

THE BLANK BIBLE.

THE curious and entertaining paper here reprinted is taken from a little book called *The Eclipse of Faith* which, first published in 1852, by the year 1860 had reached a ninth edition, but has now been long out of print. The author of the book was Henry Rogers, a theologian and scholar of great repute and influence in his day. Rogers (1806—1877) who was a Congregational minister and a voluminous author and editor, held in succession various academic offices, among them the Professorship of English language and literature at University College, London. He was a man of wide culture and reading, and deep personal piety. As a Christian apologist he followed the tradition of Bishop Butler. The *Eclipse of Faith* is an acute criticism of the many forms of scepticism prevalent in his day. It called forth a reply from Francis W. Newman, brother of the Cardinal, which was followed by a rejoinder, *The Defence of the Eclipse of Faith*, in 1860. There is a good account of Rogers and of his work in the Dictionary of National Biography.

W. G. J.

I thought I was at home, and that on taking up my Greek Testament one morning to read (as is my wont) a chapter, I found, to my surprise, that what seemed to be the old familiar book, was a total blank ; not a character was inscribed in it or upon it. I supposed that some book like it had, by some accident, got into its place ; and without stopping to hunt for it, took down a large quarto volume which contained both the Old and New Testaments. To my surprise, however, this also was a blank from beginning to end. With that facility of accommodation to any absurdities which is proper to dreams, I did not think very much of the coincidence of two blank volumes having been substituted for two copies of the Scriptures in two different places, and therefore quietly reached down a copy of the Hebrew Bible, in which I could just manage to make out a chapter. To my increased surprise, and even something like terror, I found that this also was a perfect blank. While I was musing on this unaccountable phenomenon, my servant entered the room, and said that thieves had been in the house during the night, for that her large Bible, which she had left on the kitchen table, had been removed, and another volume left by mistake in its place, of just the same size, but made of nothing but white paper. She added, with a laugh, that it must have been a very queer kind of thief to steal a Bible at all ; and that he should have left another book instead, made it the more odd. I asked her if anything else had been missed, and if there were any signs of people having entered the house. She answered in the negative to both these questions ; and I began to be strangely perplexed.

On going out into the street, I met a friend, who, almost before we had exchanged greetings, told me that a most unaccountable robbery had been committed at his house during the night, for that every copy of the Bible had been removed, and a volume of exactly the same size, but of pure white paper, left in its stead. Upon telling him that the same accident had happened to myself, we began to think that there was more in it than we had at first surmised.

On proceeding further we found every one complaining, in similar perplexity, of the same loss ; and before night it became evident that a great and terrible "miracle" had been wrought in the world ; that in one night silently, but effectually, that hand which had written its terrible menace on the walls of Belshazzar's palace, had reversed the miracle ; had sponged out of our Bibles every syllable they contained, and thus reclaimed the most precious gift which heaven had bestowed, and ungrateful man had abused.

I was curious to watch the effects of this calamity on the varied characters of mankind. There was universally, however, an interest in the Bible now it was lost, such as had never attached to it while it was possessed ; and he who had been but happy enough to possess fifty copies might have made his fortune. One keen speculator, as soon as the first whispers of the miracle began to spread, hastened to the depositories of the Bible Society and the great book-stocks in Paternoster Row, and offered to buy up at a high premium any copies of the Bible that might be on hand ; but the worthy merchant was informed that there was not a single copy remaining. Some, to whom their Bible had been a "blank" book for twenty years and who would never have known whether it was full or empty, had not the lamentations of their neighbours impelled them to look into it, were not the least loud in their expressions of sorrow at this calamity. One old gentleman, who had never troubled the book in his life, said it was "confounded hard to be deprived of his religion in his old age" ; and then another, who seemed to have lived as though he had always been of Mandeville's opinion, that "private vices were public benefits," was all at once alarmed for the morals of mankind. He feared, he said, that the loss of the Bible would have "a cursed bad effect on the public virtue of the country."

