

# ERNST VON DOBSCHÜTZ

THE INFLUENCE OF THE  
BIBLE ON CIVILISATION

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The Influence of the Bible on Civilisation:*

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# **Ernst von Dobschütz**

## **The Influence of the Bible on Civilisation**

### **PREFACE**

One of the greatest questions of our day is how modern civilisation and Christianity can go on in harmony. One can approach this question by several ways, but historical investigation has always proved to be the surest. The author has in mind to write in German a full "History of the Bible," when time will allow. Meanwhile this brief sketch may prove useful. Readers who look for references will find most of them in an article contributed by the present writer to Dr. J. Hastings's Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics, vol. II, on "The Bible in the Christian Church."

The author wishes to express his thanks to his friend, Professor J. H. Ropes, for kindly reading the proofs for him, to Mr. W. J. Wilson and Mr. H. A. Sherman, who helped him in improving the diction, and to Professor Williston Walker for valuable information regarding early American documents. If any reader should find fault with the English style of this book, he must not blame any translator – the author himself is responsible.

*Ernst von Dobschütz.*

Cambridge, Mass.

*January, 1914.*

# I

## **THE BIBLE MAKES ITSELF INDISPENSABLE FOR THE CHURCH (UNTIL 325 A. D.)**

There is a small book; one can put it in one's pocket, and yet all the libraries of America, numerous as they are, would hardly be large enough to hold all the books which have been inspired by this one little volume. The reader will know what I am speaking of; it is the Bible, as we are used to call it – the Book, the book of mankind, as it has properly been called. It has been commented upon, treated in every way, but, curious to say, hardly any one has attempted to trace its history through the centuries and mark the influence which it exerted upon our civilisation.

In order to do this we follow the traces of the Bible through the different periods of human or, to speak more accurately, of Christian civilisation. In the first period of Christian history, the time of persecutions during the first three centuries of our era, there is not much to say about the Bible as influencing civilisation. Christianity was but starting on its way and fighting for its place in the world. The Bible could not exert a civilising influence upon a hostile world. But by impressing its value upon the Christian mind it made itself indispensable for the church

and thereby laid the foundation for the future development.

Christianity was a living religion. The first congregations were dwelling in an atmosphere of enthusiasm. There was a general outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The prophet's words seemed to be fulfilled: "They shall teach no more every man his neighbour and every man his brother, saying: know the Lord; for they shall all know me." Christianity was not a religion of a sacred book, whose dead letter was to be artificially kept alive by learned men. It was a religion of living experiences. Nevertheless, Christianity from the beginning had a sacred book. Jesus and his disciples used the Bible of their people, the Old Testament, and Saint Paul carried it to the Christian communities of gentile origin, which had not known of it before.

Christianity could not do without it. If it was necessary to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, how could this be done without arguing from the Scriptures as proof? If the gospel was to be announced to the heathen they would give less heed to the new tidings than to the statement that it was really the most ancient form of religion as attested by this sacred book, which was superior to all the books of poets and philosophers and legislators by reason of its venerable age. Christianity without any hesitation claimed the Old Testament as its own book, its own Bible. Not only was Jesus the content of this book, he was even believed to be its author. It was the spirit of Jesus which dwelt in the prophets and made them seek and search concerning the salvation offered by Christ (I Peter 1: 10-11). "The prophets

having their grace from him, did prophesy unto him," we are told in the so-called letter of Barnabas. So the Old Testament seemed to be a Christian book both in content and in origin, and it was easy enough to add some properly Christian pamphlets, as Saint Paul's letters and some gospels, the Acts and other letters, and some books of revelation. It was as necessary as it was easy, if Christianity was not to lose contact with its proper origin.

The New Testament, as we have it now, was not complete at the start. It was a collection of primitive Christian writings, larger in some ways than it is now; on the other hand lacking some of its present elements. Its precise content did not become finally established until a very late period, not earlier than the end of the fourth century.

So also the size of the Old Testament was not quite fixed. There were more books in the Greek Bible of the Alexandrian Jews than in the Hebrew Bible of the Palestinian rabbis. The Christian church at first adopted the Greek Bible, but from time to time some scholar pointed out the difference, and many people thought they had better keep to the Hebrew canon. This view, championed by Saint Jerome, led to a partial rejection of the books which nowadays we usually call the Old Testament Apocrypha, until in the sixteenth century the churches accentuated their difference by a different attitude toward these books, the Calvinists rejecting them altogether, the Roman church including them as an integral part of the Bible, and the Lutherans giving them an intermediate position as books to be



read with safety but without canonical authority. When, in 1902, King Edward VII was to be crowned, the British and Foreign Bible Society intended to present to his Majesty the copy of the Bible on which he was to take his oath. Then it was discovered that according to the old regulations the king of England had to take his oath on a complete Bible, that is a Bible containing the Apocrypha. The British and Foreign Bible Society on its part, by its statutes, was prevented from printing Bibles including the Apocrypha; so they presented to the king a most beautiful copy, but the king did not use it for the coronation service. It is the difference between the Alexandrian and the Palestinian canon which reappears in this little struggle and thereby is seen surviving to our own time.

Unsettled as the size of the Old and of the New Testament may have been, nevertheless the principle was established at a very early date that Christianity was to have a holy Scripture in two parts, one taken over from Judaism, the other added from its own stores.

Let us stop here for a moment and try to realise what this meant. Mohammed, when founding his new religion, acknowledged, it is true, the books of the former religions, but for his own believers the unique authority is the Koran, a book which originated within a single generation and therefore is pervaded by one uniform spirit. Christianity adhered to a Bible whose larger part originated in a period much anterior to its own and in a religion inferior to Christianity. The Bible

covers a period of over a thousand years. What a difference in civilisation between the nomadic life of the patriarchs and the time of Jesus! What a difference in spirit between the sons of Jacob killing the whole population of Sichem in order to avenge their sister and Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan! or between the prophet Elijah killing four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and Jesus preaching the love of one's enemies! In fact, it was possible to overcome this difference only in an age which did not read the Bible with historical notions. Even so, the juxtaposition caused much difficulty. We shall see the problem of the Law troubling the church through all the centuries. We shall find the notions of sacrifice and priesthood adapted to Christian institutions. Looking at Charlemagne or Calvin, we realise that the Old Testament is ever introducing its views into Christian minds, as authoritative as any word of the gospel.

