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# The Book of the Acts of God

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G. Ernest Wright and  
Reginald Fuller



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## THE BOOK OF THE ACTS OF GOD

George Ernest Wright, M.A., PH.D., D.D., is Parkman Professor of Divinity at Harvard. In 1934 he took part in his first Palestine excavation and for the next three years he studied Biblical Archaeology under Professor W. F. Albright at Johns Hopkins University. Since then he has taught theology and has taken part in various international commissions on Bible study. Dr Wright is an active speaker, preacher, and writer, a member of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Archaeological Institute of America, and a Trustee of the American Schools of Oriental Research. His books published in England include an exhaustive illustrated *Biblical Archaeology*, and *Shechem: the Biography of a City*. He has three sons and a daughter.

Reginald Horace Fuller was born at Horsham, Sussex, in 1915. He was a scholar at Peterhouse, Cambridge, and after gaining a Double First he completed his education at Queens Theological College, Birmingham. He was ordained in 1941. From 1946 to 1950, he was lecturer at Queens College, Birmingham, and subsequently became Professor of Theology at St David's College, Lampeter. Since then he has taught in this country and America and has done much writing and translating. Among Dr Fuller's many publications are *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus* (1954), *What is Liturgical Preaching?* (1957), and *Interpreting the Gospel Miracles*. He married in 1942 and now has three daughters.







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G. ERNEST WRIGHT  
AND REGINALD FULLER

宗教

*The Book of the Acts of God*

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MODERN CHRISTIAN  
SCHOLARSHIP INTERPRETS  
THE BIBLE



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## FOREWORD

THIS book was written primarily for laymen. Its purpose is to introduce the Bible to the reader in something of the manner in which two scholars of the contemporary church present it to their students who are preparing for the Christian ministry. To be sure, many technical matters are omitted. The usual biblical introduction must concern itself in a technical way with the history, the text, and the canon of the Old and New Testaments. While these matters are here not ignored, they are nevertheless touched lightly, in order that the space may be used to depict the movement of biblical theology, the thoughts of believing men who sought to understand the ways of God and to proclaim those ways to their fellow men. Each writer treats his subject in an individual way, but on the whole they reflect the tendency of modern biblical scholarship to present the unity of the whole Bible in a somewhat different manner from that of the teachers on whose shoulders they stand.

The book first appeared in America in 1957, and has since been revised for this first British edition.

The Prologue and Parts One and Two were written by G. Ernest Wright. He would here publicly express his gratitude to the Reverend Edward F. Campbell, who has been of great service in the revision of the manuscript after it came from the hands of the typist, and but for whom its publication would have been delayed by the author's archaeological commitments. Some of the material used in Part One was taken from Sunday-school lessons written by the author and his wife and published in *Crossroads* and *The Westminster Teacher*, October-December, 1952 (Copyright 1952 by W. L. Jenkins). It is here used by permission.

Parts Three and Four and the Epilogue were written by Reginald H. Fuller, who here would express his gratitude to his

wife for detecting many typing errors and infelicities of expression.

The authors would advise the person who is thinking of using this book to read it straight through in order to see the sweep of the whole Bible before he begins to study the books of the Bible separately.

There is nothing so vitiating to interesting and productive Bible study as the continual focusing on individual verses or passages without relating them to their context in the work of a particular author, and without relating the author to his time, and both him and his time to the movement of the whole.

The Bible is a 'historical' literature in which God is proclaimed as the chief actor in history who alone gives history its meaning. To study the Bible in such a way as to make abstractions of its spiritual or moral teachings, divorced from the real context of their setting in time, is to turn the Bible into a book of aphorisms, full of nice sayings which the devil himself could believe and never find himself particularly handicapped either by the knowledge of them or by their repetition.

Bible quotations are given in the American R.S.V. (Revised Standard Version) except where otherwise stated.

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*March 21 1960*

*Prologue*

INTRODUCING THE BIBLE

G. ERNEST WRIGHT





## CHAPTER I

# THE BIBLICAL POINT OF VIEW

CHRISTIANITY has always held that the Bible is a very special book unlike any other book in the world. It is the most important of all books because in it, and in it alone, the true God has made himself known to man with clarity. The world is full of sacred literature and it is full of gods. But in the vast confusion the one source which can be relied upon for the truth is the Bible. There we are told about the events which brought the Church into being, and the purpose for its being. There we encounter the answer to the meaning of our own lives and of the history in which we live. There the frightening gulf between our weak, ignorant, and mortal lives and the infinity of power and space in our universe is really bridged. There we discover our duty defined and our God revealed. The many segments of the Christian Church have said all this in a great variety of ways with a variety of emphases; but all have agreed that the Bible has been the fountain from which have come the Church and its faith. It is the common starting point to which we must continually return for guidance and stimulation.

