

# THE PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

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## THE REFORMATION AND NATURAL LAW.\*

The world of to-day is filled with the conflict about the modern understanding of the Gospel. The decision in this conflict cannot be reached merely through Biblical studies and the investigation of primitive Christianity; there is need also of a thorough acquaintance with the development of the evangelical Church and of the evangelical spirit, as well as with their influence upon the formation of the modern world. In this respect, however, evangelical theology must be pronounced positively backward. The Protestant scholar, who is at home in Babylonia and Assyria, in primitive Christianity, and in the first three centuries, is in Germany no less than in England and America often without a moderately adequate survey of the general development of his own Church. How fragmentary is the exposition in the general Church histories, how narrow and one-sided in the histories of doctrine. How many fields have still received very little cultivation, for example, non-German Protestantism, the great movement of the "Enlightenment" and of Rationalism, Christian life, Protestantism and culture, and the like. In view of this defect, Ernst Tröltsch deserves gratitude on account of the very fact that he has even undertaken such a work as the comparatively full presentation of "Protestant Christianity and the Modern Church", which he

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\* Translated by J. Gresham Machen, B.D. The article will appear in German in the *Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie*, edited by Schlatter and Lütgert.

in the work of Jesus only. The unique character of primitive Christian ethics, which reckons not with relative conceptions, but with such absolute conceptions as forgiveness, justification, regeneration, sanctification, finds its explanation in nothing else but the absolute character of Jesus' Messianic work as an accomplished fact not only to the minds of those who preached such things, but also to their historical experience. Finally, the unanimity with which in early Christian teaching the Messiahship of Jesus is based on his Sonship, whereas in the abstract other derivations were possible, bears conclusive testimony to the reality of the rôle played by Sonship and Messiahship and their intimate union in the life and teaching of Jesus.

*Princeton.*

GEERHARDUS VOS.

INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE. A SHORT HISTORY. By GEORGE HOLLEY GILBERT, Ph.D., D.D., Author of *The Student's Life of Jesus*, *The Revelation of Jesus*, *The Student's Life of Paul*, *A History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age*, etc. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1908. Pp. viii, 309. \$1.25 net.

"This book surveys a great but neglected field"—the opening sentence of the preface is sufficient to gain a careful hearing for the exposition that follows. Surely the interpretation of the Bible has involved enough of human effort and exercised enough influence upon human life to be well worthy of the historian. Yet a good brief survey of the whole field has been conspicuously absent.

Gilbert possesses many of the qualifications necessary for filling the place so surprisingly left vacant by modern scholarship. His reading has evidently been very extensive; he has planned the work well, giving just enough detail to be convincing and forcible without causing the larger development of the history to be lost from view; his style is at times brilliant and always admirably clear. The result is a very instructive and thoroughly readable book.

On the other hand, Gilbert approaches his subject-matter with certain very strong convictions as to the requirements to which exegesis should conform, and unless the reader shares these convictions he will be apt to regard some of Gilbert's judgments as rather one-sided.

In the first place, in order to win our historian's approval, an interpretation must find as little dogma in the Bible as possible and display as little interest as possible for the dogma that unfortunately is there. Thus on page 144 (footnote) it is urged apparently as a reproach against the commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on Philippians that it devotes "about one-fifth of the entire space" to the christological passage, Phil. ii. 5-11, "which passage amounts to only one-thirteenth of the Epistle". Comparing Meyer, we find that one of the leading exponents of the modern grammatico-historical method exhibits almost the same preference for dogma by devoting over one-seventh of his space to that same passage. It should not be regarded as injudicious to devote the chief attention to passages that are at the same time most

important and most difficult. Again, Luther is taken to task for preferring "the Gospel in the semi-dogmatic form in which it appears in Paul's Epistles rather than in the simple, un-theological words of Jesus", but it may be questioned whether this may be classed among his many errors. We venture to think that not even among the words of Jesus could he have found better weapons against the legalism of the Roman Church than were afforded by the "charter of Christian liberty". Gilbert's criticism depends upon the view that Galatians and Romans are not, as they were to Luther, "the purest Gospel", but "a human *interpretation* of the Gospel". Such separation between the words of Jesus and the other revelation recorded in the New Testament is one of the greatest obstacles now standing in the way of a well-rounded development of the life of the Church. Furthermore, dogma can be removed from the words of Jesus only by a conspicuous exercise of dogmatic exegesis. The undogmatic Jesus may be required by the exigencies of the modern Church, but can be evolved from the Gospels only by an exegesis that depends as fully upon a preconceived idea as did the exegesis of the fourth century.

In the second place, Gilbert exhibits a partiality for those interpretations that break most completely with the exegesis of the first three Christian centuries. That the interpreter should see with his own eyes may certainly be conceded. The only question is whether a substantial agreement with Nicene exegesis is always a sign of bad eyes.

In the third place, Gilbert gives that interpretation the preference which abandons most completely the old doctrine of inspiration. Here again the question is a question of fact. If the Bible is merely a human book, Gilbert is right—to regard it as divine, like all other errors, will have an injurious effect upon exegesis. Perhaps, however, the history of exegesis teaches that the injury is less serious than Gilbert supposes. At any rate, it is useless to say "Peace" when there is no peace, as Gilbert does when he says (p. 273): "The Bible has been humanized, given its place among the religious literatures of the world, and thereby its divine character is being for the first time truly appreciated." Exactly how its divine character is being more truly appreciated through its humanization than it was when men regarded it as a direct message from God, Gilbert does not say. Even if modern science required us to abandon or modify our view of the Bible, it could not prevent us from recognizing the value of the old view. The authoritative Bible has been and is to-day the very foundation of popular Christianity. With it, Christianity is striving with new vigor to win the world for Christ; the Christianity that does without it has never exhibited the power to become anything more than a religion of the few. If we really have to abandon the Bible, we should at least not conceal our loss by sentimental phrases, but should address ourselves with all our might to the task of finding a real substitute for what is gone.

