ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

THE BIBLE AS POETRY

WALT WHITMAN
ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

THE BIBLE AS POETRY

BY

WALT WHITMAN
THE BIBLE AS POETRY

By

[Signature]
431 Stevens Street
Camden Jan 25 '83

My dear friends,

Would "the Bible as Poetry" suit you for paper
of Feb. 3? — The price
in 15 — I would
like 50 copies of the
WW read with moths and in about same size, print on
in "Critic" heavier paper, with the "Critic" paper as one of the print. This copy of
will pay for paper and print. A extra copy — 2'00

If put in type send proof
of "Bible" here early in week

Walt Whitman
Jan 25, '83

I L & J B Elder

Critic Office

30 Lafayette Place

New York City
The Bible as Poetry

If the time ever comes when iconoclasm does its utmost in one direction against this Book, the collection must still survive in another and dominate just as much as hitherto, or more than hitherto, through its divine and primal poetic structure. To me that is the living and definitive element, principle of the work, evolving everything else. Then the continuity, the oldest and newest Archaic utterance and character, and all between holding together, like the apparition of the sky, and coming to us the same. Even to our Nineteenth Century here are the fountain.
I suppose one cannot at this day say any thing new, from a literary point of view, about those typical traditions, begotten of Asia - not of the Hebrew Bible, the mighty Hindu epics, and a hundred typical works; (not now definitely including the Iliad - though that work was certainly of Asiatic genesis, as Homer himself was - consideration which seems curiously ignored.) But will there ever be a time or place - even a student, however modern, of the grand art, to whom those compositions will not afford profounder lessons than all else of their kind in the garnerage of the Past? Could there be any stronger suggestion to the current popular writer and reader of verse, what the office of poet was in primeval times - and is yet capable of being anew, adjusted entirely to the modern?
All the poems of Orientalism with the Old and New Testaments at the centre, tend to deep and wide, (I don't know but the deepest and widest) psychological development, with little or nothing at all of the mere aesthetic. The principal verse: requirement of our day. Very late, but inerringly, comes to every capable student the perception that it is not in beauty, it is not in art, it is not even in science, that the profoundest laws of the case have their eternal sway and outcropping.

In his discourse on "Hebrew Poets" De Sola Mendes says:

"And the illuminated history of descent, at the Hebrew assembly, was radiating its glory in all material ways. Its shining loveliness was with Israel, God's ancient nation, as in the morning, God the Greatest and Evermore, needed its majesty and beauty, inspired hymns and songs in Aaron's cod. And this he reasserted, history of the nation: "wondrous Israel, illuminating a nation whose song for God is all beauty—this story of the sacred, the holy, the splendid, the Holy city of Jerusalem, with its glorious valleys and wondrous trata.""

Compared with the greatest epics of Greece and lesser ones since, the spiritual supports of the Bible are simple and meagre.
its history, biography, narratives, etc., are as beads, strung on and indicating, the eternal thread of the Denise purpose and power. The only deepest faith for us, petus, and such Denise purpose for palpable or impalpable theme, it often transcends the masterpieces of Hellas and all masterpieces. The metaphors daring beyond account, the lawless soul, extravagant by our standards, the glow of love and friendship, the present kiss - nothing in argument or logic, but unsurpassed in Proverbs, in religious ecstasy, in suggestions of common mortals, and death, the great equalizers - the spirit, every thing, the ceremonies and forms of the Church, nothing finite limitless, its immense seriousness unbounded spiritual - an incredible all-inclusive non-worldliness and dew-drenched illiteracy (the antipodes of our Nineteenth Century, business, absorption and sophisticated refinement) - no hair-splitting doubt, no slyly sulking and sniffing, no "Hamlet," no "Donau," no "Thomast" no "In Memoriam."
The culminating proof of the poetry
of a country is the quality of its hero
sonnel, which, in my race, can never be
really superior without superior poems.
The finest blending of individually-unique
universal—human—human qualities to have been typified in
the songs of those old Asiatic lands (in my opinion
nothing has been typified out of the galaxies of the
"Heaven" or Shakespeare's heroes, or from the
Pennsylvania "Wells," so lofty, devoted and
starlike) seem to have been typified in the
songs of those old Asiatic lands. Men and
women stand like great columnar trees
nowhere else the abnegation of self
towering in such unpaint splendor
nowhere else the simplest human emotions
conquering the gods of heaven, and fate itself.
(The best episode, for instance, toward
the close of the "Mahabharata" — the journey
of the wife Savitri with the god of death,
Yama.
"One terrible to see — blood-red his garb,
His body huge and dark, blood-stained eyes,
Which flamed like suns beneath his turban crest.
Armed was he with a noose."

who carries off the soul of the dead husband,
the wife tenaciously following, and — by the react-
less charm of perfect poetic recitation! — eventually
redeeming her captive mate.