Now, at the beginning the influence was rather the other way; the Old Testament was to be interpreted in the light of the New. And, in truth, much light came from the life of Jesus to the history of the ancient people and to the prophecies. We do not wonder that Christian minds were excited by all this fresh illumination, and we must not wonder that sometimes they remodelled the tradition of the life of Christ to accord with the Old Testament.

The harmony between the two Testaments soon became a leading idea in Christian doctrine. Some heretics, indeed, would not accept the Old Testament. Marcion maintained that it came

from an inferior god, while the supreme God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, had revealed himself only through his Son. He found a great many contrasts between the Old and the New Testament, and this criticism was supported by pagan philosophers, as, for example, Porphyry. The church, therefore, was most anxious to establish the harmony of the Testaments by any means at its command. Taste varies from century to century; the minute parallelism constructed by some early Christian writers, and evidently much admired by their contemporaries, seems to us rather ridiculous and fanciful. On the other hand, the church was right in maintaining the harmony. The New Testament needs to be explained from the Old Testament; it is open to much misunderstanding when taken apart. There was almost no sense for historical development at that time; the criticism of Ptolemæus, in his famous letter to Flora, where he speaks of several strata of revelation running through the Old and the New Testament, is an exceptional one. For most of the faithful the Christian doctrine was directly looked for and found in the Old Testament; the gospel was contained in every one of its books, from Genesis to Malachi. Unity was conceived as uniformity.

This was the system which appealed most to the average Christian mind. And the Bible was open to all Christians, as Harnack has brilliantly demonstrated in a recent publication. The ancient church laid stress upon this publicity and never tried to withdraw the Bible from the people. There was no hidden

mystery regarding the Bible. On the contrary, all members of the church were anxiously urged to make themselves as familiar with the Bible as possible. They were supposed to have copies of their own and to read them privately as well as in the congregation. Even when the struggles about the right doctrine began and the heretics sometimes held to the Bible as their champion against the doctrine of the church, the church did not remove the Bible from public discussion. The ecclesiastical party maintained that the Bible was always in favour of the true doctrine; one needs but to know how to read it. Tertullian, it is true, once in the heat of controversy declared that it was no use arguing against heretics from the Bible, but he did it, nevertheless, and so did the other fathers.

The Bible proved its spiritual value to the experience of every reader. A man familiar with the Psalms has a treasure which cannot be lost; in any situation he will find what is suitable for his needs. If one looks for examples of faith, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews in his eleventh chapter gives a splendid model for finding heroes of faith all through the Bible. The book of Genesis, especially its first chapters, was of particular interest for most of the readers on account of the sublime description there given of the beginnings of mankind. The creation story in Genesis implies much more than even the finest of all Greek myths, namely, the myth in Plato's *Timæus*, with which it was compared by the emperor Julian. The mighty words, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," proved to be the

one true answer to all the cosmological questions of Greek philosophy, and besides there was ample room for introducing whatever was wanted – such as the creation and the fall of the angels – if only one knew how to read between the lines.

In an old Christian book dealing with church regulations and the rules for individual Christian life we find the following admonition to use no other book at all except the Bible, because, as the author says, the Bible contains literature of every kind. The passage runs:<sup>1</sup>

Stay at home and read in the Law and in the Book of the Kings and in the Prophets and in the Gospel (which is) the fulness of these things. Keep far away from all the books of the heathen; for what hast thou to do with foreign words or with false laws or prophecies which also easily cause young people to wander from the faith? What then is wanting to thee in the Word of God, that thou throwest thyself upon these myths of the heathen? If thou wishest to read the tales of the fathers, thou hast the Book of the Kings; or of wise men and philosophers, thou hast the Prophets amongst whom thou wilt find more wisdom and science than among the wise men and the philosophers, because they are the words of God, of the one only wise God. If thou desirest song, thou hast the Psalms of David or if the beginning of the world, thou hast the Genesis of great Moses; if law and commandments, thou hast the book of Exodus of the Lord our God. Therefore keep entirely away from all these

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<sup>1</sup> Didascalia, ch. ii, p. 5 in Mrs. M. D. Gibson's translation.

foreign things, which are contrary to them.

The Bible, in fact, pervaded the whole life of a Christian. It was the Bible, its history, its commandments, that he was taught as a child in his parents' home. When the girls gathered in the women's hall to spin, they would sing and talk about God's revelations more eagerly than even Sappho had praised her luxurious love – according to an expression used by Tatian in his Apology. The prayers, private as well as ecclesiastical, all echoed Biblical phrases, and even at burials the Christians sang joyful psalms.

So the Bible became familiar to the Christians of that time. We are astonished to find how well they knew it. The sermons of this period are full of Biblical allusions, and evidently the preacher could expect them to be understood.

