

Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

Reel Box Folder 163 59 854

Moses, 1951.

197

Sunday, November 18, 1951

I should like to congratulate you brave souls who have weathered this blizzardy morning to come and join in the Service. It is highly gratifying to see so many of you here this morning.

I want to talk to you this morning about a fine book written by a great artist. The interest in religious books is indeed a very interesting and significant phenomenon of our times. Religious books quickly go into the best sellers class if they are written at all well. There seems to be a hunger for the spiritual word, a hunger which the knowledge of our day and the science of our day do not seem to satisfy, certainly not the morally weak or even perverted writing of our day does not seem to satisfy.

Especially the Bible, which has been the perennially the source of inspiration for art and literature, is again being copiously drawn upon by writers for their material, their themes, their inspiration. And that is so not only because of the superb and magnificent style of the Bible where, as one put it, "every word rings like a bell or cuts like a sword". There is hardly any literature in the world as great stylistically, apart from content, as the literature of the Bible. And not only because the Bible tells the fascinating and exciting life story covering nearly 2,000 years of the most amazing and colorful people on the face of the earth, the Jewish people, but I believe principally because the Bible presents a remarkably rich galaxy of human beings - men and women - vital and spirited, men and women in the throes of life, in their exaltations and in their ambitions, in their struggles and in their sufferings and in their exaltations and in their degradations - living people, all types of people - kings and paupers, the wise and the foolish, the good and the evil, the loyal and the cowards. The Bible presents an extraordinary glowing panorama of human life. And this fact has captivated the imagination of mankind and has

drawn to it, as with a magnet, time and again and for many centuries and amongst every country of the world, the artist, the poet, the writer, the musician, not to speak of the theologian and the soul-seeking Good, and the historian and the man who seeks to unravel the life of this rarest and most significant of ancient cultures and civilizations.

The Bible is not a book about saints or of saints. It is not composed exclusively of the biographies of exemplary people, of the untempted and the sinless. According to the philosophy of the Bible, none is perfect but God. "There is no man living that sinneth not." The Bible is made up of very human beings, who are caught up in the web of life, in the tangle of their motives and the ambitions and their passions - human beings who are frequently strung taut upon the high tensions of life, who are tried and tempted and broken or exalted. But they are all God's children in their weakness and in their majesty - God's children lost between heaven and earth, between light and darkness, struggling upward and succeeding, struggling upward and failing, or not struggling at all. The Bible is a biography of Man, of all men! Of mankind!

You can write a book, a whole series of books, about a hundred or more characters in the Bible. In fact, such books have been written in fuller exposition, in greater elaboration, in detail, color, of what the Bible in a few bold strokes portrays - bold, decisive and unforgettable. Sometimes one sentence in the Bible becomes the material for a whole volume, for a series of wolumes, and one story, like the story of Joseph and his brethren, can inspire a great artist like Thomas Mann to write a half a dozen volumes, rich, colorful, interesting, drawing its original inspiration from the threat thought story in the Bible.

The literature of half of the world has been influenced by the Bible. And in 800 languages and in 1800 800 dialects the story of the Bible has been told to the world, and some of the greatest and the immortal classics of English literature, of French,

of German, of Italian or Russian build their subject matter, their characters from the Bible.

Of Moses alone a whole library of books have been written. Plays and novels, historical research, psychological analyses, besides the countless artistic approaches to his personality by the sculptors and the painters and the composers of all time. Moses has appealed to the creative genius in man just as he has appealed to the common man. And he has appealed not because his is a baffling, a mysterious, or strange or unfathomable personality. Not at all. Precisely because it is not, precisely because the qualities which make up this titanic figure are known to man in such a degree quite comprehensible, understandable. And Moses is a human being, a great human being, within the grasp of manas understanding. Moses is close to man. Moses, the greatest of all prophets, was according to the Bible, the humblest of men. He was a great, rare human being, rare in his spiritual and intellectual stature and in the experiences of his life, an epic character, his influence sweeping through the centuries.

Sholom Asch has written the latest book on Moses, and it, too, has become a best seller. Sholom Asch is, in my judgment, fully equipped for this task to write about Moses. He is one of the most gifted writers of our age, certainly the greatest living Yiddish writer. And he is now in the full maturity of his creative art. He is over 70, and like Moses in his old age, whis eye has not dimmerated dimmed and his force has the maturity of abated."

Sholom Asch written, as you know, of other great religious personalities, and always in marks exquisite taste and sympathy, with reverence, with scholarship, and with profound penetration. Asch is gifted with a rare spiritual sensitiveness which enabled him to reveal, for example, the soul of the great mystic, the Chassid in works like "Salvation" which many of you have read - all of you should read; in books such such as "The Mazarene" and "The Apostle" and "Mary", the latter characters not of his faith, but of his race and of his humanity.

