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 out 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 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 infractions 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 rounded 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 fanaticism? 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 Longellow, 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 had o’ugh’ to put asunder
Then that God has nowains jin.

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 interests, for the most part hastily written, are full of equally apt references.

The Biglow Papers continued the use of scriptural allusion. Birdofredum 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 “cretin’ sarjant’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 apoge 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-

Preaching brotherly love and then driving it in
To the brain of the tough old Goliah of sin,
With the smoothest of pebbles from Castalian’s spring
Impressed on his hard moral sense with a slinging stone.

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 rant away till he’s old as Methusalem,
At the head of a march to the last new Jerusalem.

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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.

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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 “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 that “the Holy Bible has colored much of our speech and writing; and 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.

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tions being Ararats upon whose silent peaks
I sit secure and watch the new deluge with-1.
out fear, though it rain figures (simulacra,
ssemblances) of speech forty days and nights
[together, as it not uncommonly happens].

Hosea Biglow contributes his mite of bib-1.
lical allusion by asserting that according to
the Democrats "Washington's mantelpiece
fell upon Polk." Prophetically, Mr. Wil-1.
bur 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 unavoid-
able 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 efferv-1.
escing humor weakened the irony of the
preceding passage, but not the following
excerpt from the pious editor's creed:

I do believe that I should give
What' s due unto Caesar,
For it's by him I move and live,1
From him my bread an' cheese air;
I do believe that all of me
Doth bear his superscription, . . .
In short, I firmly du believe
In Hambug generally . . .
This heth my faithful shepherd been,
In pasturs sweet heth led me,
An' this'lvll keep the people green
To feed ez theyhev 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 Low-
ell. He lost his wife and three of his four
children, and was depressed also by dark-
ening American politics. His literary out-
put 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 wil-
derness, and the giving of manna. Less
serious by far was his reaction to Garrison's
fulminations in the Liberator: he won-1.
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 smash-
ing one of them you will be able to furnish
yourself with a Samson's weapon for the rest
of the Philistines." One reference re-
mains much enlightenment. While spend-
ing a vacation at Newport, he wrote to
Charles Eliot Norton: "What do I do?1
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 con-
cerns 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.

THE CENTENNIAL of Robert Burns'1
birth in 1859, Lowell wrote a poem
which skirled the bounds of biblical deco-
rum as closely as he ever ventured. Burns' Holy
Willie reads indictments which if
proved will bar the bard from the pearly
gates. The first charge, "makin' stripe wi'
the water o' life / And preferrin' aqua
viva," 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 persecuted 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
capabilities. It seemed to him that the ra-
en's had gathered for the carcass of the
Union, which Lincoln was too kindly dis-
posed 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 whole-
heartedly. Speaking in the person of Mr.
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... 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.
'28
Insurance of all Kinds
Bonds
Security National Bank Bldg.
Norman

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