

# THE MODERN USE OF THE BIBLE

BY

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK, D.D.

MORRIS K. JESUP PROFESSOR OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY  
UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, NEW YORK

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To Two Members of the Younger Generation  
ELINOR WHITNEY FOSDICK  
DOROTHY FOSDICK

## THE LYMAN BEECHER LECTURESHIP FOUNDATION

The Lyman Beecher Fund in the School of Religion, Yale University, was established May 2, 1872, by a gift of ten thousand dollars from Henry W. Sage, Esq., then of Brooklyn, New York, in memory of Lyman Beecher, of the Class of 1797, Yale College, who died January 10, 1863. In accordance with the wishes of the donor, this gift was devoted by the Yale Corporation to the establishment of a Foundation "to be designated as 'The Lyman Beecher Lectureship on Preaching,' to be filled from time to time, upon the appointment of the Corporation, by a minister of the Gospel, of any evangelical denomination, who has been markedly successful in the special work of the Christian ministry." With the authorization of the donor, the Corporation, in May, 1882, voted "that henceforth the Lyman Beecher Lecturer shall be invited to lecture on a branch of pastoral theology or any other topic appropriate to the work of the Christian ministry." In December, 1893, the donor authorized the Corporation "if at any time they should deem it desirable to do so, to appoint a layman instead of a minister to deliver the course of lectures on the Lyman Beecher Foundation."

## PREFACE

These lectures have just been delivered on the Lyman Beecher Foundation at Yale University and are now given to the publishers in the hope that, although left in the style of spoken address, they may prove useful beyond the original circle of auditors. Nothing new or startling can be promised to the reader who is well informed in the realm of modern Biblical scholarship. Nevertheless, after ten years of dealing with this subject in the classroom with special reference to the practical problems of Christian preachers and teachers, I hope that some service may be rendered by the systematic statement which I have endeavored to make.

Upon the basis of the approach to the Bible here set forth I have done my preaching from the beginning of my ministry, and for the last decade I have been trying to set forth this approach in orderly fashion in lectures at the Union Theological Seminary. To the many students who have worked with me in the classroom on this course of thought and whose encouraging letters from the pastoral and missionary fields have testified to its practical feasibility and have furnished incentive for this publication, I am profoundly grateful.

A word may be needed about the bibliographies, printed one at the close of each lecture. These lists of books are intended merely to be suggestive of read-

## PREFACE

ing likely to aid the interested student in carrying further the line of thought begun in the lectures. Obviously, they are not exhaustive and could not well have been made so.

It is useless to try adequately to express my sense of indebtedness for help received in the preparation of these lectures. My secretary, Miss Margaret Renton, has given tireless and efficient service. President Arthur Cushman McGiffert and Professor Julius A. Bewer, of the Union Theological Seminary Faculty, have each read portions of the manuscript greatly to my profit. Especially, I owe an unpayable debt to my friend and colleague, Professor James Everett Frame, who has read the entire manuscript and has given me many valuable suggestions.

The position represented in this book will of course be distasteful to those bound by a theory of literal inerrancy in their approach to the Bible. I am hoping, however, that many not so bound but anxious, it may be, over the possible effects of modern scholarship, may be led to see how consonant with a reverent estimate of the Book and an inspiring use of it the new views are.

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

New York, May 3, 1924

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## LECTURE I

### THE NEW APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

#### I

Some of the most lively and perplexing problems that trouble Christian thought to-day center in the subject which we have chosen. Quite apart from the lecturer's amazement and delight at finding a topic with which but one of his forty-odd predecessors on this Foundation has dealt at all,<sup>1</sup> he may claim interest in his theme because around it gather many of our most serious questions and controversies.

