying degrees of their culpability, and of the variety of their sins and the motives behind them, and of what befell these evil men and women. It is interesting to realize that the fact of sin enters with human life itself, with the first man and the first woman - with Adam and Eve. Now Adam and Eve were not bad people. They were not villains. They didn't seek to hurt anyone. There was no malice in what they did, no cruelty. They simply yielded to temptation. They were human. They had most everything that they needed, but were not completely satisfied. They disobeyed the will of God. The serpent tempted Eve, and Eve tempted Adam, and Adam and Eve sinned because of disobedience. They were told not to eat of a certain tree in the Garden of Eden, and they ate thereof, and so they were punished. They were driven from the Garden of Eden where they had nearly all the good things that man can wish for, and they were cursed, Adam and Eve. The earth was cursed because of them. "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat thy bread hereafter. Dust thou art and dust thou shalt return." And the way to immortality, the way to the tree of life was barred to them forever by the flaming sword. The first sinners and the first punishment - the sin of disobedience, the sin of wanting too much, when enough is quite enough for happiness.

And so after, we pass from disobedience to a greater crime - murder, fratricide. And the motive here is not disobedience - the motive here is jealousy. One of the most prolific sources of human crime and misery. And the tragedy befalls the children of Adam and Eve - Cain and Abel. Abel was a shepherd; Cain was a tiller of the soil, and both brought sacrifices unto the Lord, and the Lord, knowing the heart of Abel because it was generous, turned to the sacrifice of Abel and rejected the

sacrifice of Cain. And Cain, in his wild jealousy, turned upon his brother one day when they were out in the field and killed him. And when the voice of conscience was heard, "Cain, where is thy brother?", Cain replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" But the blood of his brother cried from the ground and Cain was cursed because of his crime, and the punishment was that he shall be a wanderer and an exile and a homeless man upon the face of the earth. And then Cain, the first murderer,^{who} killed his brother - a ghastly crime - turns to the Lord and says, "Is my crime so heavy that I shall have to bear it forever? Must I forever be hid from the presence of God? Is there no hope for me? Is there no redemption for me? Must I become a human outcast physically and spiritually forever so that any man who will see me will slay me as altogether worthless and leprous in the sight of man and God?" No, even a fratricide may repent and God will shield him, and so God places a mark upon the forehead of Cain so that men who will see him will not slay him and God said that whoever will slay Cain will be punished seven-fold.

We pass from the crime of disobedience to the crime of heresy, to another type of evil and another evil-doer - Esau, in whom evil is now a larger and more permanent ingredient of character, as was not the case in Adam and Eve or in Cain. Esau was the hunter. He is the wild and hairy man. He is a man who is contemptuous of the fine and noble traditions of his family; he despises his birthright and sells it for a pottage of lentils. He is a man who lives by his sword, and he despises his brother, Jacob, because Jacob was a man of a different type - a student, a scholar, the man of peace who dwelt in the tent. And when Jacob crosses him, he decides to kill him. Esau was about to perform a crime of hatred, but here the Bible is quick to point out that this hatred was not altogether groundless and that Esau was not altogether at fault. Jacob, his brother, had cheated him twice. He had cheated him out of his birthright and he had cheated him out of his father, Isaac's, blessing. Jacob, in his high righteousness, was also a sinner, and Esau, in his great simpleness,

was not without extenuation, and that Esau was a man who revered his father and showed him great filial piety so that blessings were vouchsafed upon Esau even as they had been vouchsafed unto Jacob. And although Esau was the prototype of Amalek, and of Haman and all the enemies of Israel, nevertheless the sages say that the Torah was given as much to Esau as it was to Jacob. The Torah, they say, was given in the month of Sivan when Gemeni, the twins, are in Zodiac, to indicate that the Torah does not belong to Israel alone but also to his twin brother, Esau - that is to say, to the Gentile.

We have other criminals in the Bible, prototypes of the criminals of our own day. You have the Royal Criminal - the Pharaohs - who commits genocide, the assassination of a race at the behest of state policy - the Hitler type of criminal, the man who looks upon church and upon all law, who feels justified in using peoples and in consuming peoples, enslaving them and, if necessary, exterminating them in order to serve the interests of his country, of his state, or of himself. The punishment - plagues and death in the Red Sea.

