

INTRODUCTION

The Bible, is one of the most revered and widely read books in the world. The nomenclature is a simple translation from the Greek 'Ta Biblos' which, literally, means 'the book'. It contains a collection of books considered divinely inspired and, hence, sacred both by the Jewish people and the Christians. It is divided into two major sections: the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT). The Catholics have 46 books in their canon of the OT. They divide them into two categories: proto-canonical (39) and deuterocanonical (07). The latter consist of Tobit, Judith, I Maccabees, II Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch (and parts of Esther as well as Daniel); whereas the Protestants accept only 39, the 'protocanonical' in the Catholic terminology. There is unanimity about the 27 books of the NT.

The English Bible

Most of us who have no knowledge of the original Biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) are familiar with the Bible only in translation. The translation of the Bible in English has a long history. It is interesting to note that 'the history of the English Bible is the history of the movement of the Bible from its possession and use by clergy alone to the hands of the laity. It is also the history of the formation of the English language from a mixture of French, Anglo-Norman, and Anglo-Saxon.'¹ The first attempts of rendering the Bible in English began during the Anglo-Saxon period. Within a century after the conversion of England (AD 600 by Augustine), poetic and prose paraphrases together with translations of the Bible began to appear. We can mention here the works of Caedmon (flourished 658-680) and Aldhelm, bishop of Sherborne (died 709). Bede wanted the common people to have the Scriptures in their own tongue. Even on Version (also known as the Authorised Version). The King James Version was prepared by a commission comprising of the best scholars in England, appointed by James I, in 1611. It was a revision of the Bishops' Bible. - A modernization of punctuations, pronouns and his death bed (735) he was busy translating the Gospel according to St John. The other names associated with the Anglo-Saxon

translations are King Alfred (849-901) and the abbot Aelfric (955-1020). The Norman conquest (1066) arrested for a while the movement toward the production of the Bible in English.

The age of Chaucer (1340-1400), with the flourishing of Middle English, witnessed translations of different portions of the Bible, specially the NT, into various English dialects. But the first complete translation of the Bible (1382-84) from the Vulgate is associated with John Wycliffe.

The Reformation movement in England saw a chain of translations. The chief among them are: Tyndale's Bible (1525-31); Coverdale's Bible (1535); Great Bible (1539-41); Geneva Bible (1560); and Bishops' Bible (1568). They served as the background for the King James archaic vocabulary appeared as the New King James Version (1979-82). It was followed by the Revised Version (1881-85) done by British Protestant scholars. In 1901, appeared the American Standard Version, i.e., the Revised Version with readings preferred by American scholars.

Authorised by the National Council of Churches, the American scholars prepared a revision of the Authorised Version (1946-52). This is known as the Revised Standard Version. A major revision appeared as the New Revised Standard Version in 1980. The Revised Standard Version received the Catholic imprimatur from Cardinal Cushing of Boston in the unaltered form in which the text appears in the Oxford Annotated Bible (1966 ed.). The Second Vatican Council opened the doors for an ecumenical Bible. The other important translations of the Bible include Chicago Bible (1931), New English Bible (1961-70), Today's English Version-Good News Bible (1966-79), New International Version (1973-78), and The Living Bible (1962-71).

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) in its fourth session on April 8, 1546 decreed that the "ancient Vulgate version which has been preserved by the Church for so many centuries is to be regarded as the authentic

translation for public reading, disputations, sermons and expositions..."² In keeping with this enjoinder it was standard practice to prepare Catholic vernacular translations from the Vulgate. It was about 400 years later, on September 30, 1943, with the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* issued by Pope Pius XII, urging the exegetes to "explain the text in the original languages which, since it was written by the sacred author himself, has greater weight and authority than even the best translation, either ancient or modern,"³ that the policy of the church changed and vernacular translations from the original languages were officially encouraged.

Vatican II in *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, promulgated on November 18, 1965 endorsed this: the Church with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books.⁴ It permitted the use of such translations in the pericopes of the vernacular Mass. Hence, we find two types of Catholic translations: from the Vulgate and from the Original Languages. Douay-Rheims (1582-1609), Challoner Revision (1749-63), Confraternity Revision of NT (1941), and Knox Bible (1944-50) are translated from the Vulgate whereas Westminster Version (1935-49), Kleist-lilly NT (1950-54), New American Bible (1952-70; 1987), and The Jerusalem Bible (1966; 1985), which was translated from the French Catholic Bible de Jerusalem, are from Original Languages.⁵

