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Books Ancient and Modern.

BY THE REV. CANON R. B. GIRDLESTONE.¹

THERE is a text in Ecclesiastes which appeals to the heart of every school-boy. It tells us that "of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." If this was true hundreds of years before our Lord came into the world, how much more do we realize it in this twentieth century? Before drawing the self-evident moral, it is natural that we should look back into antiquity and ask, What is the origin of books? who wrote the first book? and why did he write it?

The object of books must have been to preserve and hand down a Record; to confirm and correct oral tradition. The human memory was very good in primæval times and amongst Oriental peoples. They had not many distractions, and they had not much to learn. All was done by word of mouth, accompanied by symbolical gestures. At last writing began. It is first referred to in the Bible in Exodus xvii. 14: "Write this for a memorial in a book (or, in the book)." But writing was no new thing in the days of Moses. We can still see on the walls of old Egyptian buildings sculptures of ancient scribes, note-book in hand, dating back from patriarchal and pre-patriarchal times. Long before the days of Amraphel, who was the contemporary of Abraham, there was writing—we might say printing or stamping—on clay in Chaldea; and there is considerable likelihood, judging from some of Dr. Hilprecht's finds, that the art was antediluvian. Probably numerals came first, and nature's decimal system was speedily developed, as we can see in the code of Hammurabi. The word for "counting" in Hebrew and other Oriental languages also means "writing," and a "number" is also a book. We still use the word "account" in both senses. Man is by nature inclined to gesture-language, and pictorial characters which everyone could under-

¹ An address given at a lay and clerical gathering, July, 1910.

stand would soon become conventional. At length a rough alphabet was evolved with many pictorial aids, these last being gradually dropped. It is interesting to compare the most ancient Chinese characters with the most ancient Chaldean or Accadian, in order to illustrate the origin of writing. Of course, much would depend on the material on which a record was to be preserved, whether clay, skin, or papyrus, and also on the implement with which the figures or letters were written or stamped. The Bible will be found to contain a good deal of information on these subjects if it is carefully studied. The book or list of the generations of Adam (Gen. v.) may be compared for its structure with some of the oldest Babylonian documents. As for its contents, it is simply Noah's ancestry, written down instead of being merely preserved by oral tradition. Our Anglo-Saxon fathers wrote upon slips of beech (*bōk*), whence the name *book*, but nothing has proved so imperishable as baked clay or pottery.

A student of the British Museum catalogue of Babylonian objects—an excellent shillingsworth—will stare with amazement at the narrative of literary activity in patriarchal times, and will wonder over the libraries, catalogues, letters, reports, grammars, treatises, and other records of those ancient days. Reading was very common in those times. Professor Petrie is reported to have said lately that it was more common then than in Europe some two hundred years ago.

In the days of later Eastern Kings—*e.g.*, Nabonidus—there was a great revival of ancient learning, and sometimes the little squeezed-up documents of the patriarchal age were misread. Some serious chronological mistakes followed in consequence, and these have only been corrected during the last few years, largely through the watchful labours of Mr. L. King of the British Museum. The result of his work is that old Babylonian dates have to be brought down considerably.

Reverting to the text with which we began, the moral is that, as we cannot read all the books which come out, even in our own language, we must choose the best; and what are they?

Some five-and-twenty years ago (1886) Sir John Lubbock (now Lord Avebury) ventured to give a list of a hundred books in a lecture which was summarized in the *Pall Mall*. It is interesting to turn over the document as it was originally drawn up, and as it stood corrected in 1904. It is prefaced by an excellent paper by J. R. Lowell, and some strong words of advice by Carlyle; then comes the list itself, with comments by the late King, Mr. Gladstone, Lord Coleridge, and others. Then follows a scathing criticism by Ruskin, given in facsimile, and by a series of other literary men. In his final list Lord Avebury deals fairly with his numerous critics, and removes some misunderstandings.