As the fact was universal and palpable, it was impossible that, like other miracles, it should leave the usual loopholes for scepticism. Miracles in general, in order to be miracles at all, have been singular or very rare violations of a general law, witnessed, by a few, on whose testimony they are received, and in the reception of whose testimony consists the exercise of that faith to which they appeal. It was evident that, whatever the reason of this miracle, it was not an exercise of docile and humble faith founded on evidence no more than just sufficient to operate as a moral test. This was a miracle which it could not be denied, looked marvellously like a "judgment." However, there were, in some cases, indications enough to show how difficult it is to give such evidence as will satisfy the obstinacy of mankind. One old sceptical fellow, who had been for years bed-ridden, was long in being convinced (if, indeed he ever was) that anything extraordinary had occurred in

the world ; he at first attributed the reports of what he heard to the " impudence " of his servants and dependents, and wondered that they should dare to venture upon such a joke. On finding these assertions backed by those of his acquaintance, he pished and psbawed, and looked very wise, and ironically congratulated them on this creditable conspiracy with the insolent rascals, his servants. On being shown the old Bible, of which he recognised the binding, though he had never seen the inside, and finding it a very fair book of blank paper, he quietly observed that it was very easy to substitute the one book for the other, though he did not pretend to divine the motives which induced people to attempt such a clumsy piece of imposition ; and on their persisting that they were not deceiving him, swore at them as a set of knaves, who would fain persuade him out of his senses. On their bringing him a pile of blank Bibles, backed by the asseverations of other neighbours, he was ready to burst with indignation. " As to the volumes," he said, " it was not difficult to procure a score or two ' of commonplace books,' and they had doubtless done so to carry on the cheat ; for himself, he would sooner believe that the whole world was leagued against him, than credit any such nonsense." They were angry, in their turn, at his incredulity, and told him that he was very much mistaken if he thought himself of so much importance that they would all perjure themselves to delude him, since they saw plainly enough that he could do that very easily for himself, without any help of theirs. They really did not care one farthing whether he believed them or not : if he did not choose to believe the story he might leave it alone. " Well, well," said he, " it is all very fine ; but unless you show me, not one of these blank books, which could not impose upon an owl, but one of the very blank Bibles themselves, I will not believe." At this curious demand, one of his nephews who stood by (a lively young fellow) was so excessively tickled, that though he had some expectations from the sceptic, he could not help bursting out into laughter ; but he became grave enough when his angry uncle told him that he would leave him in his will nothing but the family Bible, which he might make a ledger of, if he pleased. Whether this resolute old sceptic ever vanquished his incredulity, I do not remember.

Very different from the case of this sceptic was that of a most excellent female relative, who had been equally long a prisoner to her chamber, and to whom the Bible had been, as to so many thousands more, her faithful companion in solitude, and the all-sufficient solace of her sorrows. I found her gazing intently on the blank Bible, which had been so recently bright to her with the lustre of immortal hopes. She burst into tears as she saw me. " And has your faith left you too, my gentle friend ? " said I. " No," she answered, " and I trust it never will. He who has taken away the Bible has not taken away my memory, and I now recall all that is most precious in that book which has so long been my meditation. It is a heavy judgment upon the land ; and surely," added this true Christian, never thinking of the faults of others, " I, at least, cannot complain, for I have not prized as I ought that book which yet, of late years, I think I can say, I loved more than any other possession on earth. But I know," she continued, smiling through

her tears, "that the sun shines, though clouds may veil him for a moment; and I am unshaken in my faith in those truths which have been transcribed on my memory though they are blotted from my book. In these hopes I have lived, and in these hopes I will die." "I have no consolation to offer to you," said I, "for you need none." She quoted many of the passages which have been, through all ages, the chief stay of sorrowing humanity; and I thought the words of Scripture had never sounded so solemn or so sweet before. "I shall often come to see you," I said, "to hear a chapter in the Bible, for you know it far better than I."

No sooner had I taken my leave than I was informed that an old lady of my acquaintance had summoned me in haste. She said she was much impressed by this extraordinary calamity. As, to my certain knowledge, she had never troubled the contents of the book, I was surprised that she had so taken to heart the loss of that which had, practically, been lost to her all her days. "Sir," said she, the moment I entered, "the Bible, the Bible." "Yes, madam," said I, "this is a very grievous and terrible visitation. I hope we may learn the lessons which it is calculated to teach us." "I am sure," answered she, "I am not likely to forget it for a while for it has been a grievous loss to me." I told her I was very glad. "Glad!" she rejoined. "Yes," I said, "I am glad to find that you think it so great a loss, for that loss may then be a gain indeed. There is, thanks be to God, enough left in our memories to carry us to heaven." "Ah! but," said she, "the hundred pounds, and the villainy of my maid-servant. Have you not heard?" This gave me some glimpse as to the secret of her sorrow. She told me that she had deposited several bank-notes in the leaves of the family Bible, thinking that, to be sure, nobody was likely to look there for them. "No sooner," said she, "were the Bibles made useless by this strange event, than my servant peeped into every copy in the house, and she now denies that she found anything in my old family Bible, except two or three blank leaves of thin paper, which she says she destroyed; that if any characters were ever on them they must have been erased, when those of the Bible were obliterated. But I am sure she lies; for who would believe that heaven took the trouble to blot out my precious bank-notes? They were not God's word, I trow." It was clear that she considered the "promise to pay" better by far than any "promises" which the book contained. "I should not have cared so much about the Bible," she whined, hypocritically, "because, as you truly observe, our memories may retain enough to carry us to heaven"—a little in that case would certainly go a great way, I thought to myself—"and if not, there are those who can supply the loss. But who is to get my bank-notes back again? Other people have only lost their Bibles." It was, indeed, a case beyond my power of consolation.

