

ED 022 761

By-Tonkins, Muriel W.

"SODOM AND GOMORRAH WERE LOVERS": THE CASE FOR TEACHING THE BIBLE IN CANADIAN ENGLISH PROGRAMS.

Pub Date 68

Note-6p.

Journal Cit-The English Quarterly; A Publication of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English; v1 n1 p53-7
Summer 1968

EDRS Price MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.32

Descriptors-AMERICAN LITERATURE, ANCIENT HISTORY, *BIBLICAL LITERATURE, CURRICULUM ENRICHMENT, CURRICULUM PROBLEMS, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, ENGLISH LITERATURE, FOLK CULTURE, HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM, LANGUAGE STYLES, LEGENDS, LITERARY GENRES, LITERARY HISTORY, *LITERATURE, *MYTHOLOGY

The current neglect of the study of the Bible in Canadian high school English programs has deprived students of a rich cultural resource of language and literature. The Bible ought to be considered as an unrivaled collection of all types of literature, whose characters are frequently rooted in historical fact and whose themes have relevance today. The literary influence of the Bible, uniting such diverse figures as Milton and Hemingway, is also neglected, as well as its value as a stylistic guide to imagery, parallelism, and other rhetorical devices. Although many teachers believe that the Bible cannot be taught without offending someone, experience has indicated that, if it is treated as any other controversial literary work, few objections will be raised.

(LH)

the English quarterly

A Publication of the *Canadian Council of Teachers of English*

James S. Stone, Editor
University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario

Ruth E. McConnell, Associate Editor
University of British Columbia, Vancouver 8, British Columbia

R. R. Dubinski, Assistant Editor
University of Waterloo

Executive Committee of the Council

President

Merron Chorny

Vice-President

James Stone

Secretary-Treasurer

Jennie Wilson

Members-at-large

Roy Perlstrom

Muriel Kerr

Editorial Board

Brian Sulsbury

Ves Thomas

B. H. Smeaton

Lionel Wilson

W. P. M. Denham

Mary Campbell

Michael Brian

Harry McFarlane

Donald Stephens

Design, Layout and Illustrations

George Roth

Bob Murray

University of Waterloo

TE 000 663

ED022761

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

'Sodom and Gomorrah Were Lovers': **The Case for Teaching the Bible in Canadian English Programs**

Muriel W. Tomkins

The neglect of the study of the Bible is one of the most conspicuous failures of Canadian high school literature programs. Surveying such programs across the nation, we quickly discover that no province makes systematic provision for all pupils to study the Bible at some time in their school careers. If pupils encounter it at all, they do so in their senior high school literature anthologies, where Bible selections are fragmentary, few in number, and frequently badly chosen. For example, an anthology which is currently used in some grade eleven classes and which purports to deal with man's quest for values contains these truncated passages: an excerpt from the story of Joseph; seven lines of a speech by Solomon in praise of wisdom; a handful of verses from Exodus, Micah, and Matthew; and, from the Book of Job, two closing chapters in which God addresses Job out of the whirlwind. Despite its avowed purpose, the anthology leaves untouched such great Bible themes as the courage and vision of Moses, who redeemed a nation from slavery, the selfless devotion of Ruth, Job's lonely search for meaning and purpose in life, the faith and fortitude of Daniel, the struggles and triumphs of Jesus, etc.

In the circumstances, it seems doubtful whether Canadian high school students would fare any better on a Bible test than did five classes of college-bound eleventh and twelfth grade students in the Newton, Mass., High School, as reported by Thayer Warshaw in the February, 1964, issue of the *English Journal*. His students were assigned 112 straightforward questions dealing with the most familiar Biblical "names, stories and quotations." Some results of that test are quoted below:

Several pupils thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were lovers; that the four horsemen appeared on the Acropolis . . . that Eve was created from an apple . . . that the stories by which Jesus taught were called parodies . . . 79% could not supply the last word of the expression "Many are called, but few are chosen." 84% could not furnish the last word of the familiar "The truth shall make you free." 63% did not know the last word of Isaiah's "They shall beat their swords into plowshares." 84% were unable to say that "A soft answer turneth away wrath." 88% did not know that "Pride goeth before a fall." and a full 93% could not complete the well-known "The love of money is the root of all evil."⁷

