BIBLE STUDIES: FRANK RUSSELL AND THE "BOOK OF BOOKS"

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Religion was as much a concern for Frank Russell throughout his life as it was for younger brother Bertrand and their father before them. Each advocated its rational study untainted by Christian dogma. The chance discovery of an amusing film review by Frank Russell of the biblical epic *The Dawn of the World* (1921) became the catalyst for an exploration of this theme in the paper that follows, as well as providing the opportunity to explore the foundations of Frank's agnosticism and demonstrate his erudition and wit through the reprinting of his article "The Bible on the Film".

One of the joys of research is the unexpected find; the article or letter you never anticipated that triggers a connection, sparks further study or is simply a delight in itself. Four years delving into Frank Russell's life has provided me with many such moments, proving that, quite apart from his notorious reputation as the "Wicked Earl", he had a diverse output that might suggest alternative epithets shaped either by his scientific interests or keen sense of social injustice. The *TLS* considered the "Conscientious Rebel" might be appropriate.[1] Little did I anticipate until very recently, however, another possibility that suggested itself in a 1921 letter to Bertie in China in which Frank thought to tell him he had written "an amusing article about a film the other day" for *The Nation.*[2] Russell the film critic? Surely not.

[1] *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 1,102 (1 Mar. 1923): 134. A bibliography of Frank's published writings and major speeches will appear in a future issue of *Russell*. My biography of Frank entitled *Bertrand's Brother: the Marriages, Morals and Misdemeanours of Frank, 2nd Earl Russell* is due for publication by Amberley Publishing in spring 2021.

[2] Frank Russell to Bertrand Russell, 29 Apr. 1921, RAI 730.046942.

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Yet there in the British Library newsroom, after a ten-minute tussle with the microfilm reader, was proof positive that for one day at least, Frank had tried a new vocation with an unsolicited article entitled "The Bible on the Film".[3] The article was such a surprise and so much fun (almost to the detriment of rules regarding silence in the newsroom when I first read it) that it was decided to reproduce it here for your reading pleasure. Frank's sense of humour often comes through in his private letters, but only infrequently does one get public confirmation that aside from his better known "hair-shirt" qualities he was, when the mood took him, a genial man of wit and charm who enjoyed a good joke. Perhaps this is why he chose to tell Bertie of the article's publication alongside other amusing goings-on in his absence.

The film concerned was the recently released "stupendous" silent movie *The Dawn of the World*, filmed in Italy over five years, with a cast of 12,000 and a hefty price tag of £1.5 million; reportedly, the most expensive film to date.[4] Its director, Armando Vay, was ultimately responsible for a number of epic biblical productions said to be "built upon scholarly research of biblical sites and archaeological findings".[5] This one covered Adam and Eve to the death of Moses "in a spirit of reverence" and "from the purely historical point of view" and was hailed by the press as "one of the most remarkable [films] ever shown".[6] It premiered in London on Easter Monday, 28 March 1921, at the Palace Theatre, after its speedy transformation from music hall to cinema-with-a-difference over one weekend. Most films were then shown in each single venue for no more than six days. The Palace chose *The Dawn of the World* to introduce the idea of the movie "run", predicting the film would fill seats for a month, if not two. Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the famous stage actress, was engaged for a fee of £200 to appear in person three times a day to read a specially scripted prologue, delivered with "a spiritual fervour in perfect keeping with the subject of the film" which, it was hoped, would draw "the class of

[3] Frank Russell, "The Bible on The Film", *The Nation & The Athenaeum* 29, no. 746 (16 Apr. 1921): 106.

[4] "Never, in the history of the industry, has so much time and money been expended on a single production" (*The Bioscope* 48, no. 772 [28 July 1921]: 59).

[5] Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema* (2007), p. 149.

[6] *Illustrated London News*, 2 Apr. 1921, pp. 8–9; *The Graphic*, 9 Apr. 1921, p. 427.

people who, as a rule, do not frequent cinemas" to see "something that really happened".[7]

Undoubtedly, Frank fell into this category, though the tone of his review does not suggest he came out thinking he had seen something that represented fact. Though he detested music hall, he was not *completely* averse to cinema—third wife Elizabeth's diary reveals he had taken her to "The 'Movies' as he says they're called"[8] once, at least, in happier times—but as he readily admits, he did not have the "true movie spirit" which requires suspension of disbelief, just as he could not tolerate actors discordantly emoting all over the place. No doubt the draw, then, in this instance, had been to see what this brave new medium would make of something ancient for which he had a certain respect; his inner film critic awoken by the largely lamentable result.

