

*How  
To Read The  
Bible*

By  
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To  
WILLIAM LINCOLN HONNOLD  
*Wise Counselor*  
and  
*Generous Friend*

## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

For Hebrew history and law I have made much use of the published work of my friend Dr. Robert H. Pfeiffer, of Harvard University. I gratefully make acknowledgment also to the authors and publishers who have permitted the quotation of passages from their copyrighted publications:

*The Complete Bible: An American Translation*, edited by J. M. Powis Smith and Edgar J. Goodspeed. Published, 1935. All quotations from this book are reprinted by permission of The University of Chicago Press.

"Word Makers" in *No Traveller Returns*, by Joseph Auslander. 1933. Published by Harper & Brothers.

## P R E F A C E

The Bible is rich in literary, historical, and religious treasures, which many of us fail to find for want of a little direction in the search for them. We find ourselves dismayed at the sheer bulk of the Bible, for one thing—eleven hundred pages of double-column fine print. Its books are, moreover, of a perplexing range and variety, and the most familiar and interesting do not stand at the beginning.

It is this state of things that deters so many modern readers from attempting the Bible. They respect it and want to know it, but they are disinclined to plow through seven hundred and fifty pages before they get to the part that really interests them most. There must be a better way to get acquainted with the great library which we call the Bible and to find out its principal riches and values.

Let us then undertake a literary and historical approach to it, taking up the chief books in it as biography, oratory, history, poetry, drama, fiction, letters, and visions, in the light of the times that produced them and the purposes of their writers, thus combining literary and historical interests, always remembering that important as they undoubtedly are for literature and history, their religious messages must be kept uppermost, since it was chiefly to promote that side of life that they were written.

Many readers who have looked upon the Bible as a huge book too antique and portentous to interest them may, we hope, come to see it as a rich and varied library, to find their way

about among its masterpieces and feel at home among them, and to make friends with the prophets who so largely wrote it, and, above all, with its last great Hero, who called his followers his friends.

This book is intended not as a summary of the Bible or as a substitute for it but as a companion and guide to the reading of it. It does not attempt to epitomize its contents but to help the reader to find its chief treasures for himself.

**W**hatever other uses men may wish to make of the Bible,  
our first and paramount duty is to **READ IT.**

—Richard Green Moulton.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Where to Begin*

THE OBVIOUS way to read a book is to begin at the beginning and read it through; to look at the end to see how it is coming out is weakness.

But the Bible is not a book; it is a library. How do you read a library? Certainly not by taking the catalog and reading first the first book listed in it, then the second, and so on. Nor do you read it shelf by shelf, beginning at the upper left-hand corner. You follow some definite interest of yours, or you decide upon some principle to guide your reading.

The Bible has all the range and variety of a library. It was written on two continents, in three languages, by a hundred authors, scattered over a thousand years. Not only Egypt and Babylon, Palestine and Syria, but Greece and Rome witnessed its origins. Its various parts reflect widely different levels of morals and civilization.

Its very name declares it is a library, for it is just a modern form of the Greek word *Biblia*, which meant "papyrus scrolls," the prevalent book-form or antiquity. In the early days of Christianity, men had not learned how to assemble all of the Old Testament, or even all of Homer into one book. As they knew the Bible, it took forty or fifty scrolls to accommodate

its eighty books. It was in fact as well as in name a library—*The Books*, par excellence.

As these sixty-six or, with the Apocrypha, eighty books are bound today, the New Testament stands at the end of the Bible, but it is the end from which most of us approach it. We begin with the New Testament. We hear about the Golden Rule, the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, and the Sermon on the Mount long before we become interested in Adam and Eve, Noah and Abraham, or Joseph and his brethren. Nor do the kings and prophets of Israel ever equal in their interest and value to us the figures of Jesus and his chief apostles.

The teachings of the Old Testament, too, lofty as many of them are, do not come home to our consciences as those of Jesus do, and the problems that concerned the prophets never fit into our religious experiences as do those dealt with in the Four Gospels or the letters of Paul. The world of Jesus is much closer to our own than that of the ancient Hebrews can possibly be, no matter how hard we try to understand it and sympathize with it.

And the Gospels speak a much plainer language, both of fact and of symbol, than do the prophets or even the Psalms. The Twenty-third Psalm is indeed dear to the hearts of mankind, but hardly dearer than the fourteenth chapter of John. Generally speaking, few of the parables call for much explanation for us, while few of the sayings of the prophets do not.

