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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

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# Behind the Study Door

Various Aspects of the Minister's Reading and Research

## ON BIBLE READING

BY CANON J. E. FISON, M.A.

**A** GENERALISATION like the following will invite criticism. But for what it is worth, I give it as an impression gradually formed in my mind as a result of personal experience. The Conservative Evangelical knows and is at home in the historical books of the Old Testament and the Pauline Epistles. The Liberal Evangelical knows about (though he often does not know) the Old Testament Prophets and selections from the Synoptic Gospels. The Catholic knows the Psalms and the Epistle to the Hebrews and St. John's Gospel: that is, if he is an Evangelical Catholic and not set in a rigidly ecclesiastical mould. Certainly I think it is no exaggeration to say that the creative work of the last hundred years on the Prophets and the Synoptic Gospels has been the work almost exclusively of the enlightened, though not necessarily 'Liberal,' Protestant Evangelicals. Catholicism in its freer aspects is now supplementing their work. But the failure of both extremes of Evangelical and Catholic Christianity to break through the defensive entanglements of Fundamentalism has been a tragedy only equalled by the headlong abandonment of the Supernatural by the Liberals.

The correction to all this one-sidedness and apparent frustration of effort is neither to abandon the distinctive revelation of the Holy Scriptures in favour of a general and genial tolerance nor to make bigoted and unexamined claims for the uniqueness of the biblical revelation. The need of the moment is to read the Bible biblically, as the Dominicans urge, and to read it as a whole and to read it in the context of its true setting as a Church Book intended for Church Worship. It is important to realise that it is not primarily intended for personal and private devotion, but for reading and exposition in church at public worship. The convergence of biblical and liturgical studies is one of the most fascinating aspects of contemporary scholarship, and if the Bible does not recover its pre-eminent position in church it will never retain its claim to be a best-seller for private reading.

Having made this claim for the place of the Bible in public worship (and it is a most important claim), let us proceed to examine the ways in which we may most profitably approach it for individual personal Bible study. And instead of a general list of numerous books, I intend to give a personal testimony of at least one individual Christian's line of approach. First of all, we need to know the Bible and what it says as it stands. This means reading the Bible itself, rather than books about it, and it means reading the Bible as a whole, rather than little portions and tit-bits out of it. To do this we need a system: the simpler the better: and I suggest a chapter a day straight through

—and including Leviticus! We need a Revised Version of the Old Testament and an Authorised Version of the New Testament, as our basic text book, and as comment upon it we need Moffatt's New Translation of the Bible, Young's Concordance, and the Revised Version marginal references. Dr. Graham Scroggie's Scripture Union notes and a Schofield Reference Bible (which is by no means infallible) will also be a great help. We should stick to one Bible and mark it. And this should prove a most exciting two years' study.

And after this study comes the great and decisive question for so many. Either they repeat this same study year in and year out with slight variations, and the danger then will be that in their Bible study they will remain childish and immature. Or they abandon the study of the Book for the study of books about the Book and eventually so easily lose all that essential childlike dependence upon the living God which should be the hall mark of the Christian and the Bible-lover. Childishness or adult sophistication seem the equally disastrous alternatives. Is there no "more excellent way"? I think there is: neither childish, nor adult, but childlike and growing and increasingly mature.

To begin with the Old Testament, the best point of departure on the new adventure seems to me to be the great work of George Adam Smith. Read his two volumes on the Minor Prophets, entitled *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, and then read his two volumes on Isaiah. If this is not the opening up of a new world to many readers, I for one shall be very surprised. The prophets should be read chronologically, *i.e.*, the first volume of George Adam Smith's *Book of the Twelve Prophets* (Amos, Hosea, Micah) should be read first; then the first volume of Isaiah; and so on. Dr. Wheeler Robinson's three little books on *The Cross of Jeremiah*, *The Cross of Job* and *The Cross of the Servant* will supplement George Adam Smith, and W. F. Lofthouse's commentary upon Ezekiel, *The Prophet of Reconstruction*, will pave the way for adventures into the post-exilic period, where L. E. Browne's simple little *From Babylon to Bethlehem*, and larger and more complicated *Early Judaism* can be supplemented by Edwyn Bevan's *Jerusalem under the High Priests* to provide a background for the Minor Prophets and the Hagiographa. Devotionally, R. W. Dale's article on Jonah in the *Expositor* of July, 1892, will save many headaches over "the whale" and open up fascinating parallels with Pilgrim's Progress, and Walter Luthi's *The Church to Come* will illuminate the lurid darkness of Daniel.

