

Lowell's Use of the Bible

By JOHN PAUL PRITCHARD

ON THE BORDER between literature and theology lies the Bible. Occupying a scholarly no-man's land, it is frequently neglected; everybody's business is all too often nobody's. Students of religion ponder its teachings but not its literary possibilities, while literary scholars have so many matters to busy them that they are prone to leave the Scriptures to the theologian. The two courses in the Bible as literature taught at the University of Oklahoma indicate that the younger generation has little knowledge of the material in the Old and New Testaments, a fact that is further substantiated by the uniformity with which telling references to biblical events and sayings in literary masterpieces fail to make any impression upon their minds. Under these circumstances, it is well to consider the quantity and quality of what they are missing. Examination of an author whose copious biblical references are normally fairly obvious is perhaps the best method to find this information. Such an author was James Russell Lowell, in whose work scriptural passages figure frequently. Since he was not one of the first rank of writers in whose work the materials are so well fused as often to defy tracing, identification of biblical sources is seldom difficult.

Although Lowell's biblical references and allusions fail to show deep study, their extent and frequency—his twenty volumes contain nearly a thousand allusions to fifty-three of the Bible's sixty-six books—prove his wide reading in the Scriptures. They are outnumbered only by his references, some fourteen hundred in number, to classical Greek and Roman literature, and naturally by references to the long tradition of English authors. He felt sufficiently familiar with the Bible to trust often (sometimes unwisely) to his memory in quoting it. Though casual references abound, he worked not a few biblical passages into the very fabric of his discourse.

"Dante was intimate with the Scriptures," wrote Lowell; "they do even a scholar no harm." His reaction to them indicates that this was intended as ironic understatement. One finds his references occasionally in genuine religious yearning; more often their use is secular. They occur in parody of pedantic piety in *The Biglow*

Papers, as illumination of argument and exposition, as poetic simile and metaphor. Other allusions range from the serious to almost the extreme of graceless puns which seemed to some contemporaries to topple on the verge of irreverence. Lowell, however, defended such grotesque use of the Scriptures as being characteristic of god-fearing men in his region: "Will anyone familiar with the New England countryman venture to tell me that he does *not* speak of sacred things familiarly? that Biblical allusions . . . are not frequent on his lips? . . . one of the things I am proud of in my countrymen is . . . that they do not put their Maker away far from them, or interpret the fear of God into being afraid of Him." Lowell did not hesitate to use a similar freedom. He would freely combine two biblical passages, alter the sense of a passage, and even mingle in one idea such diverse elements as the Bible, Aristophanes, Rabelais, and Montaigne. It is a peculiarly "tetchy" reader, however, who finds anywhere in his work the least hint of irreverence.

Having been rusticated from Harvard to Concord in his senior year for infraction of college rules, Lowell wrote to a friend that he had "sacrificed, perchance, too assiduously on that altar to the 'unknown God', which the Divinity has builded not with hands in the bosom of every decent man, sometimes blazing out clear with flame, like Abel's sacrifice, heaven-seeking; sometimes smothered with green-wood and earthward, like that of Cain." The sacrifice for which he had been exiled to Concord had consisted of libations to Bacchus, hardly an unknown god among Harvard students; but the involved rhetoric of this first recorded instance of his conflation of biblical passages illustrated a habit that in less orotund form he followed all his life. Other passages written during his last year at Harvard and shortly thereafter include echoes of Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Matthew, the Acts, and Second Corinthians. Though most of them are conventional enough, a visit to a supposed camp-meeting is unexpectedly characterized. "I rode by the place last night, and what do you think I saw? An empty reed shaken by the wind of hypocrisy or fanati-

cism? No! a party of eight or ten gamblers."

After his engagement in 1840 to the young poetess Maria White, Lowell's faculties seemed to mature; his always exuberant fancy had its fullest play during this decade. One finds him using biblical matter in great profusion and variety of ways. In his poems, he was intensely serious; at this time no poem had value in his eyes that did not convey a "truth of philosophy." He referred to the fall of man and the flood, to the exodus from Egypt and the tables of the law given at Sinai. Phrases occur from Nehemiah, Job, and the Proverbs, along with reference to the idyl of Ruth and Belshazzar's feast. From the New Testament he took episodes about John the Baptist, the man born blind, the Good Samaritan, the last judgment, various details of the Crucifixion, the stoning of Stephen, Paul's speech at Athens, and the account in First Corinthians of the resurrection of the dead. Most of these allusions are notable chiefly for his facility in scriptural illustration. In occasional flashes, one finds unexpected and unorthodox use of scriptural story; he refers once to an abandoned child who had reverted to the beasts as

fain to glean
(More sick at heart than Ruth, and all alone)
After the harvest of the merciless wolf,
Grim Boaz.