Above all, the New Testament as a whole meets us on a far higher moral and religious level than the Old. It calls us upward to the plane on which we ought to live, and want to live. It offers us a great religious experience of faith, hope, and

love, and it makes it irresistibly attractive, as the Old Testament, with all its arts of rhetoric, never did.

So it is right to approach the Bible by way of the New Testament. But how shall we approach the New Testament? Shall we begin with Matthew because it stands first, at the portal?

No, let us begin with the Gospel of Mark. Not because it is older by a few years than Matthew's, nor because Matthew repeats almost all of it in his, but because it is the most narrative of the Gospels; it most vividly tells a story. And what a story! The great tragedy; heroic tragedy at its best and greatest, all the more so because it is not just the elaborate fancy of some gifted artist, Shakespeare or Dante, but the unvarnished truth told as Mark had been told it by those who had seen the action it records. Told in the ancient religious vocabulary of demon and marvel, it is still in its main outlines convincing and moving beyond any other narrative ever written. Told by a man who was not shaping his information to some pattern of his own, or guided by any rules of literary art, but humbly seeking to suggest something too great for him to fathom, and beyond his powers to create or to control, and writing to preserve from his memories of the reports of eyewitnesses already dead, it is a story too great to be allowed to perish. Indeed, Mark is less a gospel than the materials out of which more studied and finished gospels were later written, by men who realized the use that could be made of it for ends they clearly saw.

## THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Let us begin the reading of the Bible with the Gospel of Mark, and let us read it not piecemeal, as if it were very diffi-

cult; the Gospels are as a matter of fact very easy reading, full of interest and action. Among the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, those of the Gospels are much more numerous than those of any other part or of the whole, and even today the Gospels are sold and read in much greater numbers than any other parts of the Bible. If we ask, "How is the Gospel of Mark to be read?" the answer is, "At one sitting," as any close-packed, swiftly moving story should be read. It can easily be read aloud in an hour and a half, and to oneself in half that time.

Mark consists in the main of a number of apparently detached incidents, in each of which Jesus does or says something of great significance. The attentive reader will observe that the shadow of the cross falls across the pages almost from the beginning, and that Jesus soon perceives his danger and three times retreats before it. But at length he turns upon his foes and critics, prepares to face them at their great festival and in their stronghold, and sets out for Jerusalem, to make one great decisive effort to win his people to his gospel, and take the consequences. Let us read this incomparable story through, for once at least, at a single sitting, and hear what it has to say.

## THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

The Gospel of Mark had been in circulation only ten or a dozen years when it was expanded into a larger book, the Gospel of Matthew. It repeated almost every line of Mark, but so filled in the picture with Jesus' sayings and teachings that he now appeared not so much as a Doer or Man of Action, but as a Teacher. In fact, the main literary feature of Matthew is a series of six sermons in which it casts the teaching of Jesus.

The first of these is the Sermon on the Mount, the most striking and comprehensive statement of Christian ethics ever made. Here are found the Beatitudes, the Golden Rule, the Lord's Prayer. Matthew saw in Jesus' teaching the program for a new order in human society, a new relationship among men, which he called the Kingdom of Heaven. The sermon fills chs. 5; 6; and 7.

The teaching is resumed in ch. 10, with instructions about how to preach the gospel. The third sermon, ch. 13, is a collection of parables, that is, figures or stories, on the growth of the Kingdom. Chapter 18 tells of humility and forgiveness, and ch. 23 denounces the hypocrisies of Pharisaic religion, but ends with the touching lament over Jerusalem:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! murdering the prophets, and stoning those who are sent to her, how often I have longed to gather your children around me, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you refused! Now I leave you to yourselves. For I tell you, you will never see me again until you say, 'Blessed be he who comes in the Lord's name!'"

The final discourse, chs. 24 and 25, foretells the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. Chapter 25 consists of three parables—the Bridesmaids, the Talents, and the Last Judgment. In this final parable the moral teaching of Matthew reaches its climax with the words, "In so far as you failed to do it for one of these people who are humblest, you failed to do it for me."

The curtain falls on the Gospel of Matthew with Jesus reunited with his disciples as a spiritual presence, to remain with them to the very end. He had preached to the Jews alone, but they are to carry his message to foreign lands. Certainly the Gospel of Matthew is a much more consciously

and purposefully organized book than that of Mark. Renan, the French historian, said it was the most important book in the world.