This is only a beginning, but having done it, some of the real significance and eternal relevance of the Biblical Prophetic Revelation from Amos till the close of the O.T. Canon will dawn on almost any seriously minded Bible student. The next step will be to tackle the earlier history and the Books of the Law. Two books on the history are invaluable: Martin Buber's *Moses* and Garstang's *Joshua-Judges*. Neither is fundamentalist, though Garstang is sometimes so interpreted by those who do not really study his work. Neither is rationalist. Buber's work is handicapped by a cumbersome Germanic style, but is thrilling and re-establishes the Mosaic story both for critical history and simple devotion. And it is the divorce of these two aspects of any historical

revelation that has proved disastrous to so much modern biblical study: the alternatives being usually presented as either arid adult intellectualism or a sugary childish sentimentalism.

By the time the student has come to grips with a scheme of study such as that outlined above, he will be ready to go deeper into the works of N. S. Snaith and H. H. Rowley and other contemporary moderns and will need no further advice on his reading. He will realise the boundless and life-long vistas of adventure that await him even if he never moves a single step outside the Old Testament. But if he is wise, he will continually broaden his basis of operations as well as deepen the particular fields of study that are his own especial fascination. It may be that others will find, like the writer, that the route of special interest will move from the Old Testament and especially the Prophets to the Pauline Epistles, and so to the Synoptic Gospels and so eventually, he hopes, to St. John. There seems to be a rough and ready progression in both Old and New Testaments, whereby we start in each with a conception of the Reality of Religion and the Supernatural as the abnormal and move forward to an understanding of it as ethical and so to a final mysticism, which in St. John and Deutero-Isaiah may be described as the climax of the N.T. and O.T. revelations. There can be no by-passing of the ethical into the mystical. That has always been the danger of Catholic mysticism and Evangelical pietism. There should be no arrested development at the ethical stage, though this is where much Protestantism seems at the moment to be so pathetically stuck.

Perhaps before passing on to the New Testament a special note might be made of two of the most fascinating, but perhaps least noticed, insights of modern scholarship into the relevance of the Old Testament today. The first is the continued revising of the Law for over a thousand years in the name of the original lawgiver, Moses, and with the sanction of the God who revealed Himself to him. As long as this revision was fearlessly undertaken, the religion of Israel lived. When it became possible only to make marginal glosses on a static revelation, the way to the Crucifixion was sure. When all possible theological mud has been thrown at J, E, D and P, this stands clear and relevant to our contemporary attempts at Prayer Book and Canon Law Revision. Secondly, there is the revelation of true Catholicity in the Church of post-exilic Judaism. Within the Canon we have Esther and Jonah; Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon; Proverbs and Daniel; Leviticus and Job. Over-hasty excommunication will not find easy sanction in such a variety of churchmanship. Yet when the proportion goes wrong, the result is as fatal with arsenic as with Esther. It was (and is) the Church that crucified the Christ.

When we turn to the New Testament, Pentateuchal criticism gives way to the Synoptic problem, and who knows how to quote the Fourth Gospel with both critical and devotional assurance and certainty? The problems are vast. But the rediscovery of the New Testament understanding of the Kingdom of God is *the* supreme thrill of both liturgical and biblical scholarship in the 20th century. No one can fail to read either Gregory Dix on *The Shape of the Liturgy* or T. W. Manson and C. H. Dodd on the New Testament evidence

without something approaching awe and fascination. It is as if God had raised up, in 'the nick of time,' just the teachers we need, as we face the contemporary world and the need for evangelisation and the contemporary church and the need for reunion.

The days when a wedge could be driven in between Jesus and Paul are gone. But we need to be on our guard lest an interpretation of the Gospel (however biblical) replace that Gospel itself. It is now clear that all history involves interpretation, and this is true of the Synoptic Gospels as well as of St. John. But the corollary is not always drawn that no interpretation is more than an interpretation of the essential biblical revelation of the meeting between God and His people and the individual soul. With this warning let us approach the Pauline and Johannine interpretations of the Gospel and read C. H. Dodd's commentaries on Romans and the Johannine Epistles in the Moffatt series. To back these refreshing modern interpretations let us dip into Karl Barth's commentary on Romans and also his slighter book on I Corinthians, called *The Resurrection of the Dead*. And then let us read Armitage Robinson's exposition of the Epistle to the Ephesians, which is part of his commentary on that Epistle, and also R. Law's commentary on I John, entitled *The Tests of Life*.