To more ministers than one likes to think the use of the Bible is a difficult enigma. Some reveal this by avoiding wide areas of the Scripture altogether. All the king's horses and all the king's men could hardly drag them into dealing with certain passages that used to be the glory of our fathers' preaching. Others make their embarrassment clear by their use of texts—no longer treasuries of truth from which they draw the substance of their message, but convenient pegs on which they hang a collection of their own thoughts. Others reveal their discomfort and confusion when they try to discuss Biblical problems, such as miracles. They are ill at ease in handling

<sup>1</sup> George Adam Smith: *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament*.



these Scriptural categories, reminding one of a comment which Longfellow once made on a preacher: "I could not tell what he was driving at, except that he seemed desirous not to offend the congregation." And still other preachers cut the Gordian knot by practically surrendering the Bible as the inspiration of their thought and teaching, save as by courtesy they use it in some oblique and cursory fashion to point a moral, or adorn a tale.

Of course, such a summary does not include all ministers, but one fears that it applies to a growing percentage. Years ago, here at Yale, Dr. William Newton Clarke made this comment on the preacher's problem with the Book:

"I tell no secret—though perhaps many a man has wished he could keep it a secret—when I say that to the average minister to-day the Bible that lies on his pulpit is more or less an unsolved problem. He is loyal to it, and not for his right hand would he degrade it or do it wrong. He longs to speak with authority on the basis of its teaching, and feels that he ought to be able so to do. He knows that the people need its message in full power and clearness, and cannot bear to think that it is losing influence with them. Yet he is not entirely free to use it. Criticism has altered the book for his use, but just how far he does not know." <sup>1</sup>

Surely, it is worth while to attempt, from the preacher's point of view, a constructive contribution

<sup>1</sup> The Use of the Scriptures in Theology, 161.

in this field. It would be worth while if only a few ministers, laboring under the handicap of the prevalent confusion, were helped to handle the Bible with new zest, freedom, honesty, and power.

Quite apart from the special needs of the preacher, an intelligent understanding of the Bible is indispensable to anybody in the Western world who wishes to think wisely about religion. By no possibility can any one of us be independent of the Bible's influence. Our intellectual heritage is full of its words and phrases, ideas and formulas. Ignorance of it constitutes a hopeless handicap in the endeavor to understand any great Western literature, and as for our English classics, take from them the contribution of the Scriptures and the remainder would resemble a town in Flanders after the big guns were through with it.

No man in the Western world, therefore, can think about religion as though the Bible did not exist. He might as well try to think legally without reference to the Common Law—a psychological impossibility. Even though he never read a law-book, all the pre-suppositions with which he starts, the problems with which he deals, the mental grooves in which his thought inevitably runs, are set in advance by the inherited tradition. If a man wishes to think independently of the Common Law he must first thoroughly know the Law and then deliberately break away from it.

Similarly, in our religious thinking we may agree with the Bible or disagree with it, use its structural ideas sympathetically or hostilely, or even be unaware

that we are using them at all, but in any case we are under duress. One way or another we are thinking with reference to the Biblical tradition. That is inbred in our consciousness and we cannot get rid of it. It will never do, therefore, for us to play ostrich with reference to the problems which the modern use of the Bible presents. We must see them straight or we will see nothing else straight. In the last analysis all the controversies that vex our modern churches come back to this central matter: how are we using the Bible? There is no hope of unsnarling our sadly perplexed religious thinking until we achieve and make popularly effective an intelligent employment of the Scriptures.

When to this basic need which affects everybody's religious thinking in the Western world are added the special problems of the preacher, the necessity of a well-instructed and fruitful use of the Bible becomes overwhelming. For one thing, in most congregations there are folk drilled in the older methods of employing Scripture. They are often the salt of the earth—folk of consistent and effective Christian lives and of reliable devotion to the kingdom. The man who ministers to them must know the Bible. If he disagrees with their way of handling it he must not give the impression of doing so ignorantly or flippantly, without long reflection, sound reason, and conscientious decision. They must feel that he is a thorough, thoughtful, reverent student of the Book. If they are sure of that they will give him large liberty. But if they see that he is using texts for convention's sake and not because he is concerned with the message of

the Bible or has any well-ordered and intelligent view of it as a whole, they will rightly distrust his intellectual integrity. He seems to be trifling, and he is.

