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What makes the Bible an immortal book?, 1954.

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WHAT MAKES THE BIBLE AN IMMORTAL BOOK?

December 19, 1954

What makes the Bible an immortal book? What makes a book immortal? A book is immortal when it is perennially timely, when it is never antiquated, when it has an appeal and a message for every age and for all kinds of people in all walks of life and on every level of culture. Such a book is the Bible, the Torah. The Bible is not a book for philosophers only or theologians only or scholars only or the devout only. Everyone, every one, can find in the Bible what his mind or his heart seeks. The philosopher will find his speculations in the Bible; the theologian will find his God-concept defined in the Bible; the scholar will find his history and a knowledge of past civilizations; the devout will find in the Bible the help, the faith, and the consolation of life.

There is much food in the Bible, there is pabulum, as it were, in the Bible, even for the sceptic and the stoic, the mystic, the dreamer and the reformer. There is food there for the saint who is wrapped up in the contemplation of the eternal and for the rebel who beats his wings against the harsh injustices of the world.

Human nature, my dear friends, human basic needs and desires, the hunger of the human heart - these do not change much, if at all, from generation to generation. They are the constants in the life of man, even as seed-time and harvest time, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night are the constants of the earth as long as it endures.

Now the Bible is dedicated in a multiple of ways to these constants in human life - hence its enduring relevancy, its immortality.

When the Bible tells a story as it does in any number of its book, the story is not only significant because it is the work of skilled craftsmanship; whatever the outer garb of the narrative might be - the core of it, the central theme of

it is always some universal constant in human experience, the experience of all men, in all climes, in all ages - hate, or jealousy, or avarice, or passion, or sin, or suffering, or forgiveness, or compassion or love. The stories of the Bible are always vivid passages out of life, authentic and easily recognizable human experiences - something that can happen at any time, to any one, something that can happen to you!

When the Bible records history, for example (quite a number of the 24 books of the Bible are historical books, in the main) - the history of Israel, or the history of other peoples, it is not dust-laden, archaeological incidents of little application to our own day and to our own historical experiences. As we read these histories in the Bible, we are constantly startled into an awareness of the amazing parallel to the life of our own time; the names may be different, dates and places may be different, but the fundamental motives, the trends, the movements, tactics are remarkably identical to the national experiences of our own day.

When the Bible speaks of social justice as it does through many of its books, especially in its prophetic books, when it thunders against social wrong and iniquities, against oppression and exploitation, against grinding the face of the poor, against joining house to house and adding field to field until there is no more room - when the Bible speaks against those who call evil good and good evil; who put darkness for light and light for darkness; when it speaks against them who are wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight, against those who are heroes at drinking wine and men of valor at mixing strong drink; when it speaks against those who acquit the guilty for bribe and deprive the innocent of his right, the Bible is not speaking in archaic speech at all, it is not condemning ancient, unremembered wrongs. It is overwhelmingly and crushingly contemporaneous! It is as if it were speaking to us, today, in every

city of the world. And when the Bible sings a song - a song of nature, a song of love, as it does often through its pages, it is a beautiful song of songs - as the yearning heart of men and women have always been wont to sing - in ecstasy, or in tenderness, or in passion, or in despair, or in hope, down the ages. There is no artificiality there, no affectation in the superb poetry of the Bible, no clever virtuosity. It's deep calling unto deep. It is the spirit of life moving upon the wings of song, and it is an achievement of superb artistry. The great writers of the Bible were supreme literary artists, among the greatest in the world.

You go through the pages of the Bible, and there is reflected in almost every book of the Bible something of this lyricism, something of this poetic, aesthetic appreciation of the world, God's world, and of man's world. Here are the flaming constellations reeling in their orbits, the cords of Orion and the chains of the Pleiades. Here the morning stars sink together, and all the sons of God shout with joy. Here the seas resound, the great wide seas, and the voice of God moves over the deep waters. Here the floods sweep on, the fountains of the great deep are open, and over all, the arching rainbow of divine promise. The storms on the tempest rage here, the ^{way} riven of the thunderbolt, the whirlwinds sweep through the sobbing wilderness, and the tumult of the clouds as if the Lord of Hosts were mustering armies for battle. Here the mountains loom, the flaming mountains of revelation, the guardian mountains around the city of God, the mountains and hills that break forth into singing, praising the name of God; day and night uttering speech, the calm noon-day, and the nights of solitude and vision. The seasons come and go - spring when the winter is past, when the flowers appear on the earth, when the time of singing is come, and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in the land. Summer is here, and the smiting sun, the dry water-courses, the heat and the

whirling dust in the desert wastes, and the cool shade of a great rock in a weary land. Cool winds are here, blowing through scented gardens, and dew as of light upon the tender grass, and quiet brooks running through pastures green and still waters where God refreshes the heart of man. All the beasts of the field are held, and the winged birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, and the flowers of the field, all flocks and herd, all living things teeming and fruitful with. All the color of life is here, its every voice and word and fragrance, its song and ecstasy, its hunger, and its beauty. Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, beasts and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! All praising the name of the Lord! Hallelujah! The Bible sings to ears attuned to its song.

