I. THE BIBLE AS NATIONAL AND WORLD LITERATURE

To say that we read a work, as literature, usually signifies something further: that it has an artistic quality which we are more or less aware of. That pleases us, holds our attention; when most successful, it fascinates us, compelling us to continue even when we are called away. Above all, it sticks in our memory, so that it alters or broadens our whole understanding of things. Some of the very words come back to us spontaneously, with some new experience years later.

Literary *excellence* is distinct from plain utility. As language serves primarily to communicate, much that is expressed in words is straightforward information. We listen or we read attentively when the information concerns us. Information merely presented does not constitute literature — unless some device makes it more memorable. A small piece of information may impose itself through a jingle, such as

Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November.

It overcomes forgetfulness of whatever there is no visible need to keep in mind. Furthermore, information, however accurate, will go unheeded, unless some art makes us concentrate on it. Many authors, in full control of their subject, take no such trouble; they write simply what they know to be true. That this sort of writing is not literature is most apparent when used only for reference. A dictionary is full of information, but unattractive for *consecutive* reading.

To qualify as literature, a book must be so written that it conduces to continuous reading from beginning to end, by the charm of its contents and words. In English and other modern languages, the range of what is most often considered literature has unfortunately been narrowed in recent times, so that whatever contains substantial, copious information is almost automatically excluded. When the term *literature* is mentioned, the average student thinks of fiction or

poetry, nothing else. From the valid principle that information suffices for the everyday purposes of communication but not for literature, a false conclusion has been drawn, so that we learn to esteem — as literature — mainly or only such works as lack outright information. When we know or assume that the contents have been made up by the author, they will appeal only through his art in handling them. Fiction stands or falls on its literary merit; for there is no direct utility in reading it to learn what is not literally true. The case is almost the same with poetry: whether it contains any dependable information or not, seems irrelevant nowadays; we appraise it as literature because we assume the author is not concerned with conveying such information — if he were, he would use the normal medium of prose.

This modern bias, of confining literary criticism to works of fiction and poetry, drastically curtails literature as understood just a few generations before us. It polarizes literature in opposition to science. Not so long ago a literary critic would have included, among the English masterpieces of the seventeenth century, Boyle's treatise *The Skeptical Chemist* (or, as he spelled and pronounced it, *The Sceptical Chymist*), no less than Milton's tragedy *Samson Agonistes*. But in our time, on a long list of essential literary works — intended to be representative if not comprehensive — a candidate for a Ph.D. may look in vain for any science, history, biography, or travel. Readers — and authors — have not lost interest in these subjects; only the recent authorities on literary taste have dropped such books from consideration.

However, when we turn to the literature of ancient times, no one with good judgement would propose the modern criterion of *imagination*, contrasted with *information*. Seldom was that distinction brought up; and certainly no book was valued the less for being richly informative. We too, as we approach certain parts of the Bible, ought to lay aside any prejudice against reading an assemblage of data; many Biblical authors, unmistakably, included such material.

The term *literature*, in modern usage, sometimes has a special and different sense: the reading matter of a certain movement. We speak of anti-war literature or the literature of Marxism. *Literature*,

in this context, does *not* connote anything fascinating to the reader's imagination; it mainly presents an argument to win people over, or to elaborate an ideology. Biblical literature shares this sense of the word, although I do not focus primarily on it. The Bible, as a collection, has been the literature of a *religious community*, of the Jews first and then of the Christians as well. It has served to fortify the members of the religious community in their beliefs, and to convert outsiders about to join the community, even if some of the books were not composed for those purposes. Relatively few have read it with no ideological interest — most often, readers are respectful or reverent, occasionally hostile, but hardly ever neutral. To read the Bible open-mindedly, does not require neutrality; that is nearly impossible.

The Bible, as the central literature of Judaism and Christianity, owes much to qualities beyond ideology. The style and much of the content are humanly engaging, readable even if we do not attend directly to the religious implications. This is because the Bible originated as a *national* literature, distilling the experience of a whole, varied community through great changes of circumstance.

