

# **READINGS FROM GREAT AUTHORS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649447848

Readings from Great Authors by Various

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**VARIOUS**

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TO  
THE GOLDEN MEMORY OF  
THE PROPHET SEERS  
OF ALL THE YEARS  
THIS BOOK IS HUMBLY DEDICATED

## PREFACE

### I

This book had its origin in the religious experience and inquiry of a small group of persons in the Church of the Messiah, New York City.

For several years it has been my practise, at the Sunday morning services of worship, to read scripture passages chosen not merely from the Bible but from the secular literature of ancient and modern times. As I look over my records, I discover that I have read from authors as remote — and pagan! — as Buddha, Lao-Tse, Thucydides and Seneca, and as recent as H. G. Wells, Romain Rolland and Woodrow Wilson; while between these two extremes appear the golden names of the seers and prophets of all the ages past. From such custom, my people have become thoroughly familiar with the idea that the Christian Bible is but a single volume in a vast library of sacred writings. They hold, with James Russell Lowell, that

“Slowly the Bible of the race is writ,  
And not on paper leaves, or leaves of stone.  
Each age, each kindred, adds a verse to it,  
Texts of despair or hope, of joy or moan.  
While rolls the sea, while mists the mountains shroud,  
While thunder's surges burst on cliffs of cloud,  
Still at the prophets' feet the nations sit.”

At these same services at our church, however, minister and congregation have read together each Sunday, “responsive selections” taken exclusively from the Book of Psalms!

It was inevitable that the discrepancy between this practise and the one noted above, should sooner or later become evident to minds alert at once to consistency of faith and the deeper and truer harmonies of worship. If we chose our scripture lessons from a great variety of sources, why should we confine our responses to a single source, however noble? If the whole Bible was inadequate for the use of the pulpit, how



could the single Book of Psalms be adequate for the joint use of pulpit and pew? The Psalms, majestic in style and exalted in thought, are some of them to be numbered among the supreme religious poems of all time. Repeated use of them, however, is monotonous. Furthermore, their content is necessarily beset by the limitations of the time and place which produced them. This is especially conspicuous in their expression of individual as contrasted with social experience. The predominant religious note of our time is that of spiritual fellowship and democracy. More and more are we learning to find the reality of God in the fact of comradeship, and the work of God in the right adjustment of all human relations. But of this the Psalms know practically nothing. Hence the need of an extension of responsive as well as scripture readings; and an application to the one as to the other, of the emancipating doctrine of a universal and perpetual revelation.

Considerations such as these led to the first steps which mark the beginning of this book. As an initial experiment, a few poems were taken from the "Gitanjali" of Sir Rabindranath Tagore — written, by the way, as though for the express purpose of responsive reading — and tested at one of the Sunday morning services. A bolder venture was that of arranging selections from the writings of Robert Louis Stevenson. Encouraging results led to still further undertakings, and finally induced the organization of a committee to prepare a definite collection of readings. Many weeks of happy study and labor have produced this little volume, which is herewith commended not merely to the congregation of a single church, but to the general public.

## II

In looking back upon our work, my associates and I are most acutely conscious of the obstacles which we encountered, and which we have tried as best we could to overcome. We believe, in order that "the quality of mercy" in our critics may not be "strained," that some statement of these difficulties should here be set down. Furthermore, we are hopeful that this book, at the best an experiment, may lead to other undertakings along the same line, and we would give such help to our successors as we can.

The choice of authors was our first problem. Some of those

whom we most desired to include, as for instance, Plato and John Stuart Mill, proved unusable because of a literary style or method ill-adapted to our purpose. Others entirely satisfactory in these respects, were unacceptable because of their spiritual viewpoint, or the doctrinal nature of their teachings. St. Augustine is here an example. The committee was a unit in believing that the readings should be elevated in diction, and so far as possible expressive of the more radical and therefore prophetic aims of religious idealism. Nothing could be admitted which was unsuitable in form, or inconsistent with the spirit of man at its best and highest. Not all of the authors finally agreed upon are acceptable either to myself or to any one of my associates. Each of us, working alone, would have produced a somewhat different list. We are agreed, however, that the readings as a whole are a not unfair expression of our aims.

But we were concerned not merely with authors, but with topics. On the one hand, there were certain subjects, especially those expressive of the social aspects of religion, which we felt must be treated in our readings. On the other hand, we must tolerate no "vain repetitions," for the sake of piling up great names. More than one author was chosen not because of personal fame, but because he presented, in just the way we wanted it presented, some one indispensable theme. So also there were several great authors who were rejected because their words would have served only to duplicate, however nobly, the testimonies of other men already accepted. Ours was the task of preparing simultaneously two lists — authors and subjects — each one of which should be satisfactory quite apart from any relation to the other. The troubles involved are perhaps not unlike those of the man who must fit

"... perfect music unto noble words."

This task completed, other difficulties faced us. The selections from each author must not aggregate more than five or six hundred words, or be divided into more than some thirty or forty separate sentences or paragraphs — facts which made it necessary to exclude, in the case of such authors as Tennyson and Browning, many of the "familiar quotations" from their writings. These selections must set forth, to a high degree of accuracy and adequacy, some part at least of the

author's distinctive contribution to religious thought, and thus do him no injustice. The sentences must be so grouped as to be even in number, and show continuity of thought and mounting elevation of style and sentiment. Unusual words and difficult phrasing must be assigned to the leader and not to the people. The leader must in every case initiate the thought, and the people complete it. In the beginning must be struck the keynote, and at the end the "grand Amen."

That we have conquered such difficulties as these, we cannot claim. We have laboured untiringly, however, and we hope not without some measure of success. One thing we have especially tried to do—and that is to keep faith with the writers whose words we have used. Great freedom in the matter of omissions, rearrangements, punctuation, and the occasional insertion of connectives or substantives (indicated in each case by brackets), was inevitable. Only on these conditions could the work be done at all! But we have made no other alterations or substitutions. The words printed in this book are those written by the authors.

### III

In closing, may I emphasize that the readings are the joint work of those whose names appear upon the title page of this book. Ours has been a co-operative undertaking, and the result constitutes a mutual responsibility.

Thanks are herewith extended to the publishers who have so kindly permitted us to use copyrighted material. Proper acknowledgment has been made in each case in the text.

June 1, 1918.

JOHN HAYNES HOLMES.