This is the more remarkable as the circulating of the Bible in this time met with the greatest difficulties. There was, of course, a large amount of Bible reading in the congregations. According to Justin's description of early Christian worship about 150 a. d., the service began with continuous reading of the Bible through many chapters, as far as time would allow. Then an officer, bishop or elder, would begin to preach. The office of reading was esteemed so highly that it was regarded as based on a special spiritual gift; the *anagnostes*, *i. e.*, the reader, in the earliest time had his place among the prophets and spirit-gifted teachers. And, in fact, if we look at the earliest manuscripts of the Bible which have come down to us, we shall almost think that supernatural

assistance was necessary for reading them: no punctuation, no accent, no space between the words, no breaking off at the end of a sentence. The reader had to know his text almost entirely by heart to do it well. From the "Shepherd of Hermas," a very interesting book written by a Roman layman about 140 a. d., we learn that some people gathered often, probably daily, for the special purpose of common reading and learning. But even granted that the memory of these men was not spoiled by too much reading, as is ours, so that by hearing they were able to learn by heart – it is said of some rabbis that they did not lose one word of all their master had told them, and, in fact, the Talmudic literature was transmitted orally for centuries – nevertheless, we must assume that these Christians had their private copies of the Bible at home. The evidence from the allusions of preachers to private reading is strong. Cyprian addresses a Christian: "Your life should be one of assiduous prayer or reading (of the Bible): now you speaking to God, now God to you."

## **Plate I – HARVARD PAPYRUS**

An attempt to copy the letters of St. Paul (Romans counts as A = first letter) giving the text only unto Romans 1: 7; late third or early fourth century.

From Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Vol. II, Pl. II, Egypt Exploration Fund – London.

Here begins our difficulty: how did they get so many

copies? There was an organised book-trade in the ancient world; publishers had their offices, using (instead of printing-presses) slaves who were trained in copying; they had shorthand writers, as well as calligraphers to do the fine writing. But as long as Christianity was still an oppressed religion it is doubtful if the Bible was among the books which publishers would care to take. The Christians were, most of them, poor people who could not spend much money for procuring Bibles. Besides, it was no easy thing to get a complete Bible. At that time the books were still written on papyrus rolls, not in book form. Only one side of the papyrus could be used; the roll would become unwieldy if too long. So, in order to get all the books of the Old and the New Testament, at least two dozen rolls had to be written. Maybe a simple Christian copied for himself one gospel or some letters or even one or more books from the Old Testament. There are preserved on papyrus some unfinished attempts which show what hard work it was (Plate I). We can scarcely imagine a man going with this heavy hand through all the books of the Bible.

We are told that wealthy Christians helped their brethren by procuring copies for them. Origen, the greatest Bible scholar of the ancient church, is said to have been supported by a rich admirer, who put at his disposal a number of slave copyists. With their help he succeeded in creating one of the greatest works which Bible criticism ever undertook, his so-called Hexapla, which is a comparison of more than six various Greek translations of the Old Testament. Scholars in the nineteenth



century held that scarcely more than one copy of this enormous work had ever been written, but by recent discoveries we know that it was copied several times (Plate II). A later admirer of Origen, Pamphilus, is said always to have carried with him several rolls in order to provide poor brethren. Now that was the third century. Christianity had already begun to spread among the higher classes and to become a feature in the world's life.

## **Plate II – ORIGEN'S HEXAPLA**

Fragment found in the Cairo-Genizah and published by E. Taylor in 1900; parchment, fifth century, with part of second, third, and fourth columns: Ps 22: 25-28; used later for copying Hebrew texts.

From "Hexapla of Origen," by E. Taylor, published by G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Devotional reading of the Bible was accompanied by scholarly interpretation. We mentioned Origen as the greatest Bible scholar of his time, if not of all times. It may be worth while to insert here a few words on his life. A native of Alexandria, he saw as a boy his father dying as a martyr for his Christian faith; he longed to become a martyr himself, and was only prevented from giving himself up by a trick of his mother's, who concealed all his clothes. He got a good training at the catechetical school of Alexandria, not restricting himself to mere Christian and Biblical studies, but reading the pagan philosophers of his time as well as

the Greek classics. A youth of only eighteen years, he became the head of the school, and his fame spread all over the empire. He travelled to Rome, to Greece; he was even asked by the Roman governor to come to Arabia to settle certain questions. So zealous was he to fulfil the commandments of the gospel that, misunderstanding one of the Lord's sayings, he made himself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake, which brought him into trouble in his later life. When once on a journey through Palestine he, being still a layman, had preached before the bishop of Cæsarea, he was summoned by his own bishop and ordered not to preach. Some years afterward the bishop of Cæsarea, who was among his strongest admirers, ordained him a priest, which caused his bishop to banish him from Alexandria. He settled at Cæsarea and lived there for twenty years without ever aiming at any ecclesiastical position, pursuing his study of the Bible and gathering around his chair the best men from every part of Christianity. So great was his fame that the empress Julia Mammæa, being still a pagan, asked him to see her when she was travelling in the East. He was the one man to refute the vigorous attack made against the truth of Christian doctrine by the philosopher Celsus. When persecution began again he wrote a tractate of comfort, "On Martyrdom," and another, "On Prayer." He himself suffered imprisonment and torture, and died after his release, as a result of these sufferings, at the age of sixty-nine.

We can scarcely do honour enough to this man, who three

centuries after his death was proclaimed to be one of the most dangerous heretics, the church, however, using his learning in the form of extracts. The vast amount of reading, the sagacity, and the perspicuity of the man are alike admirable. He is said to have commented upon nearly all the books of the Bible, and this three times. He wrote short annotations, he compiled large and learned commentaries, and he preached before the congregation. Only a small part of his works has come down to us, but this fills volumes. Origen's great merit is that he brought Christian interpretation to a system which enabled the church to retain the plain historical sense alongside the so-called higher meaning.