The Bible was not the *whole* literature of ancient Israel but its literary *heritage* — what was most necessary to pass on to each new generation. My chapter XXI takes up the difficult but enlightening problem: How were certain books recognised to be essential parts of the heritage, while others were rejected? For now it suffices to distinguish between the Hebrew scriptures, which Christians call the Old Testament, and the Greek New Testament. The former were composed over several centuries.

During most of that age, literacy was not widespread in Israel. Yet the books were hardly directed to a small, privileged minority of readers; they were to reach the *ears* of the nation and to be understood by people who shared only the common background of growing up as Israelites. For such an audience the authors made an effort to be clear and forthright, which has benefitted the readers of later ages. Writing for their own people, but not a restricted coterie among them, those Hebrew authors produced books that have proved remarkably accessible to mankind. Although not everything in them could remain as clear as it was originally, the average reader

has been patient with the obscurities, because they do not overwhelm him and much else in the Bible can be followed with ease, absorption, and even entertainment.

During most of the Biblical age, the Hebrew language was fully vernacular — not, as it eventually became, a jargon limited to the teachers (or rabbis) and their pupils. Hebrew in its heyday, which was the time of the great authors, was the daily speech of all the Israelites — and not only of the Israelites: dialects that were part of the same language community embraced the neighboring peoples — the Phoenicians or Canaanites, the Moabites, and others. Scholars nowadays give separate names to those dialects, but to the ancients they were one language. The minor differences were perceived, and could mark the locality that a speaker came from; but they were no barrier to communication.

Furthermore, the several nationalities of the area, when they wrote, used the same alphabet of twenty-two letters, with little variation even in penmanship. Therefore a book written by an Israelite would have been understood by a Phoenician, and vice versa. Yet evidence of communication on *that* level is lacking. The books composed in the Phoenician coastal cities — Tyre, Sidon, Byblus, etc. — were forgotten and finally disappeared, after the population gave up the language. Scanty excerpts remain of a few Phoenician works, cited by Greek or Latin authors in translation.

The best of Hebrew literature, on the contrary, survived. That was not because the Israelites clung to their language more than others. They seem to have lost their everyday familiarity with Hebrew earlier than the language dwindled in Phoenicia, because the Israelites were conquered by Assyrian and Babylonian kings and many were deported to Mesopotamia. This weakened the Hebrew language, especially among the educated, urban class. It remained vernacular longest in out-of-the-way parts of Judah, the southern section of the national territory; but the speakers of Hebrew in those places were illiterate.

Ancient Hebrew literature was preserved not by them but by other Israelites, who had a profound sense of national identity and cherished the old books that expressed it so cogently. To understand and benefit from the books, the Hebrew language was kept alive in

school.[1] The national identity of Israel was strongest in one part of the nation — Judah, where the city of Jerusalem was located. The will of the Judahites, to be the leading tribe, evoked a negative reaction from the other Israelites to break loose from them. This disunity was never effectively overcome; but the effort to combat or somehow to transcend it, stimulated the most moving literature. The bulk of the Bible — though not all of it — was the work of Judahites, addressing one another but aspiring to reach the rest of Israel too.

However, the small community of other Israelites, known as Samaritans, who survived apart from Judah, would never accept the Judahite contribution to Hebrew literature but recognised only the five books of Moses.[2]

Hebrew literature was created by tensions that aroused the most vigorous expression. The language was on the lips of men and women engaged in every occupation, and at every level of culture and refinement; it gathered a copious, precise vocabulary from each part of the population but remained generally intelligible to all. In exploiting this richness, several Hebrew poets and prophets equaled or even excelled the men of letters in any other nation.

The Israelites recognised language as one — but only one — of the characteristics that set one people off from all the rest. Other differences, mentioned explicitly in the tenth chapter of Genesis, are lineage, nationality, and territory. The Israelites show elsewhere in the Bible that their language (which we designate by the later term Hebrew) was Phoenician; but they would not acknowledge that they and the Phoenicians were, or had ever been, the same people. The Bible defines Israel as eternally unique, in spite of many partial connections with the other nations. This became all the more pre-

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[1] The converse has temporarily preserved literature as long as the language remained in daily use — thus some Old English literature was read until the English language, among the ordinary people, gradually changed beyond recognition.