The calamity not only strongly stirred the feelings of men, and upon the whole, I think, beneficially, but it immediately stimulated their ingenuity. It was wonderful to see the energy with which men discussed the subject, and the zeal, too, with which they ultimately exerted themselves to repair the loss. I could even hardly regret it, when I considered what a spectacle of intense activity, intellectual and

moral, the visitation had occasioned. It was very early suggested that the whole Bible had again and again been quoted piecemeal in one book or other ; that it had impressed its own image on the surface of human literature, and had been reflected on its course as the stars on a stream. But alas ! on investigation it was found as vain to expect that the gleam of star-light would still remain mirrored in the water, when the clouds had veiled the stars themselves, as that the bright characters of the Bible would remain reflected in the books of men when they had been erased from the book of God. On inspection, it was found that every text, every phrase which had been quoted, not only in books of devotion and theology, but in those of poetry and fiction, had been remorselessly expunged. Never before had I had any adequate idea of the extent to which the Bible had moulded the intellectual and moral life of the last eighteen centuries, nor how intimately it had interfused itself with habits of thought and modes of expression ; nor how naturally and extensively its comprehensive imagery and language had been introduced into human writings, and most of all where there had been most of genius. A vast portion of literature became instantly worthless, and was transformed into so much waste paper. It was almost impossible to look into any book of merit, and read ten pages together, without coming to some provoking erasures and mutilations, some *hiatus valde deflendi*, which made whole passages perfectly unintelligible. Many of the sweetest passages of Shakespeare were converted to unmeaning nonsense, from the absence of those words which his own all but divine genius had appropriated from a still diviner source. As to Milton, he was nearly ruined, as might naturally be supposed. Walter Scott's novels were filled with perpetual lacunae. I hoped it might be otherwise with the philosophers, and so it was ; but even here it was curious to see what strange ravages the visitation had wrought. Some of the most beautiful and comprehensive of Bacon's Aphorisms were reduced to enigmatical nonsense.

Those who held large stocks of books knew not what to do. Ruin stared them in the face ; their value fell seventy or eighty per cent. All branches of theology, in particular, were a drug. One fellow said that he should not so much have minded if the miracle had sponged out what was human as well as what was divine, for in that case he would at least have had so many thousand volumes of fair blank paper, which was as much as many of them were worth before. A wag answered, that it was not usual, in despoiling a house, to carry away anything except the valuables. Meantime, millions of blank Bibles filled the shelves of stationers, to be sold for day-books and ledgers so that there seemed to be no more employment for the paper makers in that direction for many years to come. A friend, who used to mourn over the thought of palimpsest manuscripts—of portions of Livy and Cicero erased to make way for the nonsense of some old monkish chronicler—exclaimed, as he saw a tradesman trudging off with a handsome morocco-bound quarto for a day-book, “ only think of the pages once filled with the poetry of Isaiah, and the parables of Christ, sponged clean to make way for orders for silks and satins, muslins, cheese, and bacon ! ” The old authors, of course, were left to their

mutilation ; there was no way in which the confusion could be remedied. But the living began to prepare new editions of their works, in which they endeavoured to give a new turn to the thoughts which had been mutilated by erasure, and I was not a little amused to see that many, having stolen from writers whose compositions were as much mutilated as their own, could not tell the meaning of their own pages.