For a long time gentile philosophers as well as Jewish preachers had adopted the method of treating their sacred books allegorically. Homer, it was assumed, in telling his stories of battles of gods and heroes, meant quite another thing; otherwise he would be guilty of irreligion. He meant that the powers of nature and the energies of the human soul came into struggle, and therefore virtues and vices were fighting one with another. The same thing was done by Philo for the Old Testament. There was no real history; all was symbolical, allegory. Christianity tried to follow in this path. The gnostics indulged in the wildest form of allegory. But it was not safe to give up the idea of historicity altogether. Jesus and his gospel were historical facts, not mere ideas; they were emptied of all meaning if turned into allegory. And likewise the history of the Old Testament could not simply be reduced to allegorical metaphors. Origen saved the situation

by asserting that each of these two views had its proper place. His theory is that as man consists of body, soul, and spirit, so the holy Scripture has a threefold nature, to which corresponds a threefold interpretation. The body stands for the plain historical meaning: Jesus did cast out of the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves and the changers of money. There are some historical difficulties, Origen admits, if we compare the different gospel narratives and if we take account of the fact that a single man did this; Origen explains that it was a miracle showing the divine power in Jesus. But there are other aspects too. The soul represents the higher moral view: Christ is always casting out of his church, which belongs to the heavenly Jerusalem, the men who are profaning it by their money-making. And, lastly, there is the spirit, that is, the supreme mystical understanding. The spirit of Christ, entering its temple, the man's soul, casts out of it all earthly desires and makes it a house of prayer. Now that is very ingenious. These three strata of interpretation allow for a great variety in explanation and adaptation. Origen succeeds by this method in keeping the essential historical basis and adding what in those days was thought to be most significant. The Bible, being a divine book, seemed to require a higher form of interpretation; the Holy Ghost of God was supposed to be a spirit of mysteries; it was assumed that to interpret the Bible in a plain way was to think of God meanly.

Of course, the Bible contained some allegories which might seem to support this theory of allegorical interpretation; for

instance, the beautiful vision of Ezekiel, told in the thirty-seventh chapter of his book: he sees the valley full of dry bones, and at the command of God he prophesies over them and they begin to come together, and flesh came up and skin covered them above and at last breath came into them and they lived. It is a magnificent allegory of the people of Israel, scattered in the exile and brought to life again by the power of God. It is irritating to see the fathers just at this point declining to follow the path of allegorical interpretation. They insist upon the reality of the occurrence; it is to be taken literally as resurrection of the dead – so it has influenced all mediæval pictures of the last judgment! I need only add that the rabbis took Ezekiel's description in the same way, as a real occurrence, arguing for the historicity by showing the phylacteries which the risen persons had worn – and one feels what a pity it is to treat allegory as history. But the opposite fault is still worse: the spiritualising and allegorising of real history is the greatest damage ever done to religion.

Theologians tried to establish the authority of the Bible. This had already been done in some measure by the rabbis of the synagogue. In taking over the Bible the Christians had only to accept their estimate of it, but they were not quite satisfied with it. The rabbinical doctrine was a rather mechanical one: God had used men, just as a man uses a pencil to write with. The pencil does not act consciously: so the Old Testament writers, according to this theory, did not take any part in what they were writing; it was to them as another man's script. Commenting

upon the last chapter of Deuteronomy, where the death of Moses is described, a rabbinical authority remarks: "Until this passage God dictated and Moses wrote; henceforth God dictated and Moses wrote weeping" – namely, the account of his own death. There was so little interest in the human author that he could be eliminated altogether. We are told by an early Jewish legend that all books of the Old Testament had been destroyed at the time of Nebuchadnezzar, when the temple was burned; so God dictated them all to Ezra. According to this theory Ezra would be the real author of the whole Old Testament. This is the most mechanical way of representing the equal inspiration of all parts of the Old Testament. The Jews of the dispersion had a somewhat similar theory about the inspiration of their Greek Bible; when Ptolemy Philadelphus, king of Egypt, gathered at Alexandria seventy elders of the Jews to make the Greek translation of their law, he put each one of them in a separate cell in order to avoid any communication between them, so the legend runs. Then, after working for seventy days, all at once they shouted "Amen" from their cells, having accomplished their task, and when the seventy copies had been compared they were found to agree even in the smallest detail. Here we have again an attempt to assert inspiration not only for the book itself but also for its translation. It is as mechanical as the former, all human co-operation being excluded.

Christians did not want this. In Jesus they had experienced living revelation; they had prophets among themselves. So, at

least at the beginning, they had a much higher view of inspiration. God enters a man's soul and fills it with his spirit; now the man acts and speaks in the power of this spirit, and yet he is not unconscious of his own doing and speaking. There are two ways of inspiration, we are told by Clement of Alexandria: either God snatches up the man's soul and conducts it to the unseen world and shows to it whatever he wishes it to know – this is ecstasy – or God enters the man and fills him and makes him his organ. The latter, less striking though it appears, is nevertheless the higher and more valuable concept. Therefore the fathers do not so much use the metaphor of the pencil as the similitude of a musical instrument, whether a flute through which the Holy Spirit is playing, or a harp which he touches with a plectrum.

Much as they appreciate the holy Scripture, the early fathers usually talk about it in a very unpretentious manner. They have not yet developed those gorgeous formulas of quotation which are used in later times. They quote simply: "Scripture says," or "Paul says," not "the holy and glorious apostle in his most excellent epistle to the Romans says exceedingly well." They talk in simple words, but they are prepared even to die for this Bible.

Eusebius, the first historian of the Christian church, to whom we are indebted for so much invaluable information, tells us a moving story about Marinus, a young Christian officer in the Roman army, at Cæsarea, in Palestine. He had the confidence of his superiors and was to be promoted to the higher rank of captain. Then out of jealousy one of his comrades denounced

him as a Christian. Summoned before his colonel, he was asked if this was true, and when he confessed he was urged to abjure his faith. The colonel gave him three hours' time. So he went to the small Christian church, where he found the venerable old bishop. The bishop, hearing his story, took the Bible in one hand and the soldier's sword in the other. "This is your choice," he said. And the soldier, without hesitating, grasped the Bible, went back, and declared himself to be and to remain a Christian. And instead of receiving military promotion he became a martyr.

