

**A LAYMAN'S STUDY OF THE
ENGLISH BIBLE: CONSIDERED
IN ITS LITERARY AND
SECULAR ASPECT**

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A Layman's Study of the English Bible: Considered in Its Literary and Secular Aspect by
Francis Bowen

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A STUDY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION: THE BIBLE AS AN ENGLISH CLASSIC.

WHAT I purpose here to consider is the study of the English Bible, regarded exclusively in its literary and secular aspect, and the due place of such study in a system of liberal education. Hence the discussion will not be either philological or theological in character. I shall have little to say, except in the way of occasional reference, either about the original tongues, whether the Hebrew or the Greek, in which these books were first written, or about the religious dogmas which the various churches of Christendom have founded upon the interpretation of them. These branches of the subject must be left to the professional experts, the philologists and theologians, who have been fitted respectively for their peculiar tasks by their special studies. But it is perhaps unfortunate for the claims of the Bible to universal attention and respect that the

thorough study of it should have been made over almost entirely to these two classes of experts. The subject is interesting to others also, especially to the students of poetry, of English literature, of history and philosophy, and, indeed, of what may be called the science of human nature. At any rate, I propose now to look at the Scriptures only in the ordinary English version of them, just as if they were now, for the first time, placed before us, without any opinions previously formed respecting their character and purport; just as one might first enter upon the study of Gibbon's great historical work, or attempt to ascertain the characteristics of the Elizabethan age of English literature. To accept all the results of such an examination as is here intended, it is not necessary to belong to any one household of faith, or even to be a believer in Christianity. Romanist or Protestant, an intelligent pagan, a cultivated agnostic, even a Moham- medan, if he were a man of taste and education, might accept gladly, and without prejudice, any statements which I shall here have occasion to make.

Yet even as thus limited, the subject is a very broad one, and might well occupy the labor of a lifetime. For we have first to observe that the title, "The Bible,"—*the Book*, in a special and eminent sense,—is a misnomer in one respect,

since it is not one work, but a collection of many scriptures, widely differing from each other in their subjects and characteristics, and purporting to have been written respectively at very distant periods of time. Hence the title of the Latin Vulgate, *Biblia Sacra Vulgatæ Editionis*, "The Sacred Books in the commonly received Edition," is more precise and appropriate than their English appellation. The earlier portion of the collection contains thirty-nine distinct books, the later part twenty-seven others, having but little family likeness to each other, either in style or mode of treatment, either in the topics which they consider or in the ends which they subserve. Some are narrative in form, some didactic or hortatory, others epistolary, others still poetical. They contain legends, histories, biographies, poems, ethical and political injunctions, proverbs and parables, meditations on life and death or what we call 'philosophy,' and what purport to be revelations of the supernatural and of immortality. How far these distinct works are from being exclusively theological or religious in character appears at once from the fact that, in at least two of them, the Book of Esther and Solomon's Song, the name of God is not once mentioned from beginning to end. There is no other or better reason for lumping all these dissimilar writings together, and giving them one name as