It seemed at first to be a not unnatural impression that even those who could recall the erased texts as they perused the injured books—who could mentally fill up the imperfect clauses—were not at liberty to inscribe them ; they seemed to fear that if they did so the characters would be as if written in invisible ink, or would surely fade away. It was with trembling that some at length made the attempt, and to their unspeakable joy found the impression durable. Day after day passed ; still the characters remained ; and the people at length came to the conclusion that God left them at liberty, if they could, to reconstruct the Bible for themselves out of their collective remembrances of its divine contents. This led again to some curious results, all of them singularly indicative of the good and ill that is in human nature. It was with incredible joy that men came to the conclusion that the book might be thus recovered nearly entire, and nearly in the very words of the original, by the combined effort of human memories. Some of the obscurest of the species, who had studied nothing else but the Bible, but who had well studied that, came to be objects of reverence among Christians and booksellers ; and the various texts they quoted were taken down with the utmost care. He who could fill up a chasm by the restoration of words which were only partially remembered, or could contribute the least text that had been forgotten, was regarded as a sort of public benefactor. At length, a great public movement amongst the divines of all denominations was projected to collate the results of these partial recoveries of the sacred text. It was curious again, to see in how various ways human passions and prejudices came into play. It was found that the several parties who had furnished from memory the same portions of the sacred text, had fallen into a great variety of different readings ; and though most of them were of as little importance in themselves as the bulk of those which are paraded in the critical recensions of Mill, Griesbach, or Tischendorf, they became, from the obstinacy and folly of the men who contended about them, important differences, merely because they were differences. Two reverend men of the synod, I remember, had a rather tough dispute as to whether it was twelve baskets full of fragments of the five loaves which the five thousand left, and seven baskets full of the seven loaves which four thousand had left, or vice versa : as also whether the words in John vi. 19, were “about twenty or five and twenty,” or “about thirty or five and thirty furlongs.”

To do the assembly justice, however, there was found an intense general earnestness and sincerity befitting the occasion, and an equally intense desire to obtain, as nearly as possible, the very words of the lost volume ; only (as was also, alas ! natural) vanity in some ; in others, confidence in their strong impressions and in the accuracy of their memory ; obstinacy, and pertinacity in many more (all aggravated as

usual by controversy), caused many odd embarrassments before the final adjustment was effected.

I was particularly struck with the varieties of reading which mere prejudices in favour of certain systems of theology occasioned in the several partisans of each. No doubt the worthy men were generally unconscious of the influence of these prejudices ; yet, somehow, the memory was seldom so clear in relation to those texts which told against them as in relation to those which told for them. A certain Quaker had an impression that the words instituting the Eucharist were preceded by a qualifying expression "and Jesus said to the twelve, Do this in remembrance of me," while he could not exactly recollect whether or not the formula of baptism was expressed in the general terms, some maintained it was. Several Unitarians had a clear recollection that in several places the authority of manuscripts, as estimated in Griesbach's recension, was decidedly against the common reading ; while the Trinitarians maintained that Griesbach's recension in those instances had left that reading undisturbed. An Episcopalian began to have his doubts whether the usage in favour of the interchange of the words "bishop" and "presbyter" was so uniform as the Presbyterian and Independent maintained, and whether there was not a passage in which Timothy and Titus were expressly called "bishops." The Presbyterian and Independent had similar biases ; and one gentleman who was a strenuous advocate of the system of the latter, enforced one equivocal remembrance by saying, he could, as it were, distinctly see the very spot on the page before his mind's eye. Such tricks will imagination play with the memory, when preconception plays tricks with the imagination ! In like manner, it was seen that while the Calvinist was very distinct in his recollection of the ninth chapter of Romans, his memory was very faint as respects the exact wording of some of the verses in the Epistle of James ; and though the Arminian had a most vivacious impression of all those passages which spoke of the claims of the law, he was in some doubt whether the apostle Paul's sentiments respecting human depravity, and justification by faith alone had not been a little exaggerated. In short, it very clearly appeared that tradition was no safe guide ; that if, even when she was hardly a month old, she could play such freaks with the memories of honest people, there was but a sorry prospect of the secure transmission of truth for eighteen hundred years. From each man's memory seemed to glide something or other which he was not inclined to retain there, and each seemed to substitute in its stead something that he liked better.

Though the assembly was in the main most anxious to come to a right decision, and really advanced an immense way towards completing a true and faithful copy of the lost original, the disputes which arose, on almost every point of theology, promised the world an abundant crop of new sects and schisms. Already there had sprung up several whose names had never been heard of in the world, but for this calamity. Amongst them were two who were called the "Long Memories" and the "Short Memories." Their general tendencies coincided pretty much with those of the orthodox and Rationalists.

It was curious to see by what odd associations, sometimes of contrast sometimes of resemblance, obscure texts were recovered, though they were verified, when once mentioned, by the consciousness of hundreds. One old gentleman, a miser, contributed (and it was all he did contribute) a maxim of prudence, which he recollected, principally from having systematically abused it. All the ethical maxims, indeed, were soon collected ; for though, as usual, no one recollected his own peculiar duties or infirmities, every one, as usual, kindly remembered those of his neighbours. Husbands remembered what was due from their wives, and wives what was due from their husbands. The unpleasant sayings about "better to dwell on the housetop," and "the perpetual dropping on a very rainy day," were called to mind by thousands. Almost the whole of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes were contributed, in the merest fragments, in this way. As for Solomon's "times for every thing," few could remember them all, but everybody remembered some. Undertakers said there was a "time to mourn," and comedians that there was a "time to laugh" ; young ladies innumerable remembered there was a "time to love" ; and people of all kinds that there was "a time to hate" ; everybody knew there was a "time to speak" ; but a worthy Quaker reminded them that there was also a "time to keep silence."

