

### A Rational View of the Bible.

BY B. F. UNDERWOOD.

Many radicals exhibit a hostility to the Bible not born of reason and not in accord with the impartial philosophic spirit. The explanation of this is obvious enough. The most irrational claims have been made as to the origin, character and authority of the collection of books called the Bible. It has been declared absolutely infallible, entirely free from defect and error of every kind, to have been written by the direct inspiration of God, unsurpassable, unapproachable even, perfect in all its teachings, and in science, history, philosophy and poetry, as well as in religion and morals, incomparably superior to any and all other productions in the languages of antiquity and of the present day. Denial or doubt of these extravagant assumptions has been denounced as criminal perversity and folly, deserving pains and penalties here and punishment without end hereafter.

Against these false and preposterous claims reason, honesty and common sense have protested. For centuries an absurd theology, taught as the religion of Christ, obfuscated the minds of men, and ecclesiastical machinery reduced them to the condition of religious automatons; conformity was the rule and men who were intelligent enough to disbelieve or doubt, and courageous enough to express their thoughts were consigned to the flames, to the dungeon, or to the horrors of the Inquisition. As the conquests of science over superstition and the consequent increase of the tolerant spirit have made free speaking less dangerous, men have criticised the so-called Christian dogmas, and pointed out the falsity of certain claims regarding the Bible. They have met the "believe or be damned" argument with demonstrations that the collection of books called the Bible contain numerous historical mistakes, many anachronisms, unscientific statements, imperfect moral teachings and examples, and a multitude of absurdities of one kind and another. To this the only reply for centuries was: "He that believeth not shall be damned," and "Unbelief springs from a depraved heart."

How natural it was that men should come to feel contempt for the clergy and be accustomed to treat the Bible from a purely critical point of view, dwelling chiefly upon its errors and almost ignoring its many excellencies. In their indignation that men should call black white and white black, and demand that all dissenters be murdered or tortured, or if that were not possible, ostracized and subjected to political disabilities, how natural that courageous and honest

men should say to the priests and their disciples, "Your religion is an imposture and the Bible is a pack of lies." The spirit of this utterance was the spirit of honest protest against falsehood, of manly resistance to wrong, of respect for human reason, of loyalty to truth. We can honor the motives, the spirit and the courage of the brave iconoclasts who refused to worship the Bible, and who dared, when they had everything to lose and nothing to gain by so doing, to show that the collection of Jewish writings was no revelation from God. Their excesses and mistakes of criticism belonged to the times, and as such, are not now regarded as indications of any peculiar defect in those whose writings they disfigure.

It is, however, inexcusable at this day to repeat these mistakes. The Freethinker who today says "the Bible is a pack of lies," "the Bible is an imposture," simply proclaims his own ignorance and prejudice and the "survival" character of his intellectual condition. It is true that the old claims for the Bible are untenable, that as history it will not compare with Thucydides, Xenophon or Tacitus, not to speak of Gibbon and Macaulay, that in science it is insignificant in the light of modern research, like that of Lyell and Darwin, that in morals and religion even it is marked by grave defects, yet it is no "imposture," no "pack of lies," no "fraud." It is a natural outgrowth of the human mind, and it contains expressions of the honest thoughts and feelings of men who belonged to a far-off past. The various books of the Bible were written at different times and under different circumstances, and very naturally contain incongruous and contradictory statements and expressions. In them are fact and fable, reality and romance, truth and error. Inaccuracy, the mixture of myths with history was common in the times the books composing the Bible were written. But the Hebrews were a devout people; they had pre-eminently the religious spirit as the Greeks had the spirit of beauty which took form in their sculpture and architecture, in their painting and poetry, and in their marvellous language.

The gospels and epistles which make up the New Testament bear testimony to the sincerity and religious enthusiasm of converts to a new faith. Although they abound in errors, they are of incalculable value in the information they convey in regard to the movement of which the Nazarene was central figure.

Buddha was a similar personal moral and religious force in India. Indeed, every age has one or more characters in whom are concentrated and embodied the tendencies

which later develop into great results.