The Influence of the Bible

The influence of the books of the Old Testament in the preservation of the Hebrews and their descendants as a people and Judaism as a religion can never be exaggerated. After the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had fallen in 722 BC and 587 BC respectively, the Hebrews outlived the trauma of defeat and exile largely because they had with them the writings which preserved their history and traditions. Many of them did not return to Palestine from the exile. Those who did, did so to re-build a temple and reconstruct a society in terms of religious unity rather than a political entity. The religion found expression in the books of the

Old Testament : the Law (Torah), history, prophecy, and poetry. The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD sounded the death knell of the historical, priestly sacrificial worship around which the Jewish faith revolved. But, by then, the Jewish religion had gone with them into many lands where it not only preserved its distinctive character but also retained its vitality thanks to the constant nurture provided by the Biblical literature. The people had their Bible with them. In their local synagogues it was read, prayed and taught. It preserved their identity, inspired their worship, determined their calendar, moulded their ethical ideals, directed their personal and family life, sustained them during persecutions, and shaped their intellectual outlook. Hence, the survival of the Jewish religion and its subsequent incalculable influence on the Western culture can never be adequately estimated independent of the Biblical writings.

Joined to the books of the New Testament, they formed the Bible of the Christianity. The importance of the Bible in history and culture of the modern world, particularly the West, is too evident to necessitate explitation. It went with the Christian Church to every land in the world.

Eversince, it has contributed to the shaping and enrichment of the lives and activities of the people of all races in no small degree. Its belief in one God as the Creator of all that exists; its view that all things have a place in God's plan; its message on the essential unity of human race, with no race existing for its own sake; its stress on the inalienable rights of the individual and forthright opposition to the abuse, exploitation, or neglect of human beings by the rich and the powerful or by the government itself; its insistence on the necessity of attention to the widows, orphans, strangers, friendless, and homeless; its exacting sense of justice and truth; and its ideals of love and forgiveness have been influencing and moulding the opinions and activities of people in all spheres of life. The Church's call to ethical and social responsibility, to a life accountable to God, to a life of universal brotherhood based on equality, dignity and charity, to sonship in the family of God, to citizenship in the kingdom of God, is founded on the Bible. The Bible, thus, pointing

to a new way of life, not yet embodied in any society, calls man for a better and nobler lifestyle. Notwithstanding the wide difference between the ideal and the actual, it continues to act as the conscience of the people in pronouncing judgement over issues and persons with its stress on what should be can still be.

Millions of modern people who do not consider themselves as religious adhere to the basic presuppositions underlying the Biblical literature. It is not possible to determine precisely the effect of such presuppositions on the changing ideas and attitudes of the Western people with regard to the nature and purpose of government, social institutions, and economic theories. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the West has given up the claim of kingship as a divine right and recognised the divinely given right of every individual citizen; moved from slavery to equality; recognised the right of everyone to live with dignity and honour with equal access to resources, playing down the right to own property.

The deepest influence of the Biblical literature may be found in the arts of Western people, their music and, in particular, their best poetry, drama, and creative fiction. A great number of Biblical expressions have become part and parcel of the English usage: 'a broken reed', 'the eleventh hour', 'sweat of the brow', 'the apple of (one's) eye', 'let the dead bury their dead', 'put new wine into old bottles', 'repent in sackcloth and ashes', 'a house divided against itself', 'the tree is known by its fruit', 'the blind leading the blind', 'the signs of the times', 'physician, heal yourself', 'shake off the dust from (one's) feet', 'no prophet is honoured in his own country', 'the labourer deserves his wages', 'the good Samaritan', 'to turn the other cheek', 'spare the rod and spoil the child', 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth', and so on. It has exercised considerable influence on the style of some of the greatest writers in English. Edmund Gosse remarks that 'not a native author but owes something of his melody and his charm to the echo of these Biblical accents, which were the first fragments of purely classical English to attract his admiration in childhood'.⁶ The following extract from Compton Rickett is a beautiful summary of what the Bible is to