Upon the other hand, multitudes of people, so far from being well-stabilized traditionalists, are all at sea in their religious thinking. If ever they were drilled in older uses of the Bible they have rebelled against them. Get back to the nub of their difficulty and you find it in Biblical categories which they no longer believe—miracles, demons, fiat creation, apocalyptic hopes, eternal hell, or ethical conceptions of Jehovah in the Old Testament that shock the modern conscience. Their inherited way of thinking about the Bible has been to them indissoluble from their religion. An artificial adhesion, none the less strong because it is irrational, has been set up between their deepest and most beautiful spiritual experiences on the one side and their accustomed use of Scripture on the other. When the one goes the other threatens to collapse. In many cases it has collapsed.

The man who ministers to them must have an intelligible way of handling the Bible. He must have gone through the searching criticism to which the last few generations have subjected the Scriptures and be able to understand and enter into the negations that have resulted. Not blinking any of the facts, he must have come out with a positive, reasonable, fruitful attitude toward the Book. Only so can he be of service in resolving the doubts of multitudes of folk to-day. If they can see that the Bible is not lost but is the more usable the better it is understood, that the new knowledge has not despoiled it but has set its

spirit free for its largest usefulness, that its basic experiences are separable from its temporary forms of thought, and that in its fundamental principles of life lie the best hopes of the world to-day, they are set at liberty from a great fear that their faith is vain. In the end, like many of us, they may see more in the Scriptures now than ever they saw under the old régime.

At any rate, whether we consider the preacher's private thinking or public ministry, few things are so important as that he should achieve an intelligent and spiritually effective use of the Bible.

## II

The results of the modern study of Scripture can be grouped under two heads, and to one of these we now turn our attention. For the first time in the history of the church, we of this generation are able to arrange the writings of the Bible in approximately chronological order. That statement, like other summaries of human knowledge such as that the earth is round, can be swiftly and simply made, but its involved meanings reach far and deep. The total consequence of all the work of the Higher Criticism is that at last we are able to see the Bible a good deal as a geologist sees the strata of the earth; we can tell when and in what order the deposits were laid down whose accumulated results constitute our Scriptures. Was there ever such an unfortunate label put upon an entirely legitimate procedure as the name "Higher Criticism"? Were one to search the dictionary for

two words suggestive of superciliousness, condescension, and destructiveness, one could hardly find any to surpass these. Yet the Higher Criticism simply asks about the books of the Bible: who wrote them, when and why they were written, and to whom. Every efficient Sunday School teacher, according to his own ability, has always been a Higher Critic. This process, however, armed with our modern instruments of literary, historical, and archeological research, pushed with unremitting zeal and tireless labor, after following many false trails and landing in many cul-de-sacs, has gotten a result, at least in its outlines, well assured. We can arrange the documents of the Bible in their approximately chronological order. Endless minor uncertainties, difficulties, and unanswered questions remain but, for all that, it is possible now for Dr. Harlan Creelman to give us his volume in which the strata of the Old Testament are chronologically distinguished, and for Dr. Julius Bewer to give us his continued story of Hebrew literature from its first emergence to its canonization.<sup>1</sup>

From the purely scientific point of view this is an absorbingly interesting matter, but even more from the standpoint of practical results its importance is difficult to exaggerate. It means that we can trace the great ideas of Scripture in their development from their simple and elementary forms, when they first appear in the earliest writings, until they come to their full maturity in the latest books. Indeed, the

<sup>1</sup> Harlan Creelman: *An Introduction to the Old Testament Chronologically Arranged*; Julius A. Bewer: *The Literature of the Old Testament in its Historical Development*.

general soundness of the critical results is tested by this fact that as one moves up from the earlier writings toward the later he can observe the development of any idea he chooses to select, such as God, man, duty, sin, worship. Plainly we are dealing with ideas that enlarge their scope, deepen their meaning, are played upon by changing circumstance and maturing thought, so that from its lowliest beginning in the earliest writings of the Hebrews any religious or ethical idea of the Bible can now be traced, traveling an often uneven but ascending roadway to its climax in the teaching of Jesus.