I remember how enthusiastically
William H. Seward, in his last days once
ex-patriated on Thess Messen, throughout his
craves in Turkey, Egypt, and Asia Minor,
finding the oldest Biblical narratives
there exactly illustrated to-day, apparently no
break or change in all along three thousand
years — the veiled women, the costumes,
the gravity and simplicity, all the manners,
just the same. The veteran Trelawny
and he found the only real nobleman
of the world in a good average specimen
of the mid-aged or elderly Oriental. In the
East the grand figure, always leading is the old man, majestic, with flowing beard, paternal, etc. In Europe and America, on the contrary, it is, as we know, the young fellow in novels, a handsome and interesting hero, more or less juvenile — in operas, a tenor with blooming cheeks and black moustache, superficial animation and perhaps good lungs, but no more depth than skim milk. But reading people probably get their information of those Bible arenas and current peoples as depicted in print by English and French and the most shallow, inadequate supercilious brood on earth.

I have said nothing yet of the cumulus of associations, perfectly legitimate parts of its grand influence, and, finally, in many respects, the dominant parts of the Bible as a poetic entity, and of every book of it. For to it all the old edifice only — the conception, of events and struggles and surroundings of which it has been the scene and motive —
even the horrors, dreads, deaths. How many
cages and generations have brooded and
wept and agonized over this book!
What untellable joys and extasies — what
support to martyrs at the stake — deduced
from it. (No really great song can ever
certain full purport till long after the
death of its singer — till it has accreted
and climbed impetuously on itself the many
passions, many joys and sorrows, it has itself
aroused.) To what mysteries has it been the
shore and rock of safety — the refuge from
driving tempest and wreck! Translated in
all languages from it has united this diverse
world! Of civilized lands, whose of our retro
spect; has it not interwoven and linked and
penetrated? Not only does it bring us what
is clasped within its covers; Nay, that is the
least of what it brings. Of its thousands,
there is not a verse, not a word, but is
thick with human emotions, the emotions of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, the direct, indelible coloring of the ages, of our own antecedents, inseparable from that background of us, on which, man. Tarnished as it is, all that we are to-day inevitably depends — our ancestry, our past. These are the unspeakably precious cumuli, crowning and guaranteeing and for.

Strange, but true, that one of the principal factors in Coharsing the Nations, eras and paradoxes of the globe, by giving them a common platform of two or three great ideas, a commonality of origin, and projecting the cosmic 23

5

that dream of all races, all time — that the long trumps, gestations, attempts, and failures, resulting in the New World, and
in the idea of modern solidarity and poli-
tics—can be identified and resolved
back into a collection of old poetic lore,
which more than any one thing else, has
been the axis of civilization and history
through thousands of years—and except for
which this America of ours, with its
polity and essentials, could not now be
existing.

No true land will ever contravene
the Bible. Coming steadily down from
the past, like a ship, though all pertur-
bations, all ebb and flow, all time, it is
to-day his arts chief reason for being.

Walt Whitman
November

Boughs

BY WALT WHITMAN.

ALEXANDER GARDNER,
Publisher to Her Majesty the Queen,
PAISLEY; AND PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON,
1889
THE BIBLE AS POETRY.

I suppose one cannot at this day say anything new, from a literary point of view, about those autochthonic bequests of Asia—the Hebrew Bible, the mighty Hindu epics, and a hundred lesser but typical works; (not now definitely including the Iliad—though that work was certainly of Asiatic genesis, as Homer himself was—considerations which seem curiously ignored.) But will there ever be a time or place—ever a student, however modern, of the grand art, to whom those compositions will not afford profounder lessons than all else of their kind in the garnerage of the past? Could there be any more opportune suggestion, to the current popular writer and reader of verse, what the office of poet was in primeval times—and is yet capable of being, anew, adjusted entirely to the modern?

All the poems of Orientalism, with the Old and New Testaments at the centre, tend to deep and wide, (I don't know but the deepest and widest,) psychological development—with little, or nothing at all, of the mere aesthetic, the principal verse requirement of our day. Very late, but unerringly, comes to every capable student the perception that it is not in beauty, it is not in art, it is not even in science, that the profoundest laws of the case have their eternal sway and outcropping.

In his discourse on "Hebrew Poets" De Sola Mendes said: "The fundamental feature of Judaism, of the Hebrew nationality, was religion; its poetry was naturally religious. Its subjects, God and Providence, the covenants with Israel, God in Nature, and as reveal'd, God the Creator and Governor, Nature in her majesty and beauty, inspired hymns and odes to Nature's God. And then the checker'd history of the nation furnish'd allusions, illustrations, and subjects for epic display—the glory of the sanctuary, the offerings, the splendid ritual, the Holy City, and lov'd Palestine with its pleasant valleys and wild tracts." Dr. Mendes said "that rhyming was not a characteristic of Hebrew poetry at all. Metre was not a necessary mark of poetry. Great poets discarded it; the early Jewish poets knew it not."