I for one could not agree with the sharp criticism which men visited upon Sholom Asch for writing these three books on the three classic characters of Christendom. Knowing of Asch's universal sympathies towards humanity as well as his profound Jewish loyalties, I could not find in these writings any trace of apostasy - rather, a re-affirmation through the life and the struggles of these Jewish characters, sacred to Christianity, those basic Jewish ideals of justice and compassion and love and sacrifice and the yearning for peace, which he delineated so vividly in his earlier writings, in books like "Salvation", and which he now again illustrates so eloquently in re-telling the story of Moses, the father of all the prophets, the fountainhead of Jewish law and ethics, the Jew par were excellence:

Sholom Asch has brought to his task a great love for his people - I know Sholom Asch - and a strong faith in his people's mission and destiny. He has written tenderly and compassionately of their martyrdom in such books as . He has written of their millenial hopes, their Messianic hopes for themselves and for mankind in such books as "Sabbatai Zvi". He has been a champion of the rights of his people, and when tragedy overtook his people after the First World War, Smolom Asch threw himself and gave of his time, of his career, the gifts of his heart and his mind in sacrificial measure to their relief. Sholom Asch, therefore, approaches his "Moses" with reverence and humility, with love in his heart for the people whom Moses redeemed and fashioned into a nation, and for the law of life, of justice and of love which Moses gave to his people and through them, to mankind.

Sholom Asch wisely does not re-write the story of Moses to suit himself, as in the case of "The Nazarene", "The Apostle", and "Mary". He treats the historical account which is before him with utmost respect and reverence. He does not tamper with the narrative. He does not select or reject. He does not reconstruct the story to suit his taste or the taste of his age, or to bring it into alignment with what we call higher Biblical criticism. He is not writing a new historical text-book on the

life and times of Moses, based on the latest historical and archeological findings, through he does not hesitate to use the best available data to illumine and elucidate what is in the text. For example, he does not eliminate the miracles recorded in the Bible in connection with the story of Moses. He did not eliminate the miracles in the New Testament stories. He does not want the pious reader to be antagonized by such an arbitrary recasting of an old and sacred text; nor does he wish to attract the skeptic by "modernizing" so to speak, the story. I believe that Sholom Asch does not regard the matter of these miracles as altogether important. What is important to him is the full moral and spiritual lesson of the total narrative, its cumulative significance. He is eager that that should not escape the reader.

Yes, and after all, the essence is not the miracle, but what the miracle was intended to establish in the heart of the reader - God's providence, God's justice, His love, His living presence in the affairs of men. Sholom Asch uses therefore, the Midrash and the Haggadah and its technique, and frequently the subject matter of the later Midrashim in the same way as the Rabbis used it, to make the story of Moses more understandable, more relevant to the life and the problems of the age of the reader, more helpful.

For a great personality, like Moses, is "stored up sunlight", just like coal is stored up sunlight and oil, the stored up sunlight of thousands of centuries ago - just so is a great personality. It has light and spiritual fuel for all succeeding a ages, and/light which can never be consumed.

Now, I need not recount to you the story of Moses. It is well known to you, or is it? Asch recounts the story, highlighting every great moment, every dramatic episode, and how rich in drama that story is. How abundantly rewarding to the artist!

The Prince Moses, having reached young manhood in the court of Pharoah, goes to his slave people in the squalor and misery of the clay pits of Goshen, and becomes one of them, yet different - one of them and yet a stranger among them. Moses slaying

the Egyptian task-master, who brutally tortured a Hebrew slave, and then betrayed by a fellow-Jew and forced to flee from the land of Egypt to the land of Midian. Moses, the Prince, now become a shepherd in the land of Midian. "Shepherds make great seers." The years of meditation and communion with nature and with nature's God in the silence and the laneliness of the wilderness - here, too, Moses, a stranger among a strange people, even as he was a stranger in the court of Pharoah and among his slave brothers in Goshen; Moses dreaming of his people's liberation and wondering about his own destiny. Sholom Asch doesn't miss a moment of these dramatic situations.

Moses receiving finally his call, his summons, the revelation at Horeb, his mission to go back to Egypt. And reluctantly, hesitatingly, apprehensively, and yet, compelled by a force which he cannot resist, Moses returning to Egypt. Moses before the king, demanding that he permit the children of Israel to go forth into the wilderness and serve their God. Moses' first crushing defeat. Pharoah rejects his request, and in return makes the burdens of the Jewish slaves even more severe than they had been. They must now go forth and seek the straw which had previously been provided them to make the bricks, but the quota of the bricks must remain the same. And the Jews bitterly renounced Moses and his interference and for making their burdens so crushing.

The bitter, obstinate struggle now begins between Moses and Pharoah, between the gods of the Egyptians and the God of Israel, between freedom and slavery - a test of strength. Ten times Moses comes before the Pharoah, demanding the right of the Hebrews to go forth and worship their God; ten times he is refused; ten times plagues are brought upon the Egyptians. Pharoah hardens his heart, yields and repents, and Moses relentlessly presses on for his objective. The tenth plague finally brings Pharoah to his knees - the slaying of the first born. Moses and the Exodus! After 400 years the slaves are finally liberated and march to the Red Sea! The pursuit of

the Egyptians, the frightful panic among the Jews. What will happen at the Red Sea? Willthe Jews move forward towards their freedom, or will they capitulate before the Egyptians and return beaten slaves to their clay pits? The Jews plunge into the Red Sea to their freedom and the miracle of the emancipation takes place, and then Moses parts the waters for them. All these exciting and dramatic episodes which make up the first of the three parts of the book, Sholom Asch delineates with his rare artistry, his passion, his understanding.

