

# **THE INFLUENCE OF THE BIBLE ON CIVILISATION**

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The Influence of the Bible on Civilisation by Ernst von Dobschütz

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## 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