[2] The word *Jew* in English and the corresponding words in other modern languages are derived, through Latin, Greek, and Aramaic, from the Hebrew יְהוּדִי {yəhu^{w}d̄í^{y}}, which means ‘a member of the tribe of Judah’ (etymologically ‘a son of Judah’).

cious, when the remaining Israelites had taken to speaking Aramaic or Greek but wanted something to convince themselves that they were not, and should not try to be, just like everyone else around them. In the Bible, they found a powerful argument that their lineage guaranteed not only a unique past but also a unique future, which was more important than any immediate conditions assimilating them to the surrounding culture.

The Bible, that repository of Hebrew literature, served well to promote a sense of national identity in an age of cosmopolitan pressure, because the books that went into it had originated as the national response to an earlier challenge from the cosmopolitan or imperial civilization of Mesopotamia. Modern research, in the last hundred years or so, has recovered much knowledge of that long-extinct civilization. So it is possible to appraise how much Israel derived from the prevailing culture of the ancient Near East, especially Mesopotamia but also Syria, Egypt, and the rest of the region.

We can correct any exaggerated notion of the inventiveness of the Israelites — that they alone had thoughts such as had never occurred to anyone else. But originality should be seen in perspective. Whenever we get a worthwhile idea from some predecessor, it is natural and proper to give him credit. That he in turn got it from someone else is likely enough, and can sometimes be proved; but that in no way diminishes *our* gain and our indebtedness to our immediate source, nor should we think the less of him for having the sense to learn from others. The Israelites put together a distinctive style of life and thought; so it would not matter if many elements of that style were derived from neighboring peoples.

I further suggest that the ways of the Israelites served them all the better, and the world thereafter, because they selected so much from the outside. Through their literature — the Bible — a part of the achievement of ancient Near Eastern civilization lived on, after all the other ancient literature of the region was forgotten and the languages died out. The Bible is more appealing and more instructive to humanity because its origin was not narrowly national. Israel, while very self-conscious, was not ignorant of other people in the region. In fairly brief compass the Bible took the wisdom of that whole area of early civilization and digested it.

Now that scholars have rediscovered quite a bit of Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, and Hittite literature, there is controversy among them, whether the Hebrew literature is intrinsically superior to them. In quantity, it was never superior. To judge the quality is not easy; for nearly all the rediscovered literature is damaged more or less severely, by erosion and decay of the stones, the clay tablets, or the papyrus. The original beauty of the words is thereby marred.

Regardless, the Bible conveyed to the Israelites their national essence. So their will to remain distinct was bound up with reading the Bible. A saying popular to modern times puts it:

> ישראל ואוריתא וקודשא בריך הוא חד הוא
> {yiṡrɔʔél wəʔoʷraytɔ́ʔ wəquʷd̄šɔ́ʔ bərîʸk̄ huwʔ ʜad̄ huwʔ}
> ‘Israel and the instruction and the Holy One (blessed is he) are one.’

The words are not Hebrew but Aramaic, and must have been phrased by persons whose speech was no longer Hebrew. They understood that what they called ʔoʷraytɔ́ʔ (in Hebrew it would be הַתּוֹרָה {hattoʷrɔ́ʰ}) — i.e., the instruction contained in the five books of Moses — was indispensable if Israel was to go on. And they meant to go on as Israelites; otherwise they would not have repeated the saying. The motto stimulated the study of the Hebrew language, to capture the full meaning of the books. My chapter II explains how the third term “the Holy One, blessed is he” was likewise indispensable.[3]

But as an aid and as a substitute for knowledge of the Hebrew text, translations into Aramaic and Greek were made available to-

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[3] This Aramaic motto has been oddly treated in modern times. Atheistic socialists, among the Zionist settlers, drew upon many favorite phrases from tradition, made songs out of them and danced to them — repeating the words over and over. But they left out of this phrase the words that mean ‘and the Holy One, blessed is he.’ They were not utterly against the laws that came down from antiquity, provided that these were no longer called commandments of God. But more recently the atheistic version, in a favorite musical setting, has been unwittingly taken up by synagogues in America, as a sort of Israeli folk-song.

ward the end of the pre-Christian era. The Aramaic translations were oral at first, the Greek written — as writing was far more widespread in any Greek-speaking population and easy to learn, thanks to the clarity of the Greek alphabet, which expresses vowels as well as consonants. Translations were indispensable in making the Bible a part of world literature — not just the literary heritage of one nation.