English Literature: Bacon owed little to the Bible; his style was framed chiefly on classical models; but Milton's debt is a considerable one, in as much as whenever he achieves distinction in prose, it is by means of the Hebraic cadences. The historians, Clarendon and Fuller, catch some measures of the stately rhetoric of the Old Testament; while Sir Thomas Browne in his quaint *Religio Medici*, Robert Burton with his discursive *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Jeremy Taylor, in varying ways, testify to its influence. Nor is the Old Testament the only literary force. Mention has been made of the conversational element in the New Testament. Both Old and New are seen in Bunyan, whose style owes more to the Bible, probably narrative of the Evangelists. The colloquial ease and force of the parabolic teaching meet us in almost every page of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Addison's conversational essay is certainly influenced by them; just as Swift reflects the sterner qualities of the prophetic books. While in our own day, it is sufficient to recall the stormy vigour of Carlyle and the ironic eloquence of Ruskin, to realise the spell of Hebraic over our masters of prose.⁷ 'It may be said further,' says Henry Rogers, 'that there is no other book and I think I might say no other ten books, that have left so deep or so many traces on human literature; none that are so often cited or alluded to none which have supplied so much matter for apt illustration, or been so often resorted to for vivid imagery and energetic diction. The remark is applicable to modern literature generally on which the traces of the influence of this book are incomparably deeper and more legible than those left by any other single volume. None but those who have been in the habit of inspecting the best portions of modern literature with the express view of tracing the influence of the Bible upon it, can have an adequate idea of the extent to which it has moulded thought and sentiment, or given strength or grace to expression. Its literary excellencies in general have insensibly exhorted the homage, tinged the style of the greatest masters of eloquence and poetry... Its apothems, its examples, its historic illustrations of human life and character, its moral maxims, its lesson of conduct, its vivid and intense imagery come spontaneously to the lips, as more exactly or forcibly expressing thought and feeling than anything found elsewhere. In re-perusing lately some of the greatest masters of prose - Bacon, Milton, Cowper, Macaulay - expressly with a view to this subject, I have been surprised to note how

often struggling to give emphasis to their thought or intensity to a feeble expression of it, they have laid hold unconsciously, as it were, of scripture phrase or metaphor... As to Shakespeare, no less than three works have been expressly written to trace the influence of the Bible on his genius and writings. The matchless energy of Milton's diction in many parts of his prose writings is in no slight degree due to the use of scripture.⁸ 'It is impossible to exaggerate,' says Legouis, 'the benefit wrought to literature by the reverent reading and repetition of these admirable chapters. The most literate were preserved from affectation and pedantry; the philosophers acquired an alternative to dry and disfiguring abstractness; the ignorant received an ideal which lifted their speech above the level of the rude and the vulgar. A wandering tinker like Bunyan was able, with no model but the Bible, to become a great English prose-writer.'⁹ Among other writers, we can clearly identify the Biblical influence on Cromwell, Wesley, Richard Baxter, George Fox, Browning, Tennyson, John Bright, Emerson, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, and Mahatma Gandhi.

The Major Forms of Literature in the Bible

To an uninformed person the Bible seldom means more than a religious book of the Christians. Even in the literary circles, it has not attracted as much attention as is due mainly because of the nature of its content and the sentiments of religiosity and sacredness with which it is looked upon.

Every study, worth its name, on the Bible as a whole, or in part, revolves around its religious connotations, and, hence, is restricted in its outlook and scope. However, many critics have recognised the literary character of the Bible. R.D.Trivedi says, 'it's a pity that students in India are apt to think of the Bible as merely the scripture of Christians. It is something more. It is a great book of literature and the greatest classic of English prose.'¹⁰ Legouis, commenting on the Bible, says, 'The Old Testament condenses a whole literature in one book, with such unity of passion and sequence as the literature of no other country presents.'¹¹ According to J.N.Mundra and S.C. Mundra the Bible "contains not less than four styles." But

their quote from Middleton Murry lists only three, i.e., high poetry, dramatic narrative and religious legend.¹² But the list is not exhaustive. The Old Testament contains many kinds of literature: narratives combined with rules and instructions (Pentateuch, or Torah); anecdotes of Hebrew priests, prophets, kings, and some women (Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings); stories: an antiracist love story (Ruth), romance (Esther, and Judith), a preacher who succeeded too well (Jonah); collection of epigrams and prudential wisdom (Proverbs); philosophical view of existence with pragmatism and pessimism delicately poised (Ecclesiastes); poetry of high rank: devotional (Psalms), erotic (Song of Songs), elegiac (Lamentations); dramatic theological exposition of the problem of evil and suffering (Job); and oracles (Prophets). The New Testament, too, comprises of several types of literary forms. The major portion of the New Testament consists of epistolary literature (of the 27 books, 21 are called 'letters'); there is also historical narrative (Acts); reminiscences of Jesus' life, activities and sayings, retold with a view to elicit faith (Gospels); and apocalyptic (Apocalypse).