Compared with the famed epics of Greece, and lesser ones since, the spinal supports of the Bible are simple and meagre. All its history, biography, narratives, etc., are as beads, strung on and indicating the eternal thread of the Deific purpose and
power. Yet with only deepest faith for impetus, and such Defile purpose for palpable or impalpable theme, it often transcends the masterpieces of Hellas, and all masterpieces. The metaphors daring beyond account, the lawless soul, extravagant by our standards, the glow of love and friendship, the fervent kiss— nothing in argument or logic, but unsurpass'd in proverbs, in religious ecstasy, in suggestions of common mortality and death, man's great equalizers—the spirit everything, the ceremonies and forms of the churches nothing, faith limitless, its immense sensuousness immensely spiritual—an incredible, all-inclusive non-worldliness and dew-scented illiteracy (the antipodes of our Nineteenth Century business absorption and morbid refinement) —no hair-splitting doubts, no sickly sulking and sniffing, no "Hamlet," no "Adonais," no "Thanatopsis," no "In Memo- riam."

The culminated proof of the poetry of a country is the quality of its personnel, which, in any race, can never be really superior without superior poems. The finest blending of individuality with universality (in my opinion nothing out of the galaxies of the "Iliad," or Shakspere's heroes, or from the Tennysonian "Idyls," so lofty, devoted and starlike,) typified in the songs of those old Asiatic lands. Men and women as great columnar trees. Nowhere else the abnegation of self towering in such quaint sublimity; nowhere else the simplest human emotions conquering the gods of heaven, and fate itself. (The episode, for instance, toward the close of the "Mahabharata"—the jour- ney of the wife Savitri with the god of death, Yama,

"One terrible to see—blood-red his garb,  
His body huge and dark, bloodshot his eyes,  
Which famed like sans beneath his turban cloth,  
Arm'd was he with a noose,"

who carries off the soul of the dead husband, the wife tenaciously following, and—by the resistless charm of perfect poetic recita- tion!—eventually redeeming her captive mate.)

I remember how enthusiastically William H. Seward, in his last days, once expatiated on these themes, from his travels in Turkey, Egypt, and Asia Minor, finding the oldest Biblical narratives exactly illustrated there to-day with apparently no break or change along three thousand years—the veil'd women, the costumes, the gravity and simplicity, all the manners just the same. The veteran Trelawney said he found the only real nobleman of the world in a good average specimen of the mid- aged or elderly Oriental. In the East the grand figure, always leading, is the old man, majestic, with flowing beard, paternal,
etc. In Europe and America, it is, as we know, the young fellow—in novels, a handsome and interesting hero, more or less juvenile—in operas, a tenor with blooming cheeks, black mustache, superficial animation, and perhaps good lungs, but no more depth than skim-milk. But reading folks probably get their information of those Bible areas and current peoples, as depicted in print by English and French cadis, the most shallow, impudent, supercilious brood on earth.

I have said nothing yet of the cumulus of associations (perfectly legitimate parts of its influence, and finally in many respects the dominant parts,) of the Bible as a poetic entity, and of every portion of it. Not the old edifice only—the congeries also of events and struggles and surroundings, of which it has been the scene and motive—even the horrors, dreads, deaths. How many ages and generations have brooded and wept and agonized over this book! What untellable joys and ecstasies—what support to martyrs at the stake—from it. (No really great song can ever attain full purport till long after the death of its singer—till it has accrued and incorporated the many passions, many joys and sorrows, it has itself arous'd.) To what myriads has it been the shore and rock of safety—the refuge from driving tempest and wreck! Translated in all languages, how it has united this diverse world! Of civilized lands to-day, whose of our retrospects has it not interwoven and link'd and permeated?

Not only does it bring us what is clasp'd within its covers; nay, that is the least of what it brings. Of its thousands, there is not a verse, not a word, but is thick-studded with human emotions, successions of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, of our own antecedents, inseparable from that background of us, on which, phantasmal as it is, all that we are to-day inevitably depends—our ancestry, our past.

Strange, but true, that the principal factor in cohering the nations, eras and paradoxes of the globe, by giving them a common platform of two or three great ideas, a commonality of origin, and projecting cosmic brotherhood, the dream of all hope, all time—that the long trains, gestations, attempts and failures, resulting in the New World, and in modern solidarity and politics—are to be identified and resolv'd back into a collection of old poetic lore, which, more than any one thing else, has been the axis of civilization and history through thousands of years—and except for which this America of ours, with its polity and essentials, could not now be existing.

No true bard will ever contravene the Bible. If the time ever comes when iconoclasm does its extremest in one direction against the Books of the Bible in its present form, the collection
THE BIBLE AS POETRY.

must still survive in another, and dominate just as much as hitherto, or more than hitherto, through its divine and primal poetic structure. To me, that is the living and definite element-principle of the work, evolving everything else. Then the continuity; the oldest and newest Asiatic utterance and character, and all between, holding together, like the apparition of the sky, and coming to us the same. Even to our Nineteenth Century here are the fountain heads of song.