The Bible is not a theologic tract. It is a literature which was 1,000 years in the making - the work of numberless writers, and in a real sense it is not the work of numberless writers, it is the creation of a people, the Jewish people; it is its national literature. That is why you have this variety in the Bible, this colorfulness; these manifold and at times contrasting moods, the different styles, different types of writing - narrative writing, didactic and prophetic, and hortatory, and poetic, and of course legislative - great codes of law, of ethics, of morality, which define a way of life for men and nations. A Torah, par excellence.

Two thousand years of Jewish history are in the Bible, two thousand years! From Abraham to Ezra. The story of the Patriarchs, the story of Jacob, the sons, Joseph, going down into Egypt, enslavement in Egypt, the liberation from Egypt at the hands of the great Moses, the wandering through the wilderness for 40 years until they reached the Promised Land; the giving of the Torah in the wilderness, the conquest of the land, the struggle for a foothold in Canaan, the period of the judges, the rise of the United Kingdom - the kingdom of Saul and David and

Solomon; the Civil War and the division of the kingdom; the history of the Kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of the north, until its destruction in 722; the history of the kingdom of the south, the kingdom of Judah and its destruction and the destruction of the Temple in 586; the exile to Babylon; the return from Babylon; the rebuilding of the Temple; the work of Ezra and Nehemiah - 2,000 years of the kind of history which is significant not only for the people of Israel but which has been tremendously significant for mankind are recorded in the pages of the Bible - and not merely history, but the interpretation of history, for the Jews were the first people who gave mankind a philosophy of history, not a philosophy of existence which Hinduism and Buddhism sought to give, but the philosophy of history, the interpretation of the great events of mankind in relation to a scheme or a plan or a purpose in the mind of the Eternal.

And because the Bible mirrors the life of a people athwart the centuries, the book is alive with people. It is a teeming world of real people moving to the rhythm of life and to the stress of their own individual destinies. There is no cold gallery here of portraits, paintings^{ed}, in order that they may serve the purposes of edification or emulation. The Bible is no gallery of saints - for that matter it is no gallery of sinners, either. It is a dense and crowded world of real human beings, all kinds of human beings, jostling each other, as it were, prince and pauper, saint and sinner, great and small, strong and weak, master and slave, victor and vanquished, ascetic and voluptuary, the proud and the humble, the tortured, the bereft, the lost, and the redeemed. It is the world as it is, the world which man has intended to improve and to set aright, the world which calls upon man's pity and love and wisdom and courage to refashion it into the Kingdom of God.

This is what makes for the immortality of the Bible. It is a book for people because it is a book about people - people whom you know, people who are in many

ways like yourselves. It is a human document. The magnificent thing about the Bible, about the story of all these people, is that nowhere is the human being disdained. Nowhere is human effort discredited. Always there is dignity, even in the life of the sinner and the criminal; there is always the hope of his redemption. The genius of the Jew always revered the human being revery making; the human being never quite lost the image of God in which he was made. And so there was always tremendous sympathy and understanding in a world of forgiveness in the pages of the Bible. You never read a story in the Bible with hate in your heart. You read it with a deeper understanding, perhaps, of the frailty and of the tragedy and of the tensions of human life, but you never read with a contempt for man or for humanity. There are other religions that try to strike the note that God is everything and man is nothing. Not so Judaism. Bible begins with the creation of one man and it ends in the fifth book of Deuteronomy with the death of one man - the individual, regardless of who he is, and there are no saints in the Bible - everyone has his scars, his moral deficiencies. Every human being is important. That's why men turn to the Bible as to a friend, because they find there admonition, challenge, guidance, instruction, and never find there abasement of themselves.

The Bible is an immortal book because of its influences upon human society which have been massive, decisive, and which is continuing. It is an immortal book because it has influenced immortal philosophy and immortal art, literature, and law. It has been the most significant book to mold Western civilization. It is interesting when you come to think about it - here is a very old book. It was completed thousands of years ago; it was canonized nearly two thousand years ago. Certainly much has happened in the world since that time. Many new

philosophies have come, much new science, many new discoveries, the new world, and much of the scientific data which you find in the Bible has been completely antiquated, and yet in this atomic age, in this age of Einstein and Freud and Marx, the Bible is still the most widely read and the most influential of books in the world.