Read the Gospel of Matthew for its striking picture of the teaching of Jesus, set against the background of contemporary Pharisaic teaching, in the six great discourses, chs. 5 to 7; 10; 13; 18; 23; and 24-25.

## THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Luke, like Matthew, includes a genealogy of Jesus, and tells of his infancy and something of his youth. From his story of the angels and the shepherds he has been called the "Man Who Gave Us Christmas." What we call his Gospel was really the first volume of his two-volume work on the beginnings of Christianity, The Acts being the second volume, and presents Jesus as the Founder of a new religion, Christianity. Luke's historical interest led him to give us one definite date, in the usual Greek fashion, by the regnal year of the Roman emperor. It was the date of the call of John the Baptist to preach, in the fifteenth year of Tiberius or A.D. 29 (Luke 3:1). To him we also owe our introduction to Christian psalmody, for he it was who preserved for us the canticles on the Nativity, chs. 1 and 2. Besides these historical and literary interests, Luke evinces also a keen humanitarian concern, for it is he who records the Parable of the Good Samaritan, called by modern philanthropists the most characteristically Christian of the parables. The Prodigal Son and the Rich Man and Lazarus are other parables that we owe to Luke. Like Matthew, Luke made copious use of the Gospel of Mark; in fact, he followed Mark's order very closely, but

his Gospel is very different from Matthew's, with less concern about the religion of the Pharisees and more interest in the social, humanitarian, and universal aspects of Jesus' teaching. When he wrote, Christianity had already passed out of Jewish hands and was making great progress among the Greeks who were widely scattered through the Roman Empire. Luke was less a biographer than a historian, for his purpose was the larger one of showing how from the life and work of Jesus had sprung a new religion that promised to win the world. We shall think of him again in this broader aspect when we consider the later histories in the Bible. For Luke was the first historian of Christianity and the founder of church history. But the first volume of his history was so complete in itself that when the Four Gospels were collected and published about A.D. 115-120, it was brought into the collection as one of them.

## THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The latest of the Four Gospels in date is the Gospel of John. It reflects two generations of Christian reflection and experience. Jesus had proved to be far more than the Messiah of Jewish expectation; through the storm and stress of persecution, Christians had found in him a great spiritual reinforcement, indeed a new religious life altogether. Christianity was a new birth, and the Christian found himself transported to a new world. Instead of the brutal pagan scene about him, full of darkness, hatred, death, ignorance, and bondage, he lived in a realm of light, love, life, truth, knowledge, and freedom. It was indeed a new climate that he now enjoyed, one that he had not supposed existed in the world. And he

## *How to Read the Bible*

had reached it through Jesus. It was Jesus who had revealed it, and embodied it, and given his life to communicate it to mankind. So Jesus was a Savior. He was the Bread of Life and the Light of the World. It is this splendid consciousness of what Jesus had come to mean to human life that John reads back into his earthly ministry, and in the light of the Christian centuries, we cannot call it an exaggeration. John said that Jesus' Spirit would lead his followers on to greater deeds than he had done and would guide them into fuller and fuller knowledge of the truth, startling statements which time has strangely fulfilled. The Spirit of Truth would guide them into the full truth. "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32.) With all this great concern for light, knowledge, truth, and freedom, John is deeply concerned for the Christian's personal inner life, and his communion with the overshadowing, all-pervasive spirit of God, that "conversation with the universe," which is so much the largest part of every conscious existence. That is to be his great source of strength and comfort, his constant reinforcement. God loves the world, and forgives it; he does not hate it. Jesus hails his followers as his friends, not his slaves, and welcomes them to a new order of friendship and love.

Read the Gospel of John for its picture of what the Christian gospel meant to Greek believers all over the Roman world; for its recognition of Jesus as the embodiment of the highest Wisdom of God and at the same time the guide and helper of the individual human spirit.

We must begin the Bible with the Gospels, for the rest of it must be read from no lower point of view. Possessed with the moral and religious ideas of the Gospels, humility, forgiveness, aspiration, purity of heart, faith, and good will



## *Where to Begin*

to all mankind, one can read the darkest pages of the Old Testament or the Apocrypha with tolerance and understanding. We can look down with compassion upon the harshness and cruelty that men of old times permitted themselves in the name of God, for we have seen a nobler and better way. We can recognize the struggle toward truth and justice and goodness they were so slowly making. At the same time we will find in their long, bitter, and bloody conflict many a word and deed that will speak powerfully to our own religious experience and moral needs.