It is a significant little story. Indeed, after a hard struggle, lasting through nearly three centuries, when the Roman empire found it necessary to attempt the final destruction of Christianity the attack was mostly directed against the Bible. Diocletian, in 303 a. d., on the 24th of February, issued an edict ordering all Christian churches to be destroyed and all Bibles to be burned. He relied on the Roman law, which forbids not only the exercise of magical arts, but the science of magic, too, and therefore condemns all books of magic to be burned. The Christians were accused of employing magic, and their Bible was treated as a magical book.

We have thrilling accounts of Christians trying to conceal their treasured Bible rolls from the eyes of the inquiring officials. They took them from the church into their private homes, securing the Bible in safety but many a time bringing persecution upon themselves. To the officials they surrendered books of various kinds in order to escape from surrendering the



Scriptures. Asked if they had sacred books in their houses, many of them would answer: "Yes, in our hearts." The enthusiasm was so great that they believed the story of any miracle in support of the Bible. They maintained that copies of the Bible which had been thrown into the fire by the heathen were not burned or even touched by the flame.

Naturally there were others who were not strong enough in their faith to resist, but these "surrenderers," as they were called, were cast out of the church and never admitted again. During the fourth century to bring against a clergyman the charge of having surrendered sacred books at that period of persecution was felt to be the most serious accusation possible. Even to be ordained by a bishop who was under suspicion of having surrendered his church's holy Scriptures was held a disgrace by a large party of zealous Christians who demanded that orders of this kind be invalidated. The records of a trial held at Carthage in 329 a. d. dealing with this question have come down to us. Here documents from 303 a. d. were introduced as evidence against the clergy, and the whole forms one of the most illuminating pages of church history.

Even to be found reading the Bible made a man guilty of obstinate resistance to the emperor's law and involved him in penalty. There was a deacon at Catania in Sicily named Euplus. He was reading the holy Scripture when the sheriff laid hold of him. Brought before the judge he takes his copy of the Gospel and reads from it (Matt. 5: 10): "Blessed are they that have been

persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," and (Matt. 10: 38): "And he that doth not take his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me." The judge asks him: "Why did you not surrender those volumes which the emperors forbade?" "Because," he replies, "I am a Christian and it was not loyal to surrender. It is better to die than to surrender." We do not need the addition made by a late Byzantine hagiographer that the copy of the Gospels was hung on his neck when he was conducted to execution. It is clear enough that he was suffering for his devotion toward the Bible and that it was the gospel which inspired his boldness.

Euplus does not stand alone. I could mention a dozen martyrs whose acts all give the same impression. Sometimes a gathering of men and women is apprehended while reading the Bible, and the whole company is forthwith carried away to the most painful tortures.

These Christians knew what the Bible was to them. All declamations of later theologians about the inspiration and the authority of the Bible count for nothing compared with this testimony.

After all, we do not wonder that the Bible became a civilising power as soon as Christianity had won its victory.

## **II**

# **THE BIBLE BEGINS TO RULE THE CHRISTIAN EMPIRE (325-600 A. D.)**

After the persecution by Diocletian a new era began. Constantine proclaimed tolerance, and by and by Christianity became the religion of the empire. The victory of Christianity was a victory of the Bible as well. This finds its expression in the remarkable fact that the first Christian emperor, the immediate successor of those who persecuted the Bible and tried to destroy it, ordered fifty splendid copies of the Bible to be prepared at his expense for the churches of the newly founded capital, Constantinople. Some scholars have thought that one or two of these copies still survive in the famous manuscript discovered by Tischendorf in the Convent of Mount Sinai (Plate III), or in the Codex Vaticanus at Rome. I venture rather to think that both copies belong to the period of Constantine's sons. But the fact that the Bible, after a period of destruction when most of the earlier copies were burned, got a surprising circulation under official direction accounts, I think, for a puzzling feature in the transmission of the text. From the Old Latin and the Old Syriac, as well as from the testimony of the fathers, we can infer that

various forms of the Greek text must once have been widely circulated, which have now almost disappeared, whereas most of our present Greek manuscripts give a text evidently based on a late official recension. Looking at Diocletian's attempt to destroy the Bible altogether and at Constantine's official order to provide a large number of manuscripts, we easily understand the situation. The older forms of text had been swept away; now there was room to supply their place with the learned attempts of later scholars from the schools of Origen or Lucian who endeavoured to bring in more critical texts.

## **Plate III – CODEX SINAITICUS**

End of St. Mark (15: 16-16: 8) and beginning of St. Luke (1: 1-18); Mark 16: 9-20 is missing; 15: 47 is added at the lower margin by a later hand; remark the numbers of Eusebius's sections and canons. The eight columns of the open book recall the roll-system.

Reduced one-fifth from the fac-simile edited by Prof. Lake and published by the Clarendon Press  
(Oxford and London).

Another change is to be mentioned at the same time. The old form of papyrus rolls became obsolete and the parchment book took its place. The use of this latter form seems to originate in the law schools; the codex, or parchment book, is at first the designation of a Roman law-book. But at an early date the

Christian church adopted this form as the more convenient one and gave it its circulation. We hardly say too much when we call the Bible the means by which our present form of book came into general use. Even if the Bible had done nothing else for civilisation than to give mankind the shape of its books that would be a great deal (Plate IV).

The form of a parchment book, or codex, would admit of the copying of several books in one volume. The great Bibles of the fourth and fifth centuries of which we know contained all the books; they formed one volume. So the internal unity running through the Bible as a whole came to be represented even in the outward form.

## **Plate IV – ROLL AND BOOK**

St. Luke the Evangelist copying from a roll into a book (codex form): miniature from a Greek manuscript at the Vatican library (gr. 1158), eleventh century.

From "Vatikanische Miniaturen." Copyright by B. Herder, Freiburg.