What is the book which stands first? It is the BIBLE. This had been accidentally left out in the report of the original lecture, but now it stands in its true place. Let me support this estimate from the words of H. M. Stanley, slightly condensed, also contributed to the *Pall Mall*: "You ask me what I carried with me to take across Africa. I carried three loads, but as my men lessened, one by one they were reluctantly thrown away, until finally, when less than 300 miles from the Atlantic, I possessed only the Bible, Shakespeare, 'Sartor Resartus,' Noric's 'Navigation,' and a nautical almanack for 1887. At last I had only the old Bible left." He gives the complete list with which he started, and a very interesting one it is. Let me add the testimony contained in his autobiography. "Solitude taught me many things, and showed newspapers in quite a new light. There were several subjects treated in a manner that wild nature seemed to scorn. It appeared to me that the reading of anything in the newspapers, except that for which they were intended—namely, news—was a waste of time, and deteriorative of native force, and worth, and personality. The Bible, however, with its noble and simple language, I continued to read with a higher and truer understanding than I had ever before conceived. Its powerful verses had a different meaning, a more penetrative influence, in the silence of the wilds. I came to feel a strange glow while absorbed in its pages, and a charm peculiarly

appropriate to the deep melancholy of African scenery. . . . I flung myself on my knees, and poured out my soul utterly in secret prayer to Him from whom I had been so long estranged, to Him who had led me here mysteriously into Africa, there to reveal Himself and His will. . . .”

The Bible is of never-ending interest and value, partly because it is a growth, historical and prophetic, but chiefly because it appeals to our spirits. Our Lord marked out its main stages: (i.) “the beginning,” to which we owe the law of marriage; (ii.) “the fathers,” of whom came circumcision; (iii.) Moses, to whom we owe the Law of God; (iv.) Samuel and the prophets. Then comes the New Testament. It is all alive, and all on the side of truth, and, being the work of prophetic men, it claims to be inspired and to be written for all time. It is not surprising to find that the issue of the Books of the New Testament gave a great stimulus to the art of writing, and that thousands of copies of the sacred Books were speedily put into circulation. The Early Christian writers did not “give us the Bible,” as some affirm; they received it from the original authorities, studied it, lived it out, and passed it on, and often died for its truths. The issue of the “ante-Nicene” Library is a great help to us all, being of a healthy tone and far removed from the littleness of some modern discussions. It contains the remains of some seventy writers.

The age of printing lifted the veil which had fallen on the mass of the people. Manuscripts and block-books gave way to the use of movable type and (in these last days) to stereotype, electrotype, linotype, and photography. The works of the Reformation period are now regarded by us as “ancient”; soon the labours of the Victorian age will follow, and we shall find ourselves in a world of manuals, digests, reprints, selections, cyclopædias; cheap series load our tiny shelves, price sixpence, threepence, one penny, so that for a pound an artisan can get a complete library! What a revelation of mental activity is to be found in the *Times* “Literary Supplement,” or in the *Times*

Book Club, or on the Railway Bookstall! Again and again one says, "What shall I choose?"

I venture to say, do not despise a book because it is old. It may be described in a second-hand list as worn, shabby, weak in the back, slightly cracked, dead—in fact, rather like its writer! but after all, good writers, ancient and modern, are God's gifts. We may learn from their style, from their method, from their actual teaching. I look round on my bookshelves: I see the Bible in many tongues; I see Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus; I see the ante-Nicene Library; I see Luther and Melancthon, Cranmer and Hooker, Pascal and Leibnitz and Locke; I see Shakespeare and Tennyson and Keble; I see Butler and Bunyan, Carlyle and Charles Lamb and Isaac Taylor (the elder), Bacon and Argyll, Ruskin and De Quincey, and Emerson and Macaulay—these, and a hundred others, look out upon me as old friends. The most modern books are not always the best. We have to go by contents rather than by the pictures on their front. We want what will stimulate our better nature and not leave an unpleasant taste in our mouth. Sometimes we want to be taken out of ourselves by a story, sometimes by a hard book which will draw out all our powers. Speaking generally, any book which sends us back to our Bible with renewed zest must be good; but as for books which make us shrink from the Bible—it is cheapest, in the long run, to shut them up at once.

