

**THE MODERN READER'S BIBLE, A
SERIES OF WORKS FROM THE
SACRED SCRIPTURES PRESENTED
IN MODERN LITERARY FORM:
GENESIS**

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The Modern Reader's Bible, a Series of Works from the Sacred Scriptures Presented in Modern Literary Form: Genesis by Richard G. Moulton

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A SERIES OF WORKS FROM THE SACRED SCRIPTURES PRESENTED
IN MODERN LITERARY FORM

GENESIS

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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INTRODUCTION

THE History of the People of Israel as presented by themselves, — this is the purpose of the present series. It will be understood that this is something different from the History of the People of Israel in another sense of the term: according to which their historical books are subjected to analysis, with a view to harmonising discrepancies, appraising authorities, filling up gaps from independent sources of information, and by a variety of means arriving at the actual facts and their connections. The latter is the function of the historical critic. But to appreciate the history of a great people as they themselves understood it is an interest of universal literature.

It might seem that such a purpose as I have described is easy of attainment; the Bible, with historical books extending from *Genesis* to *Chronicles*, is in the hands of all: they have but to read. To read is easy; but to read with full appreciation is made difficult by certain differences in the form in which books are presented to the eye in ancient and in modern literatures. The differences, it is true, involve no great mystery; they are such as an intelligent reader can correct for himself. But it

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Is also true that such mental checking hampers the faculty of appreciation; books under such circumstances will be read, but not read with a zest. The constant necessity of mentally allowing for difference of literary form makes such reading resemble the use of a microscope with an imperfectly adjusted focus; by thinking it is possible to make out what the blurred picture should be, but the observer's attention wearies, and all the while a turn or two of a wheel would give clear vision. To assist such mental adjustment to the form of biblical literature is the aim of the Modern Reader's Bible.

There are three points in which the historical books of Scripture differ in their outward form from modern histories. One relates to the special matter which, in any elaborate work of history, is used to supplement the main narrative, and which a modern book presents in the form of appendix and notes. Let a reader open a volume of Hallam. He will find on successive pages three lines, eight lines, twenty lines, of text in bold type, and below double columns of closely printed matter, not to speak of an appendix at the end of the chapter. Let the reader imagine such notes and appendix introduced into the text at their proper places, and printed without distinction of type: would any one read such a Hallam who was not compelled? The historical books of the Bible abound in such special matter — genealogies, statistics, documents — and in our Bibles there is nothing to separate them from

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the continuous narrative; in one important section, if my analysis is correct, the supplemental matter is three-fourths of the whole. In the present edition I do not so far break with the ordinary arrangement as to use the form of notes and appendix: I make it a principle in no case to disturb the order of biblical paragraphs. But I have made such distinctions of type as will be impossible to mistake; the reader can, if he is intent on the narrative only, pass over the subsidiary matter, or he can come to it with the required change in the character of his attention, and then resume the narrative without break or confusion.

But the biblical narrative itself is not all of one kind: distinction must be made between narrative that is historic and narrative that is epic. To many the term 'epic' will seem strange in such connection: one reader understands epic as fiction, another associates it with a special branch of poetry, of which Homer and Virgil are types. Such limitations of the word are survivals from the narrowness of early critics, who used the Greek poets as a Procrustean bed to which the variations of other literatures were to be adapted. In its essence epic is narrative which appeals — not, as history, to our sense of information and the connections of things — but to our creative imagination and the emotions associated with poetry. To such an effect matter of historic fact, just as much as purely imaginary incident, may lend itself; it is a question of the mode of presentation. It is true that in Greek and other literatures

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epics are usually found to be in verse. But the great peculiarity of Hebrew among the world languages is the fact that it bases its verse system upon a thing which also belongs to prose — the parallelism of sentences; in such a language prose and verse overlap, and also there is an overlapping between the literary forms which associate themselves with prose and verse. It is therefore only what might be expected when we find that there is no verse narrative in Scripture, but what of epic there is has the outer form of prose. When these misunderstandings are removed, how is it possible to question the epic character of the great episodes which stand out with such distinctness from the surrounding history? To my own thinking there is no more ideal example of epic story anywhere to be found than the account of Joseph and his Brethren, with its varied interest of character, of incident, of picture, and of story movement. Not less ideal is the Story of the Plagues of Egypt: each incident, as it were, hewn out of the rock of historic narrative with a few epic strokes of description, while against the succession of wonders in the background are ever coming out into greater relief the contrasted heroic figures of Pharaoh with the hardening heart and Moses the deliverer, until the antagonism clashes in the final catastrophe. Ideal again, but of a different type of epic, are the strange adventures of David under the persecution of Saul; of yet another type, the long-drawn episode of Absalom's