Now there is a moral law which is binding upon kings and rulers even as it is binding upon individuals. And kings must respect that law as human beings must never be used as clay and mortar for the foreign policies to serve a state, and human beings must be saved. And in Pharaoh, then, we have the villainy from the patriotic motive - quite common in our day.

There are other villains in the Bible. There is the villainy, for example, of the demagogue, the man who uses the democratic slogans and catchwords ~~against~~ to incite people against legitimate authority and undermine the prestige of legitimate leaders of men. Korach, who led a rebellion against Moses - a series of disastrous events taking place in the Wilderness, and the people were depressed, and this shrewd and calculating Korach and his coterie of followers decided to seize upon these events and the dissatisfaction of the people to shake their confidence in their leader, and

they began to carry on a demagogic propaganda. "Why did Moses take you out of Egypt to kill you in the Wilderness. Look at Moses - how he lifts himself above you. Why, he is trying to impose his rule over you and to become your master! Disobey Moses - overthrow his leadership! We will lead you to freedom!" Familiar slogans - familiar propaganda in our own day. For punishment the earth swallowed up Korach and his followers.

There are other types of villains and criminals in the Bible. There is, for example, Achan, who is driven to a great crime by greed. The city of Jericho had been conquered by Joshua and his forces, and everything in the city had been declared devoted unto the Lord, not to be used by anyone. But Achan, in going through the city, chanced upon a mantle, a beautiful mantle from Sheenah. Two hundred shekels of silver, a bar of gold, and he could not resist the temptation, and stole these things which had been declared inviolate and hid them in his tent. And a great defeat befell the people as a result of the anger of God, and a search was made among the people, and it was found that Achan was the guilty one who, by his greed, had brought defeat upon his people and possible disaster. For punishment, Achan and his followers and his household were burned.

There was Nabal, a man who did evil out of miserliness, out of niggardliness. Nabal was a very rich man. He had many herds and flocks, and David, while a refugee from the wrath of Saul - David and his followers protected Nabal's flocks and Nabal's shepherds. And now David was in great difficulty. His followers were hungry and he sent an embassy, a messenger, a group of men to Nabal, imploring of Nabal to give him, David and his followers, of food. Nabal not only refused to give them anything, but insulted them and treated them shabbily. Lack of charity, ingratitude - and David determined to attack Nabal and his household and destroy them. And it was the wife of Nabal, a wise woman, who was told of what had happened and quickly gathered together food - dates, figs, skins of wine - went to meet David and pleaded with David

not to visit upon the household the sin of the inhospitality, miserliness of her husband. Nabal had heard what his wife had done and he had a stroke and he died.

Criminals there are many in the Bible. There was Haman, the criminal who, out of spite and pique and hurt vanity and cross-purposes, will take it out not upon the individuals who had hurt him, but upon the entire people to which that individual belonged. Mordecai had not knelt to Haman and Haman was outraged, and so Haman decides not to destroy Mordecai, but to destroy Mordecai's entire race. And he goes to the king and slanders, not Mordecai, but the people of Mordecai and persuades the king to destroy them all. This villainous inciter against whole peoples - How many of them we have in our midst today. These men will never judge an individual on his own merits, but judge him in relation to the group to which he belongs, and to the race and to the religion which he belongs. These men who hate collective groups of human beings! The punishment for Haman - the gallows.

There was a subtle kind of Jewish criminal in the Bible, and he is known in Jewish history as perhaps the worst of them all, that was Balaam. Balaam is the hireling criminal, the man of great gifts, of extraordinary gifts and talents who nevertheless prostitutes his gifts for money. Balaam was noted in his day and was a legendary type as a great sorcerer. He was the most famous of all the heathen prophets and divine people whose blessings were regarded as blessings, and whose curses, as curses. When Balak, king of Moab, feared the Jews, he sent messengers to Balaam: Come and curse the people of Israel for me. And Balaam was the type of man who seels his pen or seels his speech and seells his talents and his gifts for money. Balaam couldn't curse Israel because the curses stuck in his throat. Instead of the curses, blessings poured forth, but nevertheless, Balaam was always regarded as among the most damned of all criminals and sinners of history because of his impure heart, because of his readiness to do evil, not because he was evilly driven to it - not out of passion, not of some blind hunger, not of revenge which may be extenuating circumstances sometimes. It was simply, calculatingly because of money.