Though both Russell brothers were agnostic, to speak of Frank's respect for the Bible is not, I think, exaggerating the fact. In *Lay Sermons* (1902) he advocated taking pleasure in it for its own sake, for its historical interest and "inexhaustible storehouse of beautiful English": "everyone who knows the Bible is aware that instance upon instance could be given of pathos, of dramatic effect, of simple narrative, or magnificent poetry, of stirring imagery such as is to be found in no other one book", he wrote.[9] Such appreciation was fostered at Winchester College, which Frank attended from age fourteen to eighteen, where Divinity was a timetabled class and part of the Classical and English curriculum alongside Greek, Latin, History and Natural Sciences; scriptures being studied in English and Greek. There, also, he was exposed to the purposeful blending of spiritual instruction with social discipline. "Catechism them faithfully and painfully" was the order of a former headmaster still observed in Frank's time, to produce "a race of modest, earnest, noble-minded youths" with a Christian training that would fit them "for the faithful and high principled discharge of any duties to which they may be called in life".[10] The overall effect, said Frank, was "too much" for him to resist and, despite the agnostic influence of his early years, so amply described in Stefan

7 *The Bioscope* 46, no. 775 (31 Mar. 1921): 12; *Daily Herald*, 20 Mar. 1921.

8 Elizabeth, Countess Russell, diary transcript, 27 Feb 1916, ER 102, Elizabeth Mary Russell, Countess Russell Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, ca.

9 Frank Russell, *Lay Sermons* (1902), pp. 194–5.

10 Sermons of Rev. George Moberly (1848), quoted in James Sabben-Clare, *Winchester College after 606 Years, 1382–1988* (1981), p. 83.

Andersson's "Religion in the Russell family",[11] he was confirmed into the church "a firmer and more definite believer than any of those who had been brought up from their earliest youth in the tradition."[12] Winchester, I would suggest—"the only place he loved and the only place where he was loved"[13]—was the decisive factor here. Lady John Russell, Frank believed, had never subjected him to any "definite religious propaganda" prior to his going—certainly nothing that stuck—while Bertrand, left under her influence, at a comparable age had spent "almost all my spare time thinking about Christian dogmas to try and find out if there was any reason to believe them" and had by age eighteen "discarded the last of them".[14]

The "freer air of Oxford where everything was discussed and everything questioned" liberated Frank's thinking such that the Bible became not so much the book of books but a book among books. He named Paine's *Age of Reason* (1794–1807) and Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) as influential in broadening his perspective. His friendship and correspondence with Lionel Johnson was also a factor: "two of young England's rising generation in search of a creed".[15] While Johnson was still at Winchester and Frank at Oxford, the pair spent a fruitful couple of years extracting from Buddha's and Christ's teachings their own set of ethical principles to live by and discarding the "dicta and dogmata", as Johnson put it, that distorted their pure message.[16] By the time Frank left Oxford, it was the "impertinent interference of limited Christians" they held responsible for his sending down. Christianity in action—practically demonstrated at Winchester through its association with the Portsmouth Mission and, for Frank, through his involvement with aunt Maude Stanley's clubs for working girls in London—was to be valued over "the Christian virtue that is

[11] Andersson, "Religion in the Russell Family" (1993).
[12] Frank Russell, *My Life and Adventures* (1923), p. 334.
[13] George Santayana, "Autobiography (Notebook IV): Russell, Lionel Johnson, Jepson, Burke" (n.d.), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia U. Libraries.
[14] *My Life and Adventures*, p. 334; Bertrand Russell interview by Elaine Grand for CBC's Close-Up (1959), available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=tP4FDLegX9s. See also "Greek Exercises" (1888–89), **1** in *Papers* 1.
[15] Letter from Johnson to Frank Russell, 16 Oct. 1883, *Some Winchester Letters of Lionel Johnson* (1919), p. 28.
[16] Letter from Johnson to Frank Russell, 15 May 1885, MS Add. 8548, Department of Manuscripts and U. Archives, Cambridge U. Library.

keen scented after vice" and eager to damn the sinful.[17] It blended with the "sort of Buddhistical, Theosophical, neo-Platonic, Walt-Whitmaniac, Brotherhood of Man cult" at Oxford, and Frank preached it seventeen years later in the first half of *Lay Sermons*.[18]