This light-fingered borrowing and remodeling of scripture occurs much more frequently in letters of the period. He wrote to his sister-in-law that a daguerreotype of Maria was so beautiful that "your mother in direct contravention of one of the Commandments (I do not remember which, but you can easily step over and inquire of Mr. Weiss) will covet it." To Longfellow, taking the waters at Brattleboro, Vermont, he wrote: "I do not wonder at your being inspired to write a poem upon the summer rain up there, keeping as you do a sign of Aquarius (or a facsimile) stationary over your head like Joshua's sun." In a third letter he admits the imputation of slave-holding because the women at home insist upon waiting on him. "Yet how avoid it? Maria laughs when I propose to learn darning, and Ellen flies into open rebellion and snatches the pail out of my hand when I would fain

assume half of the old Israelitish drudgery and become my own drawer of water." Though one might insist that scriptural allusions found in his poems had been carefully selected for their purposes, the letters, for the most part hastily written, are full of equally apt references.

Lowell's *anni mirabiles*, 1846-48, saw the publishing of a volume of poems, the *Fable for Critics*, and the first series of the *Biglow Papers*. He was at the same time a constant contributor to anti-slavery periodicals and a busy writer of reviews. The more than eighty biblical allusions of these three years comprise, in addition to poetic simile and metaphor, literary criticism, religious and social discussion, satire, irony, humor, puns, and the pedantry of the Reverend Homer Wilbur. Humor is perhaps the most frequently met characteristic. He began to write with greater ease and to incorporate his biblical references more thoroughly into his work.

The first Biglow Paper contains a startling converse of the well-known New Testament statement about marriage:

Man hed ough' to put asunder
Them that God has nowadays jined.

The converse of a proposition is not necessarily true; but Lowell used it effectively in urging that Massachusetts secede from a Union that catered to the slave-owning states. By December, 1846, becoming tired of the single-track Abolitionist minds, he wrote for the *Anti-Slavery Standard* a versified account of their Boston convention that must have sadly ruffled the feathers of the unco guid. One fire-eating speaker was lampooned as

A terrible denouncer he,
Old Sinai burns unquenchably
Upon his lips; he well might be a
Hot-blazing soul from fierce Judea,
Habakkuk, Ezra, or Hosca.

Another, a Stephen Foster, is
the reviled and pelted Stephen,
The unappeasable Boanerges
To all the churches and the clergies . . .
A kind of maddened John the Baptist.

As for the many who attack the Church,
If any *ism* should arise,
They look on it with constable's eyes,
Tie round its neck a heavy *athe-*
And give it kittens' hydropathy.
This trick with other (useful very) tricks
Is laid to the Babylonian *meretrix*,
But 'twas in vogue before her day
Whenever priesthoods had their way.

The latitudinarian Church suffers in similar hudibrastics; it

makes one gate of Heaven so wide
That the rich orthodox might ride
Through on their camels, while the poor
Squirm through the scant, unyielding door
Which, of the Gospel's straitest size,
Is narrower than bead-needles' eyes.

SOCIAL REFORM received Lowell's zealous, almost religious support. In one poem, "Extreme Unction," he demanded that the reapers go forth into God's ripe

harvest in greater numbers ere night comes. In "Above and Below," he skilfully combined several passages into one speech.

Deus loquitur:

"I gave thee the great gift of life;
Wast thou not called in many ways?
Are not my earth and Heaven at strife?
I gave thee of my seed to sow,
Bringest thou me my hundred-fold?"
Can I look up with face aglow,
And answer, "Father, here is gold"?

Biblical reference served Lowell well in his reviews. Once, in expressing the astounding conviction that the "palmy days of the novel are gone forever," he lamented that printing, by bringing the apple of knowledge within the reach of all, had made reading "a laborious curse akin to that which ensued from the original bite." Combining biblical with classical terms, he remarked of poetry that "the curse of Babel fell not on the muse." In connection with a book on current cultures, he tartly remarked: "Civilization has made wonderful advances since the apostle Philip mounted the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch. It must be remembered, however, that Ethiopians do not keep chariots nowadays."

It was in the *Fable for Critics* (1848) that Lowell first found his pace as employer of biblical allusion. He remarked in the preface that, taking a walk after communion with "mystical Browne's Jacob's-ladder-like brain," he lets the landscape "pour her wine and her oil on the smarts of the mind." In the *Fable* itself a number of contemporary figures are treated. Theodore Parker, having been read out of all established churches, "cared not a d—n for their damming"; he defended himself lustily:

He bangs and bethwacks them,—their
backs he salutes
With the whole tree of knowledge torn
up by the roots. . . .
Every word that he speaks has been fiercely
furnaced
In the blast of a life that has struggled
in earnest.