Yet how is a modern man to receive and believe the Bible? When it speaks about the world being created in six days, while the seventh is to be a day of rest because on it God rested from his labours of creation, what does it mean? Was there ever a Garden of Eden, and did a serpent actually speak within it? To many people today the Bible, while possessing beautiful sayings and fine ideas, is nevertheless basically a collection of myths and stories which no one can really take seriously. The American commentator, H. L. Mencken, once wrote:

Christianity, as religions run in the world, is scarcely to be described as belonging to the first rank. It is full of vestiges of the

barbaric cults that entered into it, and some of them are shocking to common sense, as to common decency. . . . It is full of lush and lovely poetry. The Bible is unquestionably the most beautiful book in the world. Allow everything you please for the barbaric history in the Old Testament and the silly Little Bethel theology in the New, and there remains a series of poems so overwhelmingly voluptuous and disarming that no other literature, old or new, can offer a match for it. . . . No other religion is so beautiful in its very substance – none other can show anything to match the great strophes of flaming poetry which enter into every Christian gesture of ceremonial and give an august inner dignity to Christian sacred music. Nor does any other, not even the parent Judaism, rest upon so noble a mythology. The story of Jesus . . . is, indeed, the most lovely story that the human fancy has ever devised, and the fact that large parts of it cannot be accepted as true surely does no violence to its effectiveness, for it is of the very essence of poetry that it is not true: its aim is not to record facts but to conjure up entrancing impossibilities. . . . Moreover, it has the power, like all truly great myths, of throwing off lesser ones, apparently in an endless stream.\*

The typical 'bible' of the world is filled with a great variety of spiritual, moral, and cultic teachings, whence the popular saying 'Confucius say this' or 'Confucius say that'. The Christian Bible has teachings, too, but they are a part of a larger whole – a history of a people that starts with the creation of the world, then passes through Abraham, Moses, David, etc., and ends with Paul and the early Church. Somehow we are supposed to be taught religiously from that story. When the missionary goes to other lands and seeks to convert people to Christianity, he begins with the elements of this Bible story. Small groups of Christians gather in their weekly meetings, studying the Bible, seeking a first knowledge of the great story. Christianity has always taught that in a real history of what once happened in the ancient world God came and revealed himself. Hence the Bible presents factual history, in which is seen the work of the living God. Jesus Christ is thus

\*H. L. Mencken, 'The Poetry of Christianity', *The World's Best* (New York, Dial Press, 1950), pp. 148–50. Originally published in a volume of Mencken's essays by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and used by permission.

a real personage, not simply a beautiful piece of imaginative poetry, because he is related to the work of the sovereign God, who has sent him into history with a mission to perform.

Yet it may well appear to an intelligent critic that I as a Christian want to base my faith on a series of stories a man simply cannot believe any longer. I open the Bible and begin to read, and soon encounter an explanation of the existence of woman as being built out of a rib of a man, about a snake that speaks, about a world in which God and his angels are heard in daily life communicating with various personages and with one another, about waters dividing and people crossing through, about water turning into wine, etc. How is any man to believe these things? Are they anything other than a kind of poetry, beautiful in its essence, crude in its externals? And if one does not believe one part of it, how can he take any of it seriously?

Among the many curious episodes of modern times none is more strange than the so-called 'controversy' over the Dead Sea Scrolls. The first scholarly reports of this remarkable discovery were published in 1948 in journals of the American Schools of Oriental Research, edited by W. F. Albright and the writer. They did not come to popular attention, however, until Mr Edmund Wilson published a lengthy account of the find in the *New Yorker* magazine.\* With that article the 'controversy' may be said to have begun. Of course, as was to be expected, a scholarly debate had been going on for some time regarding the date of the manuscripts, their interpretation and their significance. During the course of this, as with all such debates, a great deal of nonsense was written. Yet on the scholarly level major issues of this sort can gradually be resolved, as they have been in the case of the scrolls by more information and deeper study. The 'controversy' over the scrolls, however, was on a different level. It arose from the suggestion that somehow the new discovery was a threat to the Christian faith, because Jesus and the New Testament writers will now be seen to have a historical background. One

\* The issue for 14 May 1955. Wilson subsequently published his story in book form, *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea* (London and New York, 1955).



will no longer have to make elaborate claims concerning the supernatural character of New Testament events. Jesus can be studied, not as a being of miracle, known only by dogma and divine revelation, but as a human being in history, with a background for his teachings and the interpretation of his mission in the world. In other words, the divinity of Christ can now no longer be believed, he was not let down out of heaven; he is just another of history's great men.

Leading biblical scholars the world over, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, looked on in amazement, not to say amusement, at this rather artificially contrived 'controversy', carried on by those who were little acquainted with modern biblical or theological scholarship. What is so important theologically about the Dead Sea Scrolls? After all, it has always been understood that Christianity arose from a Jewish background. Part of the significance of the Scrolls is that now we can say more in detail about that background. But is the theological understanding of Jesus Christ in any way affected by the discovery of more information about his background? What, after all, is the Bible? Is it simply a series of tales about supernatural doings which only the gullible can accept and then only on 'faith'? Or is it an interpretation of the meaning of earthly happenings at a certain time and place and with a given background of faith and experience? Is revelation a series of dogmas from heaven, or the actions of God which give meaning to history? And if the biblical events that are understood to be the acts of God are seen to be continuous with and interpreted by events that a historian can study on a 'secular level', does this mean that the theological understanding of them is automatically wrong? On earth a meteor is a piece of rock, but does that mean it did not come from the heavens? Behind these queries is the question as to whether the Bible itself has a particular religious point of view that we today do not readily comprehend. What is the relation between fact and faith in the Bible? What are the acts of God? Let us attempt to give a brief answer to these questions.

A. Christianity, historians have said, is a historical religion.