Whatever social idealism there is in society today, whatever effort is being made to build the good society, the society of justice and peace, democracy, derives and may continue derive their inspiration, directly or indirectly from the Torah, from the Old Testament. The great social and democratic movements in Europe in the last few centuries, which have been remaking our world, turned for their inspiration principally to the pages of the Old Testament - its proclamation of social justice and human equality, brotherhood and peace. Time and again the social passion of the Hebrew Bible swept in like the reviving sun and rain of a new springtime over a hard, frozen landscape of humanity. The Bible remains the eternal summons, challenge to man to move forward, to build a better world. There is very little in the Bible about the next world. That is left to God. (Hebrew) The heavens belong to God; the earth he gave to the children of man. There is in the Bible a summons to man as a co-worker of God to build a good society here on earth to prepare a world where they will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, but the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. And as long as men dream of the good society and work for it, so long will they turn to this fountainhead of social idealism as vast humanity which is the Bible. Parts of the Bible are easy to read - narrative parts, poetic, memoirs; parts of the Bible are difficult to read - ancient literature couched in the ancient idiom, using the ancient forms of speech, and deriving their metaphors and similes from the world in which they live. Therefore you have to study with great care and deliberateness what these men of old wanted to say, not merely for their own

generation, but future generations, because they spoke not merely to the men and women about them, but to all those who were not there in the unborn generations. The study of the Bible is a great, rewarding experience, if you approach it with a desire to learn it and to understand it. ^{There} ~~It~~ is not enough of Bible study among our people. Bible study does not necessarily require groups and circles, but the individual can study. There are numerous commentaries in English available which give the historical background, which make easy the rough passages, as it were, which explain and illumine. One can study the Bible in the privacy of one's home. An hour or two a week devoted to this immortal book is worth a thousand hours spent on wasteful reading of the unimportant, insignificant things which our printing presses are turning out today.



1. Immortal - ? Perennially timely - never antiquated -
Has an appeal and message for every age -
And for all kinds of people - in all walks of life -
and every level of culture.

^{Bible} It is not a book for philosophers only, or the sages,
or scholars, or only for the devout - ^{in heart}
Each one can find in it what he is looking for.

The philosopher - his speculation; the theologian -
his God-concept; the scholar, his history and a
knowledge of the past; the devout, the help, the faith
and the consolation of his life;
There is salvation in it for the sinner, the sinner, the
wrecker, the rebel and the reformer. The saint who
is caught in the confusion, the eternal. And the
rebel who beats his wings against the hard
injustices of the world.

Human nature, human basic needs and desires,
the hunger, the human heart - these do not
change much, if at all, from generation to generation.

They are the constants in the life of man - even as
seed-time and harvest-time, cold and heat, summer
and winter, day and night, endure as long as the earth
endures.

The Bible is dedicated in a multifarious way to these (2)
constants in human life - Hence its enduring relevance,
and its universality. It is not only the work of skilled

2) When it tells a story - ^{it is not only the work of skilled} ~~whatsoever~~ ^{craftsmanship} the artist feels, the narrator might be - its core, its archal theme, is a universal constant in human experience, all men, in all climes in all ages - Hate, jealousy, avarice, passion, ^{superficial} ~~in~~ ^{superficial} ~~prejudices~~, compassion and love.

The story is always a ^{rigid} passage of life - an authentic
and only recognizable human experience - some thing
that can happen at any time - to any one - some thing
that can happen to you!

When the Bible records history - the history of Israel and of other peoples - it is not dust-boken, archaized incidents of that it records, of little application to our historical experiences. We are constantly startled into an awareness of their ^{amazing} parallels to ~~the~~ life of nations today. Names, dates and places are different. Motives, trends, tactics, movements are remarkably identical.

When the Bible thunders against social wrong and injustice against oppression and exploitation - against rending the face, the poor; against robbery house & home and adding field to field until there is no more room,

against those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness
for light and light for darkness; those who are wise in their own
eyesight should in their own sight; those who are heroes
at drinking wine and valorous in mixing strong drink;
those who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the
innocent of his right!" - It is speaking no choice
words, and condemning no ancient, unnumbered
wrongs. It is overwhelmingly contemporary.

When it rings a song of nature or of love, it is
"a song of songs" - as the yearning heart of man has been
ever wont to ring in ecstasy, in tenderness, in passion
or despair, or hope, across the ages. No artificiality
there, no affectation, no false intimacy! - Deep calls unto

Deep! It is the spirit of life moving upon the wings of song!
It is an achievement of superb literary artistry - the great writing of the Bible.
3) The Bible is not a theological tract! It is a literature which
was a 1000 years in the making - the work of numberless
writers. In a real sense it is the work of many hands.
It is a people - the J. people - its national
literature! Hence its variety, its colorfulness, its manifold
and at times contrasting moods, its different styles of
writing, and types of writing - narrative, didactic, prophetic, hortatory,
poetic - and of course, legislation - great codes of law
of ethics and morality - which define a way of life
for men and nations. Amen!