Some dry parts of the laws of Moses were recovered by the memory of jurists, who seemed to have no knowledge whatever of any other parts of the sacred volume ; while in like manner one or two antiquarians supplied some very difficult genealogical and chronological matters, in equal ignorance of the moral and spiritual contents of the Scriptures.

As people became accustomed to the phenomenon, the perverse humours of mankind displayed themselves in a variety of ways. The efforts of the pious assembly were abundantly laughed at ; but I must, in justice, add, without driving them from their purpose. Some profane wags suggested there was now a good opportunity of realizing the scheme of taking "not" out of the Commandments, and inserting it in the Creed. But they were sarcastically told that the old objection to the plan would still apply ; that they would not sin with equal relish if they were expressly commanded to do so, nor take such pleasure in infidelity, if infidelity became a duty. Others said that if the world must wait till the synod had concluded its labours, the prophecies of the New Testament would not be written till some time after their fulfilment ; and that if all the conjectures of the learned divines were inserted in the new edition of the Bible, the declaration in John would be literally verified, and that "the world itself would not contain all the books which would be written."

But the most amusing thing of all, was to see, as time made man more familiar with this strange event, the variety of speculations which were entertained respecting its object and design. Many began gravely to question whether it was the duty of the synod to attempt the reconstruction of a book of which God himself had so manifestly deprived the world, and whether it was not a profane, nay, an atheistical, attempt to frustrate His will. Some, who were secretly glad to be released from

so troublesome a book, were particularly pious on this head, and exclaimed bitterly against this rash attempt to counteract and cancel the decrees of heaven. The Papists, on their part, were confident that the design was to correct the exorbitancies of a rabid Protestantism, and show the world, by direct miracle, the necessity of submitting to the decision of their church and the infallibility of the supreme Pontiff ; who, as they truly alleged, could decide all knotty points quite as well without the Word of God as with it. On being reminded that the writings of the Fathers, on which they laid so much stress as the vouchers of their traditions, were mutilated by the same stroke which had demolished the Bible (all their quotations from the sacred volume being erased), some of the Jesuits affirmed that many of the Fathers were rather improved than otherwise by the omission, and that they found these writings quite as intelligible and not less edifying than before. In this, many Protestants very cordially agreed. On the other hand, many of our modern infidels gave an entirely new turn to the whole affair, by saying that the visitation was evidently not in judgment, but in mercy ; that God in compassion, and not in indignation, had taken away a book which men had regarded with an extravagant admiration and idolatry, and which they had exalted to the place of that clear internal oracle which he had planted in the human breast ; in a word, that if it was a rebuke at all, it was a rebuke to a rampant " Bibliolatry." As I heard all these different versions of so simple a matter, and found that not a few were inclined to each, I could not help exclaiming, " In truth the devil is a very clever fellow, and man even a greater blockhead than I had taken him for." But in spite of the surprise with which I had listened to these various explanations of an event which seemed to me clear as if written with a sunbeam, this last reason, which assigned as the cause of God's resumption of his own gift, an extravagant admiration and veneration of it on the part of mankind—it being so notorious that those who professed belief in its divine origin and authority had (even the best of them) so grievously neglected both the study and the practice of it—struck me as so exquisitely ludicrous that I broke into a fit of laughter which awoke me. I found that it was broad daylight, and the morning sun was streaming in at the window and shining in quiet radiance upon the open Bible which lay on my table. So strongly had my dream impressed me, that I almost felt as though, on inspection, I should find the sacred leaves a blank, and it was therefore with joy that my eyes rested on those words, which I read through grateful tears : " The gifts of God are without repentance."

The name of Canon R. H. Sheppard is intimately associated with the work he accomplished at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and an interesting account of his years there has been written by the Rev. R. J. Northcott, one of the clergy of the Church. *Dick Sheppard and St. Martin's*, with an introduction by the Rev. Pat. McCormick (Longmans Green & Co., 3s. 6d. net), is a tribute to the personality of a man who endeared himself to a wide circle of friends, and it tells of the services which he rendered to many of all classes who realized the depth of his love and sympathy with all forms of distress.