Without a hint of irony, he sat down to write his sermons while detained at His Majesty's pleasure for breaking the ecclesiastical-based English marriage laws by taking a second wife while his first still lived, blaming the church once again for his inability to divorce her. He had known his Bible "fairly well" before going into prison, he said, but took the opportunity of his incarceration to reacquaint himself with it. The result (with a nod to Bunyan), provocatively addressed from "Holloway Gaol", describes the Bible as a tool—a stimulus for personal development that had the added advantage of familiarity, having "served as a quarry, the stones from which have been incorporated in our literature and daily language till many of them bear the impress of association with our lives."[19] Yet the potential pitfall of familiarity—blind acceptance—was also acknowledged, and Frank encouraged his readers to study the Bible with "an open and appreciative mind", to separate that which was useful as a foundation for a moral code from dogma based on selective reading.[20] This theme he revisited in his 1922 article "The Difficulties of Bishops" (sometimes incorrectly attributed to Bertrand[21]) in which he condemned the picking and choosing of scriptures "to be forced down our throats" and the drip-feeding of "hidebound superstition" in schools and parishes which stood in the way of "reasonable measures of freedom and progress".[22] In the second half of *Lay Sermons*, he criticized the series of copyists within whose sphere the scriptures came, who "moved by ignorance, by a desire to elucidate, or even by actually dishonest motives added to, expanded and altered the story before him" and the "subjective hallucinations" of those who claimed to witness miracles: "The mind that wants to bolster its faith with portents and miraculous happenings

[17] *Ibid.*
[18] "A Glimpse at Lord Russell's 'Past Life'", *Vanity Fair* 46 (12 Dec. 1891): 462–3.
[19] Frank Russell, *Lay Sermons*, p. 193.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 195.
[21] The error is corrected in *B&R* 2: S22.01.
[22] Frank Russell, "The Difficulties of Bishops", *The Rationalist Annual* (1922), p. 31. Frank was honorary associate of the Rationalist Press Association (RPA) from 1927 to his death in 1931 and Bertrand its president 1955–70.

is in a very low stage of development and must shake off this hankering before it can begin to learn to worship God in spirit and in truth."[23] But in suggesting that the Bible might be of value and also something that can be questioned as to authenticity, he struggled to convey the fact that these two ideas are not mutually exclusive. It was common for believers to think agnostics were simply Christians in a crisis of faith. Bertrand was subjected to the same misunderstanding when he advocated Christian love despite determinedly repeating he was not a Christian,[24] and *Lay Sermons* was regarded in some quarters as inconsistent and in others as being the work of a "suppressed theist"[25]! It seems to have been a common Russell fate to attempt to dispel this myth. Amberley's assertion—that "unbelief has nothing in it godless" and "Christian virtues in their purest, their most perfect form may exist apart from the remotest tincture of Christian dogma"—could equally have been written by Bertrand or Frank.[26] It was, they felt, an important message not easily understood. It interested me to read that in the 1940s, on a stay with Julian Huxley in Hampstead, Bertrand and Huxley had spent an evening considering compiling a series of texts from the Old Testament to "illustrate the contradictions in its moral precepts", that Huxley afterwards commented that in modern times it was only the Rationalists who really studied the Bible, and to hear that some twenty years later, in his 95th year, Bertrand was still considering a work on the Bible's contradictions.[27]

In the end, Frank could find no better words to express his views than those of his brother (he quoted from "A Free Man's Worship" in *Mysticism and Logic* at length in the chapter on religion and conduct in his memoirs) unless it be through articles like the one below. His horror at the devices used to make the Bible accessible to the masses

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 173 and 177.

[24] Bertrand Russell, *Auto.*3: 30.

[25] A review by "H.F." for *The Daily News* concluded Frank's beliefs were "in a transition state" and expressed the regret that he had not waited until they were fully formed until publishing ("Earl Russell's Sermons", *Daily News*, London, 28 Nov. 1902, p. 10); the accusation of theism was voiced by essayist and critic Arthur Clutton-Brock in a letter to Frank Russell, 26 Dec. 1919, RA1, box 6.28, 732.080123.

[26] Andersson, "Religion in the Russell Family", p. 135, quoting *The Amberley Papers* (1937), 1: 340–1.

[27] Alan Wood, *Bertrand Russell, the Passionate Sceptic* (1957), p. 203. This last fact communicated to the author by Ken Blackwell, who was tasked with sourcing a concordance for Russell.

as instructive entertainment is palpable; his amusement at the scenes which could not be ignored but were likewise too morally questionable to explain, a delight. Surely the "unfortunate incident" portrayed but not scripted refers to Lot's Daughters.[28] The stills published in the illustrated papers reveal his descriptions of the characters to be spot on.