The copying of the Bible went on rapidly, monks and noble Christian ladies undertaking it as a form of ascetic work, providing a heavenly merit and sometimes earning bread and butter, too. Instead of the plain copies in an unskilled hand we now find sumptuous books of the finest parchment with purple colouring, in the most luxurious manuscripts the sacred text

being written in gold and silver, and the margin sometimes being covered with beautiful paintings. A copy of Genesis in Greek at the Vienna library has forty-eight water-colours, one at the bottom of each page, telling the same story as the text. The manuscript when complete must have had sixty folios: this gives one hundred and twenty of such decorated pages for Genesis, and if it contained the whole Pentateuch we may allow for five hundred and ten illustrations (Plate V). And this manuscript does not stand alone; it is but one of a large group of illuminated manuscripts. This sumptuous appearance may be taken as a sign of the value attached to the Bible. Persecuted hitherto, it became the ruler of the Christian empire, invested with all the glory of royalty.

The place given to the Bible is best shown by the fact that it presided over the great councils, a copy of the Bible lying upon the presidential chair. It was meant as a symbol for Christ himself taking the place of honour and deciding the great questions of faith. The same holds true for non-ecclesiastical assemblies. In an ordinance of the emperor Theodosius it is required that a copy of the Bible be present in every court-room. The Bible, or rather the Gospels, or to speak even more precisely the most prominent page in them, the beginning of the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, was used for taking an oath. The worn condition of this page in many a manuscript still attests this use.

Presiding over the courts, the Bible began at once to exercise its influence upon the Law. We can already trace this influence

in the legislation of Constantine himself: when he forbids to brand a criminal on his face, giving as reason that the image of God ought not to be marred, it is the Biblical notion of the man's face being the likeness of God which underlies this law. When, in a law published in 334, he insists that no man, whoever he is and whatever rank he has, shall be admitted as a solitary witness unless supported by another witness, it is the well-known Biblical rule that at the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established. When he makes divorce more difficult, denying the right of remarriage to the man who repudiates his wife without sufficient reason on her part, we feel that it is the injunction of Jesus which is behind this law. I would not say the same of all parts of this legislation which various scholars have adduced as proving Christian influence. Roman law from the second century was influenced to a large extent by the Stoa, all the famous lawyers such as Gaius and Paulus belonging to this school and introducing its ideas into the practice of the courts and into the legislation of the magistrates, especially of the emperor. There is an evident development in the Roman law toward a more humane conception of slavery; this is due to the Stoa. The views on marriage and divorce, the position of "natural children," as the Roman law calls illegitimates, all this is largely due to non-Christian influences. Nevertheless, there are unmistakable traces of a particular influence of the Bible upon the legislation of the Christian emperors, and this influence increases from decade to decade. Constantine gives a rather vague ordinance for keeping

Sunday as a day on which courts are not to be held. Theodosius is much stricter; and the climax is reached with Justinian, when Sunday has become a legal holiday.

## **Plate V – VIENNA GENESIS**

The paradise: Adam and Eve appear three times: (1) under the tree of knowledge, Gen. 3: 6; (2) when discovering their nakedness, 3: 7; (3) when hiding themselves from the Lord among the trees, 3: 8. The divine voice, represented by the hand from heaven, belongs to this third scene; it is put in the centre merely for artistic reasons.

From "Die Wiener Genesis." F. Tempsky, Vienna.

Justinian, of course, codifies the Roman law, but his *Novellæ*, the laws issued by himself, show the new spirit of a legislation ruled by the Bible. He sometimes refers directly to the Bible as authority. Still more is this spirit prevalent in some provincial codes. One of these says that everything has to be judged according to the ancient and to the modern law, i. e., the law of Moses, which antedates the laws of all other nations, and the law of Christ, as it is contained in the laws of the emperors Constantine, Theodosius, and Leo. Lawyers of this period indulge in comparisons between the Roman law and the law of Moses.

The Roman empire was Latin in some respects, Greek in others. Latin was the official language of the court, of the law,



of the army. But the population spoke mostly Greek, though from the third century on large parts used their native language, Syriac and Coptic, as well. The Bible had been translated into these languages during the former period. Now the general political situation brings the empire into contact with the Goths in the North, with Armenians and Georgians in the East, with Libyans and Ethiopians in the South. As soon as the empire gains any influence among these neighbouring peoples, the Christian mission tries to get hold of them and we see the Bible translated into these languages, which hitherto have had no writing. The Bible marks for these peoples the beginning of a national literature. Their alphabets were made up from the Greek, thus showing that the reading of the Bible with these nations began in connection with their intercourse with the Roman empire.

The Bible ruled even the Greek language of this empire. There are many changes in the later Greek which are surely due to familiarity with the Bible. Words previously unknown in Greek or used in a different sense became quite familiar; everybody knows what is the meaning of Beelzebub, Messiah, Paradise, Satan, and that an angel is not a mere messenger, but is a messenger from God, a spiritual being, and that the word demon always means an unclean spirit.

Moreover, the Bible influenced the style of the writers, especially of the great preachers. One may distinguish three forms of influence in this department: artificial imitation; naïve use of Biblical names and phrases (what is usually

called in Germany the language of Canaan); and, lastly, the unconscious influence which the style of any book exerts upon a careful reader. I do not think that there are many instances of artificial imitation in this period. Sometimes a preacher skilfully composed his whole sermon by adding Biblical quotation to quotation; asked to preach a sermon on a saint's day, he did nothing else than comment upon the saint's life in Biblical phrases. The second type of influence is very common; the present emperor is usually spoken of as the new David; the story of a war is always told as if David were fighting the Philistines; each heretic is entitled to be called the new Judas Iscariot who betrays his Lord. The most famous example of this kind is the sermon attributed to Chrysostom after his first return to Constantinople, when he had fled from the wrath of the empress: "Again Herodias is furious, again she flurries, again she dances, again she desires the Baptist's head to be cut off by Herod." The preacher's own Christian name, of course, was John, and the empress was trying to get rid of him for political reasons.

