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The Bible as Problem and Answer

THROUGHOUT the centuries, innumerable members of the Christian and Jewish churches have found in the Bible the answer to their needs. They say that God speaks through this book and that it has been to them the Word of God. Readings from a daily lectionary, texts from a scripture calendar, a verse that appears when the book is opened at random, have changed and directed their lives. Many would say with Fr. Charles de Foucauld that in the immense treasury of scripture every soul has a verse or some verses which God has inspired for that one specially.

But the Bible has also been a problem. Our libraries are filled with the products of seemingly endless arguments about text and date and authorship, as well as the wider problems of authority and interpretation. Men have fought bitterly over the Bible and still do, and we are tempted to wonder whether the Bible is an answer only to the blessedly ignorant, while to the learned it is a burden and a problem.

The Bible is both problem and answer. When men become learned in the scriptures they know them as a problem, but they need not thereby cease to know them as an answer. If the Bible ceases to be for them the Word of God it is not because of their learning but despite it or for some other reason. To struggle with the problems of the Bible should enrich our understanding of the way in which it is the Word of God, and if we are not prepared to struggle, but wish to make it a magic book to produce answers that we have not worked for, God will deal with us in judgement. Sir Edwyn Hoskyns spoke of sitting down with a lexicon and rising up amid the glory of God. From those who know how to sit down with a lexicon, God is likely to exact that price for the illumination of his glory.

Yet to the learned as to the simple, God's word in scripture will always be mysterious and unpredictable. Helmut Gollwitzer, the theologian at Bonn, is not unskilled in the scriptures, but in his diary from a Russian prison camp he tells how, removed from his books and from the atmosphere of learning, simple Bible texts spoke to him as directly as they do to an old peasant woman. The Word of God is not bound by our ignorance, such is His condescension. It is not even bound by our learning, such is His power.

The following four articles about problems connected with the Holy Scriptures were read at the annual meeting of the Canadian Theological Society, May 14-15, 1958, at Wycliffe College, Toronto. The fifth article is the Presidential Address delivered by Professor George B. Caird to the Canadian Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, May 13, 1958, in Wycliffe College. We trust that these articles are sufficiently learned and hope that they will not impede but rather aid the hearing of the Word.

D.M.M.