He was a man of no conscience - a man who does not recognize the great moral responsibility involved in the possession of a rare talent. They are sometimes the gravest devastators of mankind. The writer, the artist who polutes and prostitutes his art - the man in a prominent position of authority who misuses the great powers resident in him for the sake of gain.

Yes, the Bible knows them all - all the tempter spirit of man - unchastity, and gluttony and greed and strife, pride and love of admiration and jealousy and arrogance, and all the variety of their commutations and combinations, and all their devastations. And yet, the Bible has not lost faith in man and in his moral, upward climb. The Bible always keeps before the eye of man the day when they will not hurt nor destroy "in all My Holy mountain, when the earth will be full of the knowledge of God and the waters cover the sea".

A word about the women criminals of the Bible. There are such. The Bible has the record of noble women and also of wicked women. The woman who was the help-mate, and the woman who was the destroyer. The approach of the Bible to womanhood is like its approach to everything else - very sane, sound, fair and just. You do not find in the Bible any romantic chivalry which is lacking in all realism, nor do you find in the Bible any misogyny - any hatred of womankind or any indication of any position of inferiority in any regard whatsoever. Woman is the ~~same~~ equal of man in moral virtue and in evil potentialities. So that's why you have in the Bible such noble types of women as the Matriarchs - Miriam, Deborah, Ruth and Esther. And while you have in the Bible the most perfect tribute to womanhood found in the literature of mankind, you also have in the Bible other kinds of women. There is, for example, very early in the book of the Bible, the story of the wife of Potiphar, this Egyptian woman - the archetype of the temptress who, in her infatuation with Joseph, wishes Joseph to betray his master who had been very kind to him and who had made him overseer over his household, and when Joseph refuses and flees from Potiphar's wife, this spurned woman, in her anger where her love turns to poison against Joseph, accuses young Joseph of the very crime which she wanted him to perpetrate and young Joseph is thrown into prison.

There is Delilah, the Philistine woman, the archetype of the seductress throughout the ages, who destroys the man - destroys him for a bribe, a bribe which the Philistines offered, and beguiled Samson to reveal to her and to the Philistines the source of his strength, and when she has wheedled out the secret from him, she turns him over to the Philistines, who blind him and then put him into the dungeon to grind corn for them. And they call him from the dungeon - this blind giant of a man, and bring him to their temples to dance and to amuse the assembled crowd of the Philistines, who mock this fallen giant of a man, and in his last agonized moments, eyeless in Gaza, Samson prays for strength, and taking hold of the pillars upon which this temple is built, brings down the temple upon the heads of the Philistines and himself.

Yes, the Bible knows the woman criminal. There is Jezebel, the Phoenician princess, who married King Ahab of Israel - this proud woman, this ruthless woman, this woman who is used to instant and unquestioning obedience, this woman who re-introduced into Israel worship of the Baal, who persecuted the prophets and drove Elijah into exile, this woman who persuaded her husband, the King, to put an innocent man to death/^{Naboth,} because he would not sell his vineyard to the King, because he treasured the vineyard that had come down to him from his ancestors. And this Jezebel hires perjured witnesses to testify that Naboth had blasphemed God and blasphemed the King, and Naboth is executed. This Jezebel's end is not a happy one. And her husband died and her son was killed in a revolt led by Jehu. When she knew that her end was up, she attired herself in the most costly of raiment, and as Jehu passed by the window of the palace, she taunted him, mocked him, jeered at him - this proud Phoenician princess. And Jehu ordered her to be thrown from the window to the ground, and the prophecy of Elijah came through, that the dogs lick the blood of Jezebel.

Yes, and then there is her daughter, Athaliah, the daughter of a king, the wife of a king, the mother of a king; Athaliah, who when her son dies, seized the throne and ordered all the royal seed destroyed. This would have put an end to the entire dynasty of King David, but the young Prince Joab was rescued by the High Priests and kept in hiding six years that Athaliah reigned, and a revolt broke out, and Athaliah was seized and executed.

There are all types of wickedness, of women and of men in the Bible - men and women who are driven on to crime and suffering and death by one passion or another, but over all is the abundant mercy and forgiveness of God - the God who said to man, "Seek Me, Seek Me and live. Do not seek death; seek me and live."

"Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord?

And who shall stand in His holy place?

He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart;

Who hath not taken my name in vain,

And hath not sworn deceitfully.

He shall receive a blessing from the Lord,

And righteousness from the God of his salvation."

Amen

