

BROTHERS AND BUILDERS. 2

By Joseph Fort Newton

THE HOLY BIBLE

Upon the Altar of every Masonic Lodge, supporting the Square and Compasses, lies the Holy Bible. The old, familiar Book, so beloved by so many generations, is our Volume of the Sacred Law and a Great Light in Masonry. The Bible opens when the Lodge opens; it closes when the Lodge closes. No Lodge can transact its own business, much less initiate candidates into its mysteries, unless the Book of Holy Law lies open upon its Altar. Thus the book of the Will of God rules the Lodge in its labours, as the Sun rules the day, making its work a workshop.

The history of the Bible in the life and symbolism of Masonry is a story too long to recite here. Nor can any one tell it as we should like to know it. Just when, where, and by whom the teaching and imagery of the Bible were wrought into Freemasonry, no one can tell. Anyone can have his theory, but no one can be dogmatic. As the Craft laboured in the service of the Church during the cathedral-building period, it is not difficult to account for the Biblical colouring of its thought, even in days when the Bible was not widely distributed, and before the discovery of printing. Anyway, we can take such facts as we are able to find, leaving further research to learn further truth.

The Bible is mentioned in some of the old Manuscripts of the Craft long before the revival of Masonry in 1717, as the book upon the covenant, or oath, of a Mason was taken; but it is not referred to as a Great Light. For example, in the Herein Manuscript, dated about 1600, the obligation of an initiate closes with the words: "So help me God, and the holy contents of this Book." In the Ritual, of which a copy from the Royal Library in Berlin is given by Krause, there is no mention of the Bible as one of the Lights. It was in England, due largely to the influence of Preston and his fellow workmen, that the Bible came to its place of honour in the Lodge. At any rate, in the rituals of about 1760 it is described as one of the three Great Lights.

No Mason needs to be told what a great place the Bible has in the Masonry of our day. It is central, sovereign, supreme, a master light of all our seeing. From the Altar it pours forth upon the East, the West, and the South its white light of spiritual vision, moral law, and immortal hope. Almost every name found in our ceremonies is a Biblical name, and students have traced about seventy-five references to the Bible in the Ritual of the Craft. But more important than direct references is the fact that the spirit of the Bible, its faith, its attitude towards life, pervades Masonry, like a rhythm or a fragrance. As soon as an initiate enters the Lodge, he hears the words of the Bible recited as an accompaniment to his advance towards the light. Upon the Bible every Mason takes solemn vows of loyalty, of chastity and charity, pledging himself to the practice of the Brotherly Life. Then as he moves forward from one degree to another, the imagery of the Bible becomes familiar and eloquent, and its music sings its way into his heart.

Nor is it strange that it should be so. As faith in God is the corner-stone of the Craft, so, naturally, the book which tells us the purest truth about God is its altar-light. The Temple of King Solomon, about which the history, legends, and symbolism of the Craft are woven, was the tallest temple of the ancient world, not in the grandeur of its architecture but in the greatest of the truths for which it stood. In the midst of ignorant idolatries and debasing superstitions the Temple on Mount Mariah stood for the Unity, Righteousness, and Spirituality of God. Upon no other foundation can men build with any sense of security and permanence when the winds blow and the floods descend. But the Bible is not simply a foundation rock; it is also a quarry in which we find the truths that make us men. As in the old ages of geology rays of sunlight were stored up in vast beds of coal, for the uses of man, so in this old book the light of moral truth is stored to light the mind and warm the heart of man.

Alas, there has been more dispute about the Bible than about any other book, making for schism, dividing men into sects. But Masonry knows a certain secret, almost too simple to be found out, whereby it avoids both intolerance and sectarianism. It is essentially religious, but it is not dogmatic. The fact that the Bible lies open upon its Altar means that man must have some Divine revelation - must seek for a light higher than human to guide and govern him. But Masonry lays down no hard and fast dogma on the subject of revelation. It attempts no detailed interpretation of the Bible. The great Book lies open upon its Altar, and is open for all to read,

open for each to interpret for himself. The tie by which our Craft is united is strong, but it allows the utmost liberty of faith and thought. It unites men, not upon a creed bristling with debated issues, but upon the broad, simple truth which underlies all creeds and over-arches all sects - faith in God, the wise Master Builder, for whom and with whom man must work.