With this introduction to the main creative interpretations of the Gospel, it is good to turn back to the Gospels themselves. And the best way to begin to come to grips with the living and eternal message they contain might well be to read C. H. Dodd's little book on *The Parables of the Kingdom*, not straight through but as a commentary upon the Parables of our Lord to which it refers. Then I should turn to what strikes me as the best piece of biblical exposition in our day that I have yet come across—T. W. Manson's exegesis of the Teaching of Jesus, to be found in the second part of the large volume, *The Mission and Message of Jesus*, by Major, Manson and Wright. To supplement this (or perhaps in preparation for it) read C. H. Turner's commentary upon St. Mark in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture* (ed. Gore, Goudge and Guillaume), and if possible use a Synopsis of the first three Gospels in parallel columns—the best is of the Greek text by Huck.

There is also a fascinating series of studies of each of the Synoptic Gospels entitled *Jesus as They Saw Him*, and commentaries on St. Luke and the Acts by J. A. Findlay. No one can read his account of Sosthenes, 'beaten up' by the Greeks 'on general principles,' without a whoop of joy, not at the misfortunes of the individual concerned but at the living and contemporary vitality of such an illuminating commentary. And by the time a Bible student has dug as deeply as this into the New Testament, he will need no prodding to remember that he has hardly begun yet! There is the Epistle to the Hebrews (A. B. Davidson will introduce it!), and St. James (C. J. Cadoux's little book is good), and the Revelation (both Anderson Scott and E. F. Scott have written simply about this enigmatical book); and then there is I Peter—and Selwyn's commentary carries us back into the spacious days of an almost forgotten age as we read it, and we think of the massive Anglican commentaries of Westcott, Lightfoot and Moule.

Finally, there is St. John. This remains critically the most restless

of all the books of the New Testament, and devotionally it is the most peaceful. At no point is the fatal divorce between criticism and devotion easier to make and at no point has it such an obvious and specious appeal. Yet this divorce reduced Evangelical Anglican scholarship to stagnation for over a generation, and the results in a devotional sugary pietism replacing the true salty tang of the Gospel are plain for all to see. Either we must worship the Lord our God with our whole being, intellect, emotion and will, or we cannot for long worship Him at all. Let us, then, despite all difficulties, tackle the Fourth Gospel. Temple's *Readings* will start us off, and Hoskyn's great commentary will urge us on, and E. F. Scott's pioneering venture, *The Fourth Gospel*, will be perhaps best of all, but it is strong meat and not everyone will be able to digest it. Perhaps before long C. H. Dodd will have written the commentary we are still waiting for on St. John, and if T. W. Manson would complete his studies so as to include all the contents of the first three Gospels, then indeed there would be time to give thanks for that splendid and fascinating rediscovery of the faith and life and worship of the Early Church, which we owe to contemporary biblical and liturgical scholarship.

"These are great days, great in opportunity, great in opposition, glorious in triumph," Bishop Linton wrote home from Persia about 1930. His words may be echoed as we survey the Bible and realise how wonderfully we are being led to a rediscovery of the Gospel as adequate to our needs of to-day as it ever was to the needs of the first century Christians. But there is no short cut. It is no good trying to speak with authority unless you know the authorities. But there is all the difference in the world between speaking from authorities (even biblical ones) and speaking with authority. It is not merely good advice that the world needs, but Good News: and it must be spoken with authority, not merely from authorities. "We through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." We might have it. Have we got it? And can we pass it on?

## THE STUDY OF CHURCH HISTORY

BY J. P. HICKINBOTHAM, M.A.

GIBBON in the *Decline and Fall* distinguishes between the theologian who "may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from heaven arrayed in her native purity" and the historian whose "more melancholy duty" it is to describe "the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings."<sup>1</sup> Bishop Lightfoot, on the other hand, affirms that "History is an excellent cordial for the drooping courage."<sup>2</sup> The difference of verdict is, perhaps due to differing degrees of spiritual insight. Church history is the story of how the Gospel of Redemption has in fact been applied to the world of men and women. Because they are men and

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Sykes, *The Study of Ecclesiastical History*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Smyth, *The Genius of the Church of England*, p. 23.