Frank went on to denounce all religious dogma and oppose the teaching of Christian principles in state schools while retaining close friendships with several clergymen. *The Dawn of the World* showed at the Palace for four weeks and then went on tour in the north of England and Scotland. Mrs. Pat, who had been compelled to accept the opportunity "to make a fool of myself" by an empty engagement book and ill health, broke down again afterwards and was banished to the country to recuperate.[29] In Manchester, the censors initially banned the film after complaints from the Biblical Society that the producers did not always show the Bible in its "best light", only conceding after the offending scenes were cut.[30] Having been deemed such a success, after a year in the fast-moving world of cinema *The Dawn of the World* disappeared without trace,[31] and now barely gets a mention in the annals of cinema history. It resurfaced briefly in the United States in 1929 with added dialogue, a controversy over attempts to use the Ten Commandments in its advertising, and a new title—*After Six Days*. Here, then, we revive it for one last showing through Frank's discerning eyes.

THE BIBLE ON THE FILM

Lord Russell writes us:—

Moved by some rather good notices and by the novelty of the idea, I turned somewhat hesitating steps to the Palace Theatre last night to see the presentation of the "Dawn of the World". After the

[28] Genesis 19: 30–8.
[29] Margot Peters, *Mrs. Pat* (1984), p. 370.
[30] *The Bioscope* 48, no. 779 (15 Sept. 1921): 76.
[31] The re-release is reviewed on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) at www.imdb.com/title/tt0244954/?ref_=nm_knf_il. The advertising controversy was settled by a Supreme Court ruling that the Ten Commandments were already the "exclusive property" of the Famous Players–Lasky Corporation (*The Bioscope* 61, no. 941 [23 Oct. 1924]: 45). A clip of Joseph "registering" emotion is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqTpDRdCVzY.

performance perhaps the most dominating impression left on my mind was how any inducement could be sufficiently large to bring Mrs. Patrick Campbell (who, after all, is an artist, and one that most of us remember with admiration) to take part in the jejune prologues and to sanction by her assistance some of the scenes that follow. Still, the earlier part of the performance was undoubtedly well done on the whole, and would have been interesting but for its exasperations. The Garden of Eden was quite good, although it did not seem to me sufficiently flowery: so was the Serpent: so were Adam and Eve, who were just sufficiently "not ashamed" to pass the Censor. We did not have the flaming sword, although I should have thought this was a trick particularly adapted to the capacities of the Cinema. Cain and Abel were quite good, too: so was the Tower of Babel. Then we had a great deal of Joseph, and the natural irritation of his brethren at his provoking dream was convincing and realistic. Potiphar's wife was all she ought not to be: with the worst Oriental touches. The scenes at Pharaoh's Court were magnificently staged, but entirely failed of their effect because of an extraordinary American Cinema tradition which requires even the most stately personages to walk at seven miles an hour and to waggle their shoulders from side to side like a runner in the last stage of exhaustion at the end of a three-mile race. In spite of the producers, I am convinced that no Pharaoh ever moved in this unseemly manner. Then the "close-ups" of Potiphar's wife, Joseph, and others, "registering" emotion in the approved manner, were very painful and irritating. I am afraid I have not a true movie mind, for I thought the quotations of the Bible's own perfect language the best part of it. Even here one was driven to inarticulate fury at times by mistakes which no third-rate proof-reader would have passed, and it is difficult to understand any London management allowing them upon its screen. We then had Moses and Aaron, the brickmaking, the Red Sea, the Tables of the Law, the Striking of the Rock, and Lot, with one of the more unfortunate incidents illustrated but not described. Incidentally it was rather curious to note that apparently not 10 per cent. of the audience knew what the incident was. Two of the very best effects were the fire and brimstone and the turning of Lot's wife to a pillar of salt.

Well so far, so fairly good: subject to the exasperations and annoyances I have mentioned, one had been able to appreciate the display. But after an interval of ten minutes came the second part, and here

the producers allowed themselves to break loose. Solomon—one at any rate thinks of him as an opulent and dignified figure, but here he was looking like an Arizona cowboy on the prowl; the Shulamite woman a village hussy. We had many scenes of the pursuit and approach, interspersed with the magnificent words of the Song of Solomon, and defaced with "close-ups" "registering" passion. However, the time had come when the American movie spirit could be controlled no longer. It broke all bounds, and after these two had at last met these noble words were flashed up upon the screen: "Where is your house? I'll come to-night—and we'll be happy." I could bear no more. I flung myself out of the theatre, and rocked across Cambridge Circus with such unseemly mirth that I barely escaped arrest by the stolid and respectable police on duty. Well, well, as I said before, I fear I am lacking in the true movie spirit.

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