Herein our gentle Craft is truly wise, and its wisdom was never more needed than to-day, when the churches are divided and torn by angry debate. However religious teachers may differ in their doctrines, in the Lodge they meet with mutual respect and good-will. At the Altar of Masonry they learn not only toleration, but appreciation. In its air of kindly fellowship, man to man, they discover that the things they have in common are greater than the things that divide. It is the glory of Masonry to teach Unity to essentials, Liberty in details, Charity in all things; and by this sign its spirit must at last prevail. It is the beautiful secret of Masonry that all just men, all devout men, all righteous men are everywhere of one religion, and it seeks to remove the hoodwinks of prejudice and intolerance so that they may recognize each other and work together in the doing of good.

Like everything else in Masonry, the Bible, so rich in symbolism, is itself a symbol - that is, a part taken for the whole. It is a symbol of the Book of Truth, the Scroll of Faith, the Record of the Will of God as man has learned it in the midst of the years - the perpetual revelation of Himself which God has made, and is making to mankind in every age and land. Thus, by the very honour which Masonry pays to the Bible, it teaches us to revere every Book of Faith in which men find help for to-day and hope for the morrow. For that reason, in a Lodge consisting entirely of Jews, the Old Testament alone may be placed upon the Altar, and in a Lodge in the land of Mohammed the Koran may be used. Whether it be the Gospels of the Christian, the Book of the Hebrew, the Koran of the Mussulman, or the Vedas of the Hindu, it everywhere Masonically conveys the same idea - symbolizing the Will of God revealed to man, taking such faith and vision as he has found into a great fellowship of the seekers and finders of the truth.

Thus Masonry invites to its Altar men of all faiths, knowing that, if they use different names for "the Nameless One of an hundred names," they are yet praying to the one God and Father of all; knowing, also, that while they read different volumes, they are in fact reading the same vast Book of Faith of Man as revealed in the struggle and tragedy of the race in its quest of God. So that, great and noble as the Bible is, Masonry sees it as a symbol of that eternal, ever-unfolding Book of the Will of God which Lowell described in memorable lines:-

"Slowly the Bible of the race is writ,
And not on paper leaves nor leaves of stone;
Each age, each kindred, adds a verse to it,
Texts of despair of hope, of joy or moan.
While swings the sea, while mists the mountain shroud,
While thunder's surge burst on cliffs of cloud,
Still at the Prophet's feet the nations sit,"

None the less, while we honour every Book of Faith in which have been recorded the way and Will of God, with us the Bible is supreme, at once the mother-book of our literature and the master-book of the Lodge. Its truth is inwrought in the fiber of our being, with whatsoever else of the good and the true which the past has given us. Its spirit stirs our hearts, like a sweet habit of the blood; its light follows all our way, showing us the meaning and worth of life. Its very words have in them memories, echoes and overtones of voices long since hushed, and its scenery is inter-woven with the holiest association of our lives. Our fathers and mothers read it, finding in it their final reasons for living faithfully and nobly, and it is thus a part of the ritual of the Lodge and the ritual of life.

Every Mason ought not only to honour the Bible as a great Light of the Craft; he ought to read it, live with it, love it, lay its truth to heart and learn what it means to be a man. There is something in the old Book which, if it gets into a man, makes him both gentle and strong, faithful and free, obedient and tolerant, adding to his knowledge virtue, patience, temperance, self-control, brotherly love, and pity. The Bible is as high as the sky and as deep as the grave; its two great characters are God and the Soul, and the story of their eternal life together is its everlasting romance. It is the most human of books, telling us the half-forgotten secrets of our own hearts, our sins, our sorrows, our doubts, our hopes. It is the most Divine of books, telling us that God has made us for Himself, and that our hearts will be restless, unhappy and lonely until we learn to rest in Him whose Will is our peace.

"He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself."

"Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets."

"Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted by the world."

"For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

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