

University of Northern Iowa

Interpretation of the Bible and the Progress of Christian Civilization

Author(s): George Holley Gilbert

Source: *The North American Review*, Vol. 193, No. 665 (Apr., 1911), pp. 551-560

Published by: [University of Northern Iowa](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25106910>

Accessed: 02/07/2013 01:38

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Northern Iowa is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The North American Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE AND THE PROGRESS OF CHRISTIAN CIVILIZATION

BY GEORGE HOLLEY GILBERT

THERE may be nothing in our celebration of the tercentenary of the King James translation of the Bible as picturesque as that which