That this involves a new approach to the Bible is plain. To be sure, our fathers were not blind to the fact that the New Testament overtops, fulfils, and in part supersedes the Old. They had the Sermon on the Mount and the opening verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews to assure them of that. But our fathers never possessed such concrete and detailed illustration of that idea as we have now. We shall have occasion later to applaud the school of interpretation made notable by Theodore of Mopsuestia and to appreciate great exegetes like Calvin, but even such interpreters never dreamed of arranging the documents of the Bible in chronological order and then tracing through them the development of those faiths and ethical ideals that come to their flower in the New Testament. Rather, they lacked both the historical apparatus that could have made this possible and the idea of development which interprets everything in terms of its early origin and gradual growth. In consequence, the older interpreters of the Bible consistently tended to read

the meanings of the New Testament back into the Old, to level up the Old Testament toward the New, until there was nothing in the New Testament which could not by direct statement, by type, symbol, or allegory, be found in the Old.

To us it would seem obvious that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity arose after the church had begun to meditate on the significance of Jesus. But our fathers found the doctrine of the Trinity all through the Old Testament. Luther found it in the opening chapter of Genesis: "Let us make";<sup>1</sup> he found it in Psalm 67:

"God, even our own God, will bless us.  
God will bless us."<sup>2</sup>

Calvin, a superb exegete, had to rebuke those ancient fathers who, as he thought, had carried this process much too far. They had based argument for the Trinity upon the story that at the sacred oak of Mamre Abraham had bowed once when greeting three heavenly visitors and so had recognized one God in three persons.<sup>3</sup>

This leveling up of the Old Testament by reading into it the message of the New is most familiar to us through the deeply ingrained habit of finding definite references to Jesus throughout the older record.

<sup>1</sup> Commentary on Genesis, Ch. I, verse 26a, in translation by J. N. Lenker, Vol. I, 109.

<sup>2</sup> Dictata super Psalterium 1513-1516 Glossa: Psalmus LXVI (LXVII) lines 20-23, 40-41, in Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Weimar, Vol. 3, 383.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin: Commentary on Genesis, Ch. XVIII, Sec. 2, last ¶, in translation by John King, Vol. I, 470.



Luther said that Genesis contained more figures of Christ and his kingdom than any other book in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The book of Proverbs would hardly suggest itself to us as likely to yield rich doctrinal material, but probably few passages in Scripture have been more consistently used as proof of the divine nature of Jesus than the eighth chapter of Proverbs. In a word, the Bible has not been conceived as a record of developing ideas and ideals, but as a repository of truth in which from beginning to end could be found everything that New Testament Christians believed. From Genesis to Revelation it has been supposed to speak with unanimous voice the theology of the early church. In this respect Athanasius is typical of the general method of ancient interpretation. "Athanasius saw no development of truth through the ages of biblical history," says Gilbert, "and no differences of doctrinal type. All parts of the Bible were equally good, in his judgment, as sources of proof-texts."<sup>2</sup>

If one supposes that the Reformation changed this general view and use of Scripture, he can readily disabuse himself by reading the commentaries and books of apologetics. Indeed, one wishes that one were not dealing with such typical material when he quotes from Pfeiffer, a Lutheran superintendent of the sixteenth century. According to him Genesis "must be received strictly"; "it contains all knowledge

<sup>1</sup> In *Genesin Declamationes*, closing ¶, in Weimar edition quoted above, Vol. 24, 710.

<sup>2</sup> George Holley Gilbert: *Interpretation of the Bible; A Short History*, 121.