The true significance of these results is shocking. For, in turning out Bible illiterates, the schools are guilty of depriving students not only of the rich resources of Bible language and literature but also of their cultural heritage. As the 1965 Commission on English in the United States remarked, when assigning to the Bible top priority on the literature curriculum:

Preeminently the Bible has become a part of "English," a part of our common culture, a part of our common humanity. In the King James Version it is a work of high literary merit and the source of more literary allusions than any other book in the language. To ignore the Psalms, the Song of Solomon, the great trial of Job, the subtle epistles of Paul is to ignore some of the best literature we have.⁸

Seven years earlier (1958), the Conference on Basic Issues in the Teaching of English had advanced the same reasons, when recommending formal Bible study as part of the literature programs of both elementary and secondary schools.⁹ Incidentally, British schools have long provided such instruction. Another strong argument in favour of teaching the Bible is, of course, the imperative need for children growing up in a pluralistic society like ours to understand some of the beliefs held by others.

To appreciate fully the literary value of the Bible, we need to know it intimately as an unrivalled collection of all types of literature—riddles, fables, proverbs, poems, drama, biographies, letters, stories in great variety. As Mary Ellen Chase points out:

The Old Testament teems with stories: legends such as those in Genesis of the creation and of the flood, sagas like the Jacob-Joseph saga in Genesis 27-50, hero tales like those of Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson in the book of Judges, romances like much of the story of David, tragedies like the dark, ironic story of Saul . . . the humorous, ironic story of Jonah sulking under his withering gourd. And there is a novel in the book of Esther, which in plot design and irony of incident has never been surpassed.⁶

Moreover, as the discoveries of modern Bible archaeologists increasingly confirm, much of that literature has its roots in "real" events and "real" people who lived and worked, knew happiness and despair, in the hills and valleys of ancient Palestine. In other words, the Bible offers countless authentic, if sometimes stark, portrayals of the human condition, a fact which will appeal to many teachers and

students. Even where that appeal has not been established, the themes of Bible literature have relevance for today. Job, for example, "is every man in every age swept by doubt, rebellion and anger against the *sunt lacrimae rerum* of human existence"⁵ Here is an account of how Paul Hildebrand, another high school teacher, linked his presentation of the Book of Ruth, which Goethe described as the most beautiful of idylls, to the contemporary scene:

[It] is presented not only as a beautiful story, but a parallel is drawn between the book and the problem novel of the twentieth century. The Book of Ruth was written at a time when the marriage of young Jews to foreign women was a problem. Many of those who married foreigners forsook their religion and adopted that of their wives. This led to a law forbidding the marriage of a Jew to a foreigner and even dissolving those marriages already made (Ezra, Chapter 10). The Book of Ruth was evidently written as a protest against that law. When the story is approached from this angle, its message on tolerance becomes obvious.⁶

Another dimension is added to the literary value of the Bible when we recall its tremendous impact on English and American literature. Although Milton's *Paradise Lost* is perhaps the most striking example, we need not reach so far back in time to find clear evidences of this impact. Many contemporary works appearing on modern high school curricula demonstrate it and are, indeed, incomprehensible on a symbolic level to pupils who lack a background of Bible study. As Warshaw cautions, the richest meaning of *The Pearl* may elude their grasp:

*Let the English teacher begin the study of Nobel prize-winner John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* with an examination of the book's second paragraph, which begins, "If this story is a parable, perhaps everyone takes his own meaning from it . . ." Nine-tenths of the pupils do not know even what a parable is, much less that in one parable a man "sold all he had" for "one pearl of great price."⁷*

Such pupils are also likely to miss the significance of the "crucifixion" scene in Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea*: the old man staggering and finally collapsing under the heavy burden of the mast he carries and sustaining injuries to his hands and forehead. And in Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* it would be easy for pupils to overlook the parallel to the story of King David and Absalom, the beloved son who betrayed his father, with tragic consequences for both.⁸

Turning to the language of the Bible, we have John Livingston Lowes' oft-quoted accolade to it as "the noblest monument of English prose." In particular, Lowes praises the vividness of the "physical" imagery of the Bible—similes and metaphors drawn from the immediate environment of great hills, desert rocks that give shelter from sun and storm, streams that sustain life, verdant pastures for the flock.⁹ Mary Ellen Chase, on her part, admires the frequent use of the question by Hebrew writers to give "variety to their style, and the suggestion, now of pathos, now of mystery, both in narrative and in poetry." To illustrate, she comments that

the magnificence of the thirty-eighth chapter of Job is actually dependent upon the fact that God speaks out of the whirlwind in a series of questions: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . . Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow? . . . Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?"¹⁰

She also praises the many striking evidences of *parallelism*, in various forms, in Old Testament poetry. For example, synonymous parallelism emphasizes an idea by showing two different, related aspects of it in two lines:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament showeth his handiwork.
The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree;
He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.*

Antithetical parallelism, on the other hand, provides dramatic contrasts between ideas:

*A thousand shall fall at thy side,
And ten thousand at thy right hand;
But it shall not come nigh thee.
Weeping may endure for a night,
But joy cometh in the morning.¹¹*

I am well aware that any proposal to teach the Bible in a systematic way in school will elicit objections from many sources, including teachers. Indeed, it is surprising to find, sometimes, that the same people who protest the deletion of a four-letter word from a short story will tacitly support the far more serious form of censorship involved in banning the Bible from the classroom. One reason is, I suspect, that many teachers are themselves Bible illiterates, lacking the background necessary for teaching it. The reason commonly given, however, is the impossibility of teaching the Bible without offending someone—a reason based on the assumption that the Bible cannot be presented strictly as literature, without regard to its religious implications. Warsaw testified to the groundlessness of such fears when he reported receiving "not one complaint from a parent or other member of the public" about the Bible course he introduced, even though all shades of belief, including atheism, were represented in the community.¹² For teachers having fears about problems that may arise in the classroom, there is reassuring counsel from Hildebrand, who remarks that pupils in his school have studied the Bible for more than four decades:

. . . students are warned that they may read or hear points of view expressed by the teacher or by other students which are at variance with those which they have been taught at home or at church school. The teacher explains that no one is trying to convert anyone to or from any particular belief or attitude toward the Bible. The students are also urged to take any troublesome problems of interpretation to their ministers or priests and to accept their explanations rather than those of their English teachers.¹³

Another writer sensibly advises those who believe that study of the Bible constitutes a "controversial issue" to adopt toward it the same intelligent attitude they would adopt toward any controversial issue, i.e., they should "frame a clear philosophy of why they are teaching selections from the Bible, which selections, and how these will be presented."¹⁴

References

1. "Studying the Bible in Public School," *English Journal*, LIII (February 1964), 91.
2. *Freedom and Discipline in English: Report of the Commission on English* (Princeton, 1965), p. 48.
3. *Issues, Problems, and Approaches in the Teaching of English*, ed. George Winchester Stone, Jr. (New York, 1964), pp. 177, 135-6.
4. *The Bible and the Common Reader*, rev. ed. (New York, 1962), p. 21.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
6. R. Paul Hildebrand, "We Study the Bible as Literature," *English Journal*, LV (November 1966), 1023.
7. *Warshaw*, p. 91.
8. *Ibid.* p. 91.
9. "The Noblest Monument of English Prose," in *Issues, Problems, and Approaches in the Teaching of English*, p. 187.
10. *The Bible and the Common Reader*, p. 97.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-101.
12. *Warshaw*, p. 97.
13. *Hildebrand*, p. 1022.
14. Robert F. Hogan, "The Bible in the English Program," *English Journal*, LIV (September 1965), 494.