There has been no age in which so-called inspiration, vision, prophecy and miracles have not been among the religious experiences of men and women. The accounts of them are frequently distorted, exaggerated and misleading. This is true of many Bible narratives which should be subjected to the same rules of historical criticism that are applied to all other ancient religious books and to profane literature.

The Bible contains much that is legendary, much that is archaic, much that is unsuited to these later times, but these books are a natural outgrowth of the human mind; they represent conditions of life and thought which were real and which still have their survivals in some parts of the world—conditions which modern civilization has passed beyond. They were necessary to the evolutionary process, and the religious writings of those times, including accounts of miracles, and interviews with God, represented the conceptions and feelings, the fears, hopes and aspirations of the people.

The Bible as a collection of ancient writings, in prose and poetry, the imperfect history, the laws, proverbs, songs, genealogies, etc., of an ancient people who lived, believed and hoped according to the ideas and ideals which belonged to their stage of mental and moral development, is a priceless possession that has come to us from the rich harvest fields of the past. It belongs not merely to Christians and Jews, but to the entire civilized world. Viewed in the light of evolution and modern rational thought, it is and ever will be regarded as a work of incalculable worth to all scholars, thinkers and intelligent readers who have the historic sense and are able to consider sympathetically the cherished beliefs and conditions of every people and of every age.

This would be true even if the Bible contained a less lofty morality or fewer moral lessons than may justly be claimed for it; but many of the books of the Bible have a religious and moral value which will always give them an assured place for popular moral instruction. As Huxley says: "Take the Bible as a whole; make the severest deductions which fair criticism can dictate, and there still remains in this old literature a vast residuum of moral beauty and grandeur." All this may truthfully be said with full knowledge that the Bible contains errors in regard to facts, and moral teachings and examples which are bad.

So long as there are people who believe that the collection of books known as the Bible is the infallible authoritative "Word of God," written by special divine inspiration

and its teachings attested by miracles, there will continue to be "infidels" of the old-fashioned type, who will indignantly point to the 31st chapter of Numbers, to the 109th Psalm and to numerous acts recorded as done by "Thus saith the Lord," and ask, "Did God inspire this?" "Did God command that to be done?"

For those who apply to the Bible the ordinary canons of historical criticism and read it in the light of modern knowledge, the old method of attack and the old method of defense are of interest only as illustrating how ideas which have been demonstrated to be untrue, and methods which have been shown to be based upon misconception, may persist and continue to have representatives and admirers, when they have been discarded by the science, advanced scholarship and progressive thought of the age.

After the preacher has exhausted his resources in trying to prove that the Bible is infallible in its teachings, a revelation from God, exceptional in its origin, and divine and authoritative in its character, and when the Freethinker has disproved these claims, as he easily can, by appealing to the book itself, to history and to science, there is work for the constructive liberal thinker to apply evolution to Judaism and to Christianity, and to the books which compose the Bible, and to prove thereby that these forms of religion have had a natural development and these books a natural origin. The Bible, like the Vedic hymns, like the Iliad, like the dramas of Shakespeare, is a product of human thought, and the human mind is entitled to the credit of all the moral beauties which may justly be claimed for it, just as the human mind is entitled to the credit of having produced the works of Plato and Aristotle, Newton and Bacon, Darwin and Spencer.

### Our Representative Abroad.

BY FRANK J. BEATY.

HONOLULU, H. I.,  
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I think this is the fabled garden that our ancestors were turned out of, as we read in the good book. Anyway it is nearer the popular idea of that country than anything I ever saw. This morning a light rain fell, and now the sun is shining again. The thermometer stands at 70, and a pleasant breeze blows from the sea. Flowers and singing birds are everywhere. I am told it is like this all the year, and the records show a variation from 58 to 80 degrees (Fahrenheit). And the fruit—yum! yum! There is everything you could imagine, and more.

I was out to the north end of this (Oahu) island last week on my bike. It is 41 miles by the govern-