The most important influence, however, is the unconscious influence simply from the use of the Bible. The great power of Chrysostom's sermons was partly due to his eminent rhetorical talent and training. He knew how to gain his hearers' attention; yet for the greater part his thorough acquaintance with the Bible seems to be responsible. Reading the sermons of those great Greek Christian orators of the fourth century, we are often struck by the embedded quotations from the Bible. In the midst of

this fluent Greek there is something quite different, something stern, something austere, something dignified and solemn, which immediately appeals to the hearer. As a matter of fact, the preachers themselves, proud as they were of their classical training, had rather the opposite impression; they apologise for introducing barbarous language. Chrysostom insists, in many a sermon, on the idea that the apostles were fishermen, unskilled in literary style, and that it is one of the proofs of inspiration that those men could write at all. He evidently is not aware of the fact, clear to us, that it is just the vigour and strength of Biblical language which gave to his own sermons their magnificent effect. He was filled with Biblical phraseology as was no other preacher of his time. He himself did not realise it, nor did, I presume, the greater part of his congregation, yet it was this which so impressed them. If only the modern editors would note all the Biblical allusions in his works! Yet they are hardly able even to recognise them. We find preachers noted for their brilliancy in extemporaneous speaking, and usually the remark is added, it was because the speaker knew the Scriptures by heart.

In this way the people became accustomed to Biblical phraseology, and we do not wonder that at last the colloquial Greek also was influenced by the Bible. We can trace its influence even in the romances.

The Bible ruled the home and the daily life; people had their furniture decorated with Biblical symbols; lamps showed Noah's ark or Jonah's whale, Jesus with his disciples in a ship

or Jesus treading upon the lion and adder, the serpent and dragon (according to Psalm 91). At the Strassburg Museum there is a beautiful engraved glass cup made probably in a Roman manufactory in Cologne. On one side is engraved Abraham sacrificing Isaac, on the other side Moses striking water from the rock. Rich people wore sumptuous garments embroidered with representations of Biblical scenes. The preachers complain that these people wear the miracles of Christ on their coats instead of taking them to their heart and conscience.

The great officials of the empire used to give to their friends ivory tablets commemorating their honours. In former times they had represented on them the emperor, the empress, or their own portraits, and scenes from the circus; now they chose Biblical subjects. People liked to have long rolls exhibiting the wars and triumphs of an emperor in a continuous series of drawings. Two gigantic rolls of this kind may still be seen at Rome; I mean the columns of Trajan and of Marcus Aurelius. Christian art produced rolls of the same kind, exhibiting the story of Joshua's battles (Plate VI). Senators and noble ladies vied with each other in arranging the history of the Bible and especially the life of Jesus in the form of poems, each word of which was taken either from Homer or from Vergil. It is a wonderful mixture of Bible and classical culture.

## **Plate VI – JOSHUA ROLL**

### **(At the Vatican)**

Joshua is sending from Jericho (at the left, walls tumbling down) to Ai two men to spy out the land, Joshua 7: 2. The towns are represented by edifices as well as by allegorical figures (Tyche of the City).

From "Vatikanische Miniaturen," by St. Beissel.  
Copyright by B. Herder, Freiburg.

The Bible rules not only the public and the private life, but also the church and its organisations. At the beginning the Christians were afraid of comparing the Old Testament rites with the ecclesiastical institutions. The Law of the Old Testament belonged to an earlier form of religion; it was abolished by the New Testament. Christ, according to Saint Paul, was the end of the Law. But by and by the Old and the New Testament were brought nearer together. An author of the first century remarks that God by his commandments in the Old Testament has shown himself to be a lover of order, therefore in the Christian congregation, too, order ought to rule. He does not call the Christian communion a sacrifice, the Christian minister a priest; but his parallelism comes very near to this, and a

century later the step is taken. It becomes usual to speak of bishop, elders, and deacons as high-priest, priests, and Levites. Later on, even the minor degrees were taken back to Biblical models: the subdeacon, lector, exorcist, acolyte, janitor were found represented in the Old Testament. The clergy formed a separate class as distinct from other people as the tribe of Levi was among the tribes of Israel. It was upon the authority of the Old Testament that they claimed rights and prerogatives to be given and guaranteed by the empire. The monks found their models in Elijah and Elisha; common life was represented by the apostles; penitents were Job, David, and the people of Nineveh; widows (as ecclesiastical functionaries) had their models in Naomi, Hannah, Tabitha, etc. The church was the tabernacle of Moses and the temple of Solomon, and each detail in the description of these Biblical buildings was made to agree with a feature in the Christian church by means of allegorical interpretation. The feasts of the church correspond to the feasts of the Old Testament; Easter is usually called Passover, and Whitsuntide Pentecost. At a rather early date a festival of the dedication of the individual church was introduced to correspond with the festival of the dedication of the temple. As the Jews kept two days in the week for fasting, so did the Christians, choosing Wednesday and Friday instead of Monday and Thursday; and in doing so they remembered that it was on a Wednesday that Jesus was betrayed by Judas and on a Friday that he died on the cross. Even the usual hours for prayers were based on Old

Testament authority; David, saying in Psalm 141: 2 "The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice," means vespers, while in the 131st Psalm he is speaking of compline, in the 63d of matins. The vigil was observed as well as commanded by Christ himself (Luke 6: 12 and 12: 37). The whole liturgy was explained as being in every detail a representation of the life of Christ. The sacraments, too, were prefigured in the Old Testament. This symbolism is very old and very commonly used; it has influenced Christian art. We see Noah's ark as a symbol of baptism (*cf.* I Peter 3: 20); Abel's sacrifice, and Melchisedek offering bread and wine to Abraham, as symbols of the holy eucharist. Abraham entertaining at his home the three angels reveals the holy Trinity. All this is represented in splendid mosaics on the walls of the churches, as for instance in San Vitale at Ravenna.