Whittier, the Quaker militant, amused Lowell by his pugnacity:

Anne haec, one exclaims, on beholding
his knocks,
Vestis filii tui, O leather-clad Fox? . . .

Preaching brotherly love and then driv-
ing it in
To the brain of the tough old Goliath
of sin,
With the smoothest of pebbles from
Castaly's spring
Impressed on his hard moral sense with
a sling.

He declared that readers who did not enjoy Sylvester Judd's *Margaret* (an early realistic novel) justified the biblical prohibition, *porcos ante ne projiciatis margaritas*. He also decried his own tendency to preach in poetry:

His lyre has some chords that would ring
pretty well,
But he'd rather by half make a drum of
the shell,
And rattle away till he's old as Methu-
salem,
At the head of a march to the last new
Jerusalem.

The *Biglow Papers* continued the use of scriptural allusion. Birdfredum Sawin, the gullible recruit, "worn't so wise ez thet air queen o' Sheby"; she had been wise to visit Solomon, who more than fulfilled her expectations, whereas army life was far below the "cruetin' sarjunt's" promises. The Reverend Homer Wilbur ironically recommends that American cannon-balls be wrapped in leaves of the New Testament, "the reading of which is denied those who sit in the darkness of Popery." By such missionary endeavors among the Mexicans, we should become "shooters as well as fishers of men." "I have found," Mr. Wilbur adds in a comment that explains Lowell's anti-slavery technique, "that the Arch-Enemy loves nothing better than to be treated as a religious, moral, and intellectual being . . . and that there is no *apage Sathanas* so potent as ridicule." To the *Boston Post's* irritation at the early *Biglow Papers*, Mr. Wilbur responds in a later number: "It is very clear that my young friend's shot has struck the lintel, for the *Post* is shaken (Amos ix. 1)." Wilbur's ignorance of modern languages, those results of the fall of Babel, saves him from confusion of mind. "For this reason," he adds, "I have ever preferred the study of the dead languages, those primitive forma-

About the Author

As Professor Pritchard points out, literary references to the Bible are not so effective nowadays as they once were because too many readers fail to recognize the allusions. Nevertheless, the "noble English" of the Bible has colored much of our speech and writing; and this study of the telling use which James Russell Lowell made of the Bible makes a very interesting article. Dr. Pritchard, Professor of English, has recently completed the manuscript of a book on the history of American literary criticism, which will be published by the University of Oklahoma Press.



tions being Ararats upon whose silent peaks I sit secure and watch the new deluge without fear, though it rain figures (*simulacra*, semblances) of speech forty days and nights together, as it not uncommonly happens." Hosea Biglow contributes his mite of biblical allusion by asserting that according to the Democrats "Washington's mantelpiece fell upon Polk." Prophetically, Mr. Wilbur remarks: "No ship of state was ever freighted with a more veritable Jonah than this same domestic institution [slavery] of ours . . . Nevertheless, it is the unavoidable fate of Jonahs to be cast overboard sooner or later . . . Perhaps our suspicious passenger is no Jonah after all, being black. For it is well known that a superintending Providence made a kind of sandwich of Ham and his descendants, to be devoured by the Caucasian race." Lowell's effervescing humor weakened the irony of the preceding passage, but not the following excerpt from the pious editor's creed:

I du believe thet I should give
Wut's his'n unto Caesar,
For it's by him I move and live,
Frum him my bread an' cheese air;
I du believe thet all o' me
Doth bear his superscription. . . .
In short, I firmly du believe
In Humbug generally
This heth my faithful shepherd been,
In pasturs sweet heth led me,
An' this'll keep the people green
To feed ez they hev fed me.

Mr. Wilbur's comment is also biblical as well as punning. In a reverie upon the daily newspaper, he suddenly concludes: "The wonder wears off, and to-morrow the sheet (Acts x. 11, 12), in which a vision was let down to me from Heaven, shall be the wrappage to a bar of soap or the platter for a beggar's broken victuals." Seldom has biblical matter better served irony and humor.

The 1850's were years of sorrow for Lowell. He lost his wife and three of his four children, and was depressed also by darkening American politics. His literary output decreased and became more serious in tone, though his normally riotous humor could not even then be fully repressed. We find him adopting Emerson's belief that the canon of Scripture is not closed.

Slowly the Bible of the race is writ,
And not on paper leaves nor leaves of
stone;
Each age, each kindred, adds a verse to it.

