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Acts 10:34–35—“No Respector of Persons” in American Democracy

In the book of Acts, Peter speaks to the gentile Cornelius, explaining God revealed to him in a vision: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34–35).

In the KJV, the passage is translated: “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”

The phrase “no respecter of persons” from this one Bible verse became ingrained in the English language and was often cited as one of the foundations for American democracy.

In America, the law was expected to be exercised with the same perspective attributed by Peter to God.

James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851): The novelist responsible for *Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer* presents a robust frontier character in one of his works as saying, “The law, gentlemen, is no respecter of persons in a free country. It is one of the greatest blessings that has been handed down to us from our ancestors, that all men are equal in the eye of the law as they are be nater [nature]” (*The Pioneers*, chap. 13).¹

John Stuart Mill (1806–73): The political philosopher argues in favor of women’s rights: “It is held that there should be restraint not required by the

general good, and that the law should be no respecter of persons, but should treat all alike” (*The Subjection of Women*, chap. 1).²

G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936): The British journalist exploits the double meaning the term “respect” can have in English (i.e., “regarding, concerning” or “courtesy, honor”) when he describes what he likes and doesn’t like about America: “Democracy is no respecter of persons. It is no respecter of them, either in the bad and servile or in the good and sympathetic sense” (*What I Saw in America*, “Facts and Opinions”).³

1. David Lyle Jeffreys, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 551.

2. Jeffreys, *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition*, 551.

3. Jeffreys, *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition*, 551.