To us this system of Biblical references for everything in the Christian service seems strange. We feel that the worship of the Christian congregation rests on other principles than the ritual of the Old Testament and does not gain anything by such hazardous comparisons. It looks like comparing the stars in heaven with beasts on earth. But the fathers thought that this was the highest achievement at which they could arrive: to allegorise and spiritualise the Old Testament law in order to deduce from it the Christian liturgy. That was what they called worship in spirit and truth. It is exactly opposite to the great idea which Jesus conveyed in those words; it is one of the greatest confusions to which the juxtaposition of the Old and the New Testament in one

Bible was leading. Nevertheless, it was of great influence upon civilisation for centuries.

The church and the laity were ruled by the Bible; but the real Bible folk of this time were the monks. There had been a tendency toward asceticism from the very beginning of Christianity. At the moment when the church came into power this tendency increased rapidly. In Egypt as well as in Syria, wherever there was a desert place hermits gathered and monasteries were built. Now, in these monasteries the life was really filled with the reading of the Bible. Even the poorest monk would have a copy of the Gospels to read. Some of the monks, of course, were very simple, unlearned people. They could not read, so they learned it all by heart. And sometimes – we are told in the legendary tales of the monks – it happened that a monk who never before had learned to read was miraculously given the art of reading, God granting it to him as a recompense for his zeal. The monks had their hours for common worship and reading, but they were supposed to read each by himself as much as possible. "The rising sun shall find the Bible in thy hands," is one of the monastic rules, and legend illustrates how the divine grace recompensed assiduous reading: filled with heavenly light all through the night was the cell of a hermit as long as he was reading the Bible. When visitors came the talk was over questions raised by the Bible. It was with quotations from the Bible that the celebrated anchorite entertained the people who called upon him to ask for spiritual help.



Among all Biblical books the Psalter was the one most favoured by the monks. They knew it by heart, almost all of them, and they used to recite it during their manual labour. The Psalter was their spiritual weapon against the temptations of the demons; the demon liked nothing so much as to turn a monk from reciting his Psalter. But besides the Psalter it was the Gospel which prevailed over all other books in these ascetic circles. Many of the hermits were induced to leave the world by attending a Gospel lesson in their church at home. "If thou wouldest be perfect, go, sell that thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me," or "And every one that hath left houses or brethren or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name's sake shall receive a hundredfold and shall inherit eternal life." These are the words which occur again and again in the lives of saints as the decisive ones for their "conversion," that is for leaving the world and going to the desert or entering a monastery. The first saying quoted above is referred to in the life of Saint Anthony, the greatest of all hermits, and Saint Augustine had this in his mind when the time came for him to change his life. The second saying makes Saint Hypatius go away from home; his biographer, however, is honest enough to add that the saint, a youth of eighteen, had just received punishment from his father. An actor living luxuriously with two concubines chances to enter a church, and hears read from the Gospel, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"; so he repents and becomes a monk. I do not mean to

say that these tales of the monks are historical and trustworthy in every point, but I venture to think that this statement about the motives for conversion is, after all, a correct one. The gospel is what appeals to the human heart, in all centuries and in all nations. And then the man will try to make the gospel the rule of his life. I think it is remarkable that whereas the church and the empire both were ruled mainly by the Old Testament, these ascetic circles took the gospel as their main rule, that is to say, the gospel as understood by the men of that time. It was to them a new law, a law of asceticism, of self-denial, and they kept to it as strictly as possible. Even if for other Christians it meant an almost inaccessible ideal, the monastery ought to be the place to fulfil it literally.

Our picture would be inadequate, however, if we should neglect the abuse of the Bible, the Bible showing its importance and ruling force even by its influence upon the dark domain of human superstition. The ancient world was full of magic. We remember the story in Acts 19 of how Saint Paul overcame some Jewish exorcists, with the result that "not a few of them that practised curious arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all, and they counted the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver." I suspect many a scholar or librarian of to-day would like very much to have those books among his treasures, but they were burned; and Christianity scored its first triumph over superstition. Superstition, however, did not give way at this first defeat; on the contrary, it made a

strenuous effort to draw over all the forces of Christendom to its own side. There was the name of Jesus, frightening the demons; black magic took this name and converted it to its detestable uses. There was the Gospel, representative of Jesus himself in his heavenly power; superstition made it a vehicle of its own magical rites. There was the Bible, the book of divine oracles; human inquisitiveness turned it into a book from which to read the dark future. The heathen had done this with the poems of Homer and Vergil. Turning over the pages they suddenly stopped at a verse and then tried to find in this verse the answer to their question. The fathers of the early church detested this method as something quite alien to a Christian mind, but as early as the end of the fourth century people came to feel that it was all right if only they used the Bible for the same purpose. In the sixth century even church officials kept to this practice. When a bishop had to be elected they almost always consulted the Psalter first on behalf of the man to be elected. Bible verses written on parchment were attached to easy chairs in order to keep away the evil spirits. Gospels in the smallest form were hung on the necks of the babies. It is astonishing to see how great was the esteem in which the Bible was held and how terribly contrary to the spirit of the Bible this practice was, especially when the Bible was used to do harm. Lead, by its dull lustre, always has reminded mankind of the realm of death; so it was used in black magic for bringing upon an enemy a curse from the gods of the underworld. A rolled sheet of lead, inscribed with a psalm and

a dreadful curse against any robber, has been found on one of the Ægean Islands hidden in the ground of a vineyard. Evidently the psalm was supposed to be one of the most effective spells. Even the Lord's Prayer and other parts of the Gospels have been abused in the same way (Plate VII). Nothing is so holy that it cannot be turned into a crime by human sin.

It is a dark page of human civilisation. I am afraid it is a large page, too. I could accumulate instance upon instance. But however interesting this might be, it would give a wrong impression. The Bible was not primarily used as a magical means in those centuries. It was acknowledged as something superhuman, bearing supernatural powers, and therefore ruling everything. It ruled the empire as well as the church. It influenced law, language, art, habits, and even magic.

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