7. Immortal - be. & its influence upon human society -
masses - deenies, - continuing. - in photo - in art - in literature
in law.

The most sig. sig. book to modern Western civilization
which has happened to that the West could move the American
Kabbala now canonized

new philosophies - new science - new discoveries -

much, the sc. data of Kabbala - authorized -

and yet in the atomic age - in the age of Einstein, Freud
and Marx - the Kabbala is still the most widely read -

the most influential of books -

8. / Whatever / social idealism - building the good society -
- social justice - peace - democracy -

It is the eternal reminder to men to move forward -
- 1921 / 10

→ The great social and democ. movements in Europe, in the
last few centuries, which have been remaking our world, turned
for their inspiration principally to the Q.T. - its proclamation of social
justice and human equality, brotherhood and peace. Time and again
the social passion, the Hebrew Bible swept in like the rising sun
and rain of a new spring time over a hard, frozen landscape.

Day and night, uttering speech, the ^{calm}~~clear~~ noonday and the nights of solitude and vision.

The seasons come and go (seed-time and harvest time, cold and heat, summer and winter, fire and hail, snow and frost.) Spring when the winter is past, when the flowers appear on the earth, when the time of singing is come and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in the land.

Summer and the smiting sun, the dry water-courses, the heat and the whirling dust in the desert wastes, and the cool shade of a great rock in a weary land.

Cool winds are there, blowing through scented gardens, and dew as of light upon the tender grass, and quiet brooks running through pastures green and still waters where God refreshes the heart of man.

All the beasts of the field are there, and the winged birds of the air, and the fish of the sea and the flowers of the field, all flocks and herds, all living things teeming and fruitful with life.

All the color of life is there, ^{every voice and work} all its ~~rest~~ and fragrance, its song and ecstasy, its hunger and its beauty. "Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! Let them all praise the name of the Lord! Hallelujah!"

Worship in Israel was song, - the song of a confident and joyous heart. The darkness of life, of course, was there, ^{to} and the shadow of death, the vast sorrows and tribulations, the tears, the wrongs, the ^{anguish} doubts, and ^{the way} ~~all the~~ broken hopes of mortal man. But the spirit of man was taught not to be ^{it takes force} ~~cast down or disquieted within him~~! "Hope in God"! (Ps. 42.5) The human heart should deeply feel that God will at last wipe away all tears. ~~It should be lifted up in trust.~~ "Weeping may tarry for the night but joy comes in the morning." (Ps. 30.5)

The Zohar declares: "When the High Priest was to appear before God in the Sanctuary, he was to enter that holy place with joy, and all things about him were to express joy- for in God's service there is no room for sadness." (Zohar, Terumah II, p. 165a)

How often

Where in ancient literature does one find anything comparable to the enraptured contemplation of creation which one finds in Job (Chap. 38-41), or the exalted nature Psalms, (Ps. 8, 19, 29, 65, 104, 187.--On a comparison between Ps. 104 and the Hymn to Ikhnaton see Moses Bottenwieser, "The Psalms" (1938), p. 158-161: "Its dependence upon the Hymn to the Sun notwithstanding, Psalm 104 is poetically incomparably superior to it, being in fact, a new creation which bears throughout the stamp of the distinct genius of Israel". It is noteworthy that this one approximation to ^a the great nature hymn comes from one who most closely approximated monotheism) or the exquisite nature vignettes of the Song of Songs, or Ben Sira's descriptions of the beauty of the world (Ecclus. chap. 43) or the exultant Bendicite of "the Song of the Three Children" (vv. 35-68), wherein all nature and the works of the Lord, animate and inanimate, are called upon to sing God's praise and highly to exalt Him. The Jewish spirit was enthralled with the pageant of life, with the breathless panorama of nature. In all ^{its} this glowing splendor, Judaism saw God, Who created all beauty to gladden the heart of man, so that the human heart could cry out: "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live." (Ps. 103.33) ^{TP} This is reflected in almost every book of the Bible. Here ^{are} one finds the flaming constellations reeling in their orbits, the cords of Orion and the chains of the Pleiades, ^{the morning stars singing together and all the sons, and shouting for joy.} ~~The stars in their courses move silently across the heavens, hushing man's questioning heart in the adoration of God.~~

— The seas resound, the great wide seas and the voice of God moves over the deep waters. The floods sweep ^{on} ~~here~~, the fountains of the great deep, ^{are given over all the} ~~and the~~ ^W ~~over~~ arching rainbows of divine promise.

— The storms and tempests rage, the riven way of the thunderbolt, the whirlwinds sweep through the sobbing wilderness, ^{and} the tumult of the clouds as if the Lord of Hosts were mustering armies for battle.

— The mountains loom, the flaming mountains of revelation, the guardian mountains round the City of God, the mountains and ^{beauty of the world} ~~hills~~ that praise the ^{name} Lord.