Of course, the three criteria just mentioned are not the only ones that Gilbert uses in estimating the progress of exegesis—far more prominent than all of them is the criterion afforded by the degree and

manner of application of the historical method in general. Here, of course, no objection can be made; the development of historical exegesis is not least among the achievements of modern science. Only, the historical method is not the only requisite for successful exegesis; it may even become a hindrance rather than a help if it causes the interpreter to evade the great "Thou art the man" of the Bible. After all, the Bible is a religious book, and a religious book must be studied in the light of religious experience. Without the religious sense and the consciousness of one's own personal need, all the historical and grammatical study in the world will never penetrate beyond the shell, and the possession of such a sense will sometimes lend an enduring value to interpretations that are wofully defective from the point of view of modern scholarship. The facts of universal human experience are just as truly part of the "setting" of the Bible, just as necessary for its comprehension, as are the facts of Jewish history. Gilbert has recognized this principle (see especially the tribute to the spiritual insight of some of the rabbis and to the commentary of Bengel), but the recognition has not been general enough or hearty enough.

The last chapter, which discusses "the scientific era of Biblical interpretation", is disappointing. A good survey of nineteenth century exegesis (in the narrower sense) is greatly needed, but Gilbert has merely added one more to the many reviews of the progress of modern Biblical study in general. The chapter is animated by an overflowing enthusiasm, which hardly seems justified by the facts of our rather prosaic age. "At the close of the eighteenth century", says Gilbert (p. 260), "the science of Biblical interpretation had reached the foothills of the 'promised land', but no one saw or could see the heights that rose in majesty just ahead. The progress of the past three centuries—yes, of the past thirteen—was to be more than duplicated before the nineteenth century should have given way to the twentieth. A simple enumeration of the discoveries affecting Scripture interpretation, and of the changes in the dominant conceptions of the Bible, which were to come in the next hundred years, would have seemed to the men of that day stranger than fiction, and by the great majority even of thinking people would doubtless have been regarded as heralding the final and irremediable collapse of true religion." Nevertheless, the fact remains that the new conceptions of the Bible have as yet given rise to no religious movement that can, for a moment, be compared with the great movements of the past, and if they have not yet brought about "the final and irremediable collapse of true religion", perhaps that is because they are not so completely "dominant" as some men suppose. Gilbert himself confesses that the "partial and imperfect dawn of a new era of interpretation is as yet seen and felt by only a few in the wide Church of God". So perhaps we are still pretty much in the same position as Gilbert's eighteenth-century observer. The new view of the Bible may produce a greater and stronger Christianity in the future; it has not done so as yet.

What Gilbert means by a "disenthralled Bible" (p. 292) is essentially a Bible from which we have been disenthralled.

*Princeton.*

J. GRESHAM MACHEN.

ΠΡΟΣ ΡΩΜΑΙΟΥΣ. DIE EPISTEL PAULI AN DIE RÖMER, verdeutscht und erläutert von G. RICHTER, Pfarrer in Gollantsch. Gütersloh. Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann. 1907. Pp. 90.

The aim of this little book seems to be somewhat similar to that of the commentaries of Rudolf Niemann on the same epistle (see *PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL REVIEW*, Vol. VI, p. 144). The author seeks to awaken interest in the Epistle to the Romans outside the circle of the trained theologians or even of advanced students in any department. The commentary is arranged throughout in two columns, of which the former is devoted to details of exegesis, the second to an exposition of the general progress of the thought. An acquaintance with the Greek text is presupposed. The effort to attain brevity and simplicity has perhaps been carried almost to an extreme, but the book will no doubt prove useful in the place that it is intended to fill.

*Princeton.*

J. GRESHAM MACHEN.

The Baird Lecture for 1907. THE FOUR GOSPELS IN THE EARLIEST CHURCH HISTORY. By THOMAS NICOL, D.D., Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism in the University of Aberdeen. William Blackwood & Sons: Edinburgh and London. 1908. Pp. xxii, 326.

Dr. Nicol believes that the "first line of defense" of the credibility of Gospel history "must always be the external evidence". It is important that this evidence should be set forth from time to time in popular form, and in the light of recent discussion; and it is fortunate that the work has been done this time by a careful and thoroughly competent scholar. Those who have studied the masters, "Westcott and Lightfoot, Sanday and Stanton", will be upon familiar ground, but will read with enjoyment and profit this fresh presentation of the evidence. Dr. Nicol adopts the method of Salmon and Zahn and begins with the literature at the close of the second century, and works back toward the Apostolic age. This he does first for the fourfold collection and then for each Gospel separately. He makes the point (alluding to Harnack's work on Luke) that where the internal evidence, as examined by modern scholarship, is conclusive, it confirms the traditional authorship. He believes it to be a reasonable conclusion that the Four Gospels "were written by the Evangelists whose names they bear." A bibliography of some one hundred titles and an index add to the usefulness of the volume.

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