The poem is almost a cento of biblical phrases: the broken reed, the twenty-third psalm, the giving of the law from Hor and Sinai, Isaiah's lips touched with the coal from the altar, the wandering in the wilderness, and the giving of manna. Less serious by far was his reaction to Garrison's fulminations in the *Liberator*: he won-

dered whether "Boston has by this time met the fate of Sodom." In commending Holmes for his attack in the *Autocrat* upon bigoted religion, he wrote: "The religious press . . . will be at you, but after smashing one of them you will be able to furnish yourself with a Samson's weapon for the rest of the Philisterei." One reference requires much enlightenment. While spending a vacation at Newport, he wrote to Charles Eliot Norton: "What do I do? Tarry at Jericho chiefly." The cryptic statement seems meaningless until one notes from photographs that Lowell was engaged in growing the beard which after 1854 covered his jaws. The reference concerns an episode in the history of David. Hostile Ammonites had disgraced David's envoys by shaving half the beard of each; and David had ordered them to tarry at Jericho until their beards should be grown.

FOR THE CENTENNIAL of Robert Burns' birth in 1859, Lowell wrote a poem which skirted the bounds of biblical decorum as closely as he ever ventured. Burns's Holy Willie reads indictments which if proved will bar the bard from the pearly gates. The first charge, "makin' strife wi' the water o' life / And preferrin' *aqua vitae*," is dismissed:

Then roared a voice with lusty din,
Like a skipper's when 'tis blowy,
"If *that's* a sin, I'd ne'er got in,
As sure as my name's Noah!"

As to his saying "hard things o' the clergy":

Then rang a clear tone over all,
"One plea for him allow me:
I once heard the call from o'er me, 'Saul,
Why persecutest thou me?'"

The third charge, that he had "yearned O'erwarmly toward the lasses," embarrasses both David and Holy Willie.

Here David sighed; poor Willie's face
Lost all its self-possession:
"I leave this case to God's own grace;
It baffles my discretion!"

The summing up ambiguously gets Burns acquitted of all charges, especially the third, on the ground that he loved much—"that is gospel good / Howe'er the text you handle."

At the beginning of Lincoln's presidency, Lowell was skeptical of the President's capacities. It seemed to him that the ravens had gathered for the carcass of the Union, which Lincoln was too kindly disposed to defend by injuring the South. "The doing good to those that despitefully entreat us was not meant for enemies of the commonwealth. The devil's angels are those that do his work, and for such there is a lake of fire and brimstone prepared." Later, he came to support Lincoln wholeheartedly. Speaking in the person of Mr.

Wilbur, he wrote of much political propaganda: "Whereas Job was left to desire . . . that his adversary had written a book, as perchance misanthropically wishing to indite a review thereof, yet was not Satan allowed so far to tempt him as to send Biddad, Eliphaz, and Zophar each with an unprinted work in his wallet to be submitted to his censure." He deprecates popular strictures on governmental policies: "the Good Book ascribes safety to a multitude, indeed, but not to a mob, of counsellors." He cynically asserts that the negro's rehabilitation requires first his economic independence: "so soon as the Ethiopian goes in his chariot, he will find not only Apostles, but Chief Priests and Scribes and Pharisees willing to ride with him."

Lowell attacked also the pro-slavery propaganda. Birdofredum, now a renegade Yankee, attends a Southern camp-meeting.

Wal, so I went along an' hearn most an
impressive sarmon
About besprinklin' Afriky with fourth-
proof dew o' Harmon. . . .
Ham's seed wuz gin tu us in chairge, an'
shouldn' we be li'ble
In Kingdom Come, ef we kep' back their
priv'lege in the Bible?
The cusses an' the promerses make one
gret chain, an' ef
You snake one link out here, one there,
how much on't ud be lef'? . . .
For why should Caeser git his dues more'n
Juno, Pomp, an' Cuffy?
It's justifyin' Ham to spare a nigger when
he's stuffy. . . .
When Satan sets himself to work to raise
his very bes' muss,
He scatters round onscriptur'l views re-
latin' to Ones'mus.

As the preacher "bellered like all Bashan," conviction in Birdofredum "grewed an' grewed like Jonah's gourd," until he got religion. His neighbors' persuasion no doubt hastened his conversion; as he remarks, "one canter on a rail Makes a man feel unannermous ez Jonah in the whale."