The translation into Greek was somewhat crude and often awkward, because the translators would not sacrifice any sense of the Hebrew original for the sake of the idiom of another language. Their ungainly phrasing repelled some educated Greeks, who enjoyed a fine literary tradition of their own from way back. However, anyone who could surmount an initial prejudice against the odd, foreign-sounding style of the Bible in Greek, would soon appreciate the content. He might even perceive some of its artistic power, different though it was from the Greek classics. The partisans of the Bible argued that it was older and authentically true, and so was far superior to all books of Greek origin.

Both in the heyday and during the decline of schools that taught Homer, Euripides, Plato, and the rest of the Greek masters, the Bible in Greek gained more and more readers, even among those who never learned any Hebrew beyond the names of some Hebrew letters. A devoted reader of the Bible was inclined to belong to the people that had cherished it over the centuries. The Jews, the main survivors of the ancient nation, welcomed converts and acquired a fair number. But their customs were very old-fashioned, and inconvenient for a convert to practice, however well impressed by reading about them. He had to begin with the prehistoric ritual of circumcision. The Jews could not think through what to do to reach more converts, without abrogating the very core of the ancient national treasure. A large field of potential converts was ready, if the Biblical message were reinterpreted — upon old and known principles.

The opportunity was seized by a dissident Jewish sect, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who were called *Christians*. My study from Chapter XXXVI on is devoted to *their* contribution to the Bible. They solved the dilemma, ingeniously and subtly, which had baffled the Jews. The Christians kept the entire literary heritage of

Israel; and they added certain works of their own, most notably the four Gospels, telling of Jesus, and the letters of the apostle Paul. These were soon read and esteemed as much as the older books — perhaps even more. The Christians distinguished between two collections: the books of the Old Testament, which were common to them and to all Jews, and those of the New Testament, which were fewer and exclusively Christian.

The latter were composed in Greek. One Gospel (Matthew) was said to have been originally in Hebrew; but the evidence about it is unsatisfactory. Certainly no such text was preserved from ancient times.[4] The history of all four gospels, so far as it is accessible, begins with the Greek text. Greek was chosen because it was then the most international of all languages. The early Christian authors, while writing in Greek, did not think of themselves as Greeks, and most of them made no effort in their style to follow the national literary tradition of Greece, exemplified by Plato and many others. Rather, they steeped themselves in the Greek translations made from Hebrew, and they wrote Greek accordingly.

In their view, the message of the holy books was paramount. Whoever accepted that, became a member of the true Israel (as the Christian teachers after the first century put it). To the question, "Is the Bible for just one people or for all?" the Christian answer was brilliantly ambiguous: The Bible addresses and is intended for mankind at large; but some notion of privilege remains. If anyone fails to heed the message of the Bible, he will be excluded. That Christian formula led to active propagation to bring such essential knowledge to more and more of the world.

Subsequently the Bible spread along with Christianity in the Mediterranean region, and then throughout Europe. It added to the energy and dynamism of the European nations, as the Bible was read more than any single book. In particular, the doctrine of life after death made many men bold to go far away, trusting in God to protect them and reunite them with their loved ones, in another and better life, if he did not bring them safely back home. In the last few

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[4] Hebrew texts of this Gospel exist; but they are, demonstrably, medieval translations from Greek or some other language.

centuries, when the Europeans extended their settlements, their influence and power far overseas, the Bible has accompanied them, and now circulates in every country.

What we praise as *world literature* is worth recommending to readers to enlarge their sensibilities, and improve their understanding, beyond anything more immediately available to them. A book advances from national to world literature through being read in translation and studied in the original language by foreigners, as the Bible is so read.