The second part of the book is the story of the wanderings of these emancipated slaves through the wilderness and most of the 40 years before they reach the Promised there

Land. And their great human drama takes place. There, a mass, a mob of slaveshas to be fashioned and beaten into a nation - taught, educated, spiritually emancipated so that they accept the new disciplines of freedom without the lash of the task-master.

There is the hunger and the thirst among the people, and their bitter complaints as they move into the cruel waste of the desert before they come to Mt. Sinai. They want food! They cry for water! Why have we left Egypt! Why did you, Moses, bring us out into this land to perish? And the enemy attacks them, the Amalekites swoop down upon them. The first struggle between the Jew and the Amalekite, the eternal enemy of the Jewish spirit, takes place. Moses on top of the hill with hands uplifted by Aaron, encouraging, inspiring the people to war on the Amalekites and not to yield.

And then Moses at Mt. Sinai, the beginning of the Ten Commandments and the thunder and the lightning of the revelation. And the Covenant, the Eternal Covenant made with a peculiar people for a peculiar destiny, a people which was to become a Kingdom of Priests, and a Holy nation. The high moment of Mt. Sinai. And then the black apostasy, the day of Satan, the making of the Golden Calf. All his work undone. The Covenant defiled, the people returns to the corruptions and the idolatry of Egypt. And Moses descending from the mountain after 40 days, after having pleaded with God not to destroy his people that had so shamelessly abandoned its Covenant and its faith. Moses breaking the tablets of the Ten Commandments; Moses in his wrath slaying 3,000 of the leaders in this black apostasy; Moses fashioning new tablets of stone of the Ten Commandments. And as a visible sign of the presence of God which is to continue hereafter in the midst of the people, Moses building the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Moses organizing the people, teaching them, writing down the code which is to guide them and all future generations, the laws which were to keep the people pure and clean, free from heather a bomination. And then finally having received the Law, Moses wanted a signal for the people to march on to the Promised Land and as they approach the Promised Land, Moses sends out 12 spies to bring back a report of the land to guide the people in the conquest of the land. And the spies return - a beautiful land, a land flowing with milk and honey, but a land possessed by powerful inhabitants and strong and fortified cities. "We shall be in their eyes as grasshoppers." We cannot take the land! We will be slaves, all of us! Let's return to Egypt! This man Moses has let us into a trap! And that's a second black apostasy, a second Day of Satan in the wilderness.

Moses realized that this generation is unfit for freedom. They are unwilling to fight for it. This generation must die in the wilderness. And so, for 38 years he leads that people between Etzion, Geber and Kadesh Barneher, until the entire generation of slaves that had left Egypt had died in the wilderness, they and their complaints and their rebellions had perished. That's the end of the second part of the book.

The third part is the story of the new generation born in the wilderness, the generation of sands had now been transformed into a generation of stars, strong men of molten steel ready to fight for their freedom, by no means a perfect generation, but a generation that did not know the last of the task master on their bodies and

in their souls.

And the story of the battles on the way to the borders of Canaan with the Amenites and the Moabites and the King of Boshan. Alos the story of the defections of this new generation which is not a perfect generation, and their bitter complaints. And the story of how Moses, in his haste and his impatience to give water to the people who are again famished for lack of water, violates a commandment given to him by God, to speak unto the rock and in his impatience and his anger smites the rock. And Moses is informed that he, too, must die with his generation in the wilderness, for he, too, is not free from sin. He, too, has failed to give evidence of the perfect faith.

And Moses turns over his authority, his unfinished work and commission to Joshua, and puts his mantle upon him and prepares to die. And before his death, Moses blesses his people. And alone he ascends to the top of Mt. Pisgah and from there he sees the land with his own eyes, "tired though undimmed", asthe Bible says, sees the whole land where the children of Israel were to live in the days to come, and where they were to fashion the great civilization in a great life for themselves and for mankind. And there alone he dies with the kiss of God upon his lips. He had liberated a people, he had given them a Law, he had trained and tamed them, he sustained them for 40 years in the wilderness, he brought them to the threshold of the new day. And so Moses, the servant of the Lord, died in the land of Moab.

Now, each one of these great moments - and there are so many more - Asch illumines with rare insight, with wisdom, with sympathy so that the book glows with life, and Moses stands before you as a monolithic, a majestic, a collosal figure, towering, just as Michael Angelo pictured him with a great piece of sculpture. Yet, a very human being, torn by doubts, by fears, frustrated time and time again, betrayed,

suffering, and yet never losing faith in his God and in the destiny of his people.

I wish I had the time to read to you some of the pages from Sholom Asch's book.

I had marked off some of the things to read to you, but I haven't any time, so I suggest you read it yourself. No, I'm afraid I haven't the time - the passages are too long. If I have given you a taste for the book, I think I feel myself highly rewarded.



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