Lowell's post-Civil-War activities produced a number of critical essays as their best fruit. Here, too, biblical comment abounds. Carlyle's hero does not lead mankind like a shepherd; "Mr. Carlyle is for calling down fire from Heaven whenever he cannot readily lay his hand on the match-box." He dismissed the Great American Poet for whom the age was seeking as one of the "sham shaggy, who have tried the trick of Jacob upon us." Petrarch, for all his libertinism, would have flung the first stone at the woman taken in adultery. Rome "produced but one original poet, and that was Horace, who has ever since continued the favorite of men of the world, an apostle to the Gentiles of the mild cynicism of middle age and an after-dinner philoso-

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phy." The fiery impetuosity of Paul and the *nil admirari* of the Roman form a startling collocation.

The letters of this period contain also amusing biblical terms. He was "Marthitized by many small troubles." After selling his fields in Cambridge during the post-war boom in real estate, he wrote: "I have been selling my birthright for a mess of pottage, and I find it so savory that I side with Esau more than ever." In Paris, playing cicerone to Emerson, he took him "to the top of the tower of Notre Dame, and played the part of Satan very well, . . . showing him all the kingdoms of this world." With a contribution to the *Atlantic Monthly* he enclosed a note to his successor as editor, expressing his amusement "that our positions should be reversed, and that you should be sitting in the seat of the scorner where I used to sit." When the publisher Sampson Low sent only twenty pounds royalty on nine thousand copies of his *Among My Books*, he drily remarked: "Sampson has turned Philistine and means to let others do the grinding for him."

One serious reference cannot be omitted. "A man does not receive the statements that 'two and two make four,' and that 'the pure in heart shall see God,' on the same terms. The one can be proved to him with four grains of corn; he can never arrive at a belief in the other till he realize it in the intimate persuasion of his whole being. This is typified in the mystery of the incarnation. The divine reason must forever manifest itself anew in the lives of men, and that as individuals." One cannot avoid the conviction that here the same Lowell whose humorous use of the Scriptures often scandalized the godly admits us to personal, genuine religious experience.

During his years as minister first to Spain and subsequently to England, Lowell's public duties gravely curtailed his literary activity. Looking at his works, he regrets that he has brought in so few poetic sheaves. His natural force is abated; virtue goes out of him whenever he attempts composition; the grasshopper has become a burden. He finds the Parthenon standing in a landscape that is the abomination of desolation. England is the "incarnation of the Kingdom of this World." London is "Babylon the great city." Paris, though he likes it, is a City of the Plain. He is persuaded that "the D—I has been abroad in great wrath, but not because his time is short unhappily." His pub-

lic addresses are "as cold as Saul on Mount Gilboa." Such excerpts from his letters indicate an aging, ailing, disappointed man, who for all his successes temporarily found life vanity and vexation of spirit.

His depression did not, however, smother the sparks of his humor. He is uncertain of his tenure as minister: "Such is the lot of an American Minister—he fleeth away as a shadow and hath no abiding place." He would be "content with a portership in the House of the Lord—not only because it would keep me nearer earth, but because in that office I could slam the door in the faces of bores, critics, and booksellers." He abhorred autograph hunters, "those perverse persons who seek for a sign and to whom no sign shall be given." He bragged to an English friend that a single American mosquito "would have prevented the catastrophe of the Foolish Virgins." The casualness with which such remarks were dropped in letters indicates the facility with which biblical matters came to his mind.

Lowell's sportive use of the Scriptures, one must reiterate, implies no lack of reverence for them. When Mrs. Lowell lay dangerously ill in Madrid, he wrote to a friend: "We took great comfort together in the twenty-third psalm. I am glad I was born long enough ago to have some *superstitions* left. They stand by one somehow, and the back feels that it has a brother behind it." His underlining the word "superstitions" indicated that he meant by it not its usual significance but the belief in something standing over him. In his public life, too, he found resource in the Bible. At Birmingham, in defending the American way before a manufacturing audience unfriendly to his country, he admitted some of the charges brought against his nation; but he added: "The testimony of Balaam should carry some conviction." This seemingly casual remark, which he forbore to amplify, carried the implications of his entire address on "Democracy." Like Balaam, he could not condemn what God had blessed; he could only praise the goodly land that was obviously under God's protection; and he foresaw, proceeding from America as Balaam saw it for Israel, the overthrow of baser forms and principles of life. He was not, however, proclaiming a nationalistic gospel: "Our healing is not in the storm or the whirlwind, it is not in monarchies, or aristocracies, or democracies, but will be revealed by the still small

voice that speaks to the conscience and the heart, prompting us to a wider and wiser humanity."

Though unusually prolific in his biblical allusions, Lowell is a fair sample of the author who competently employs the Bible as part of his materials. The reader who attempts to understand good writing will seldom be at ease in his reading without more than a nodding acquaintance with the Scriptures.

Hal Muldrow, Jr.

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