However, a caveat seems necessary. We are in the realm of religious literature which may not exactly conform to our modern scientific yardstick. The books of the Bible were written by different individuals at various times with a particular community in view. As such we cannot look for homogeneity in style, thought patterns or social and cultural values. Further, 'the Bible is the literature of faith, not of scientific observation or historical demonstration... The great Biblical themes are about God, his revealed works of creation, provision, judgment, deliverance, his covenant, and his promises. The Bible sees what happens to mankind in the light of God's nature, righteousness, faithfulness, mercy, and love. The major themes about mankind relate to man's rebellion, his estrangement and perversion. Man's redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, the gifts of grace, the new life, the coming kingdom, and the final consummation of man's hope are all viewed as the gracious works of God.'¹³

Uniqueness of the book of the Apocalypse

The Book of the Apocalypse is unique in the New Testament. It is full of bizarre images, frightful visions, esoteric descriptions, mysterious symbols, and allegorical presentations, setting it apart from the rest of the New Testament literature.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. (Ap 1:12:16)

At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads. From the throne issue flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, and before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God; and before the throne there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing... (Ap 4:2-8)

Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand; and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; but do not harm oil and wine!"

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth...

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place... (ch 6)

The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.

The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the fountains of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the water, because it was made bitter.

The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night...

And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key of the shaft of the bottomless pit; he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth... they were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion, when it stings a man. And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will fly from them. (8:7-9:6)

Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.

And another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God; and the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia. (14:14-20)

The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the

throne, saying, "It is done!" And there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as had never been since men were on the earth, so great was that earthquake. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath. And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found; and great hailstones, heavy as a hundredweight, dropped on men from heaven, till men cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague. (16:17-21)

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur. And the rest were slain by the sword of him who sits upon the horse, the sword that issues from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.(19:17-21)

This literary form of fantastic imagery which the Apocalypse uses makes the book unparalleled in the NT, at the same time making it the most difficult book to understand for the modern reader. Yet, it is not an isolated piece of work. It is, as we shall see, the representative of a form of religious literature rather common in late Judaism and early Christianity: the apocalyptic. Though the imagery employed and the visions portrayed therein seem weird and frightful to the modern reader, the contemporary people would easily have recognised the form as we differentiate the various present day literary forms such as the novel, the drama, the scientific fiction, the newspaper report, the essay, the story and so on. They would have expected such a work to be dominantly symbolical as weeks made up of years, numbers standing for

names, beasts representing the nations and empires of the time, gemstones and metals suggesting character traits... Beasts, war in the heavens, destruction of the earth - all these things which we find so strange would have been expected by the first readers of the Apocalypse, just as we expect to find horses, gunfights, posses, and cowboys in a Western.¹⁴

The present study purports to delve into the rich imagery and symbolism employed in the book by studying it closely. It also attempts to unravel the meaning and significance of this symbolism by unearthing the sources from which these images are derived or allude to, and aims at critically examining to what extent it conforms to the apocalyptic genre.

The thesis consists of seven chapters, in deference to the author's schematic arrangement of the material in units of seven, with an introduction and a conclusion. Introduction deals briefly with the history of the Bible in English, describes the influence of the Biblical literature on the life and literature of the West, and points out the major literary forms in the Bible. It also provides a glimpse of the unique literary style the book of the Apocalypse employs: weird imagery and frightening visions Chapter 1 concerns the authorship, outline, and the summary of the book. In chapter 2, the salient features of Jewish apocalyptic literature are examined. The historical development of this genre is dealt with in chapter 3. In chapter 4, the extant canonical and non-canonical apocalyptic works are briefly surveyed. The Apocalypse is compared with the rest of the books of the Bible in chapter 5. In chapter 6, the Apocalypse is compared with the apocryphal books. The rich symbolism made use of in the various vision narratives in the Apocalypse and its significance is studied in chapter 7. Conclusion comprises of the finding of this study: the book of the Apocalypse is a great apocalyptic literary work fitted in an epistolary framework, borrowing heavily from the prophetic literature and exhibiting some likeness to the Greek Tragedy.

REFERENCES

1. Tucker, Gene M and Craddock, Fred B, "Bible," Microsoft(R) 98 Encyclopedia.
2. The Christian Faith, Neuner, J., and Dupuis, J. (ed), p 71
3. *ibid*, p 79
4. The Documents of Vatican II, Gallagher, Joseph, Very Rev Msgr, p 126
5. The Jerome Biblical Commentary, vol II, pp 586-89
6. Edmund Gosse, A Short History of Modern English Literature
7. Compton Rickett, A History of English Literature, p 166
8. J.N.Mundra & S.C.Mundra, A History of English Literature, pp 369-370
9. Emile Legouis & Louis Cazamian, A History of English Literature, p 379
10. R.D.Trivedi, A Compendious History of English Literature, p 155
11. Emile Legouis & Louis Cazamian, *op cit* p 377
12. J.N.Mundra & S.C.Mundra, *op cit* p 368
13. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1981, vol 2, p 880-81
14. Majka, Frank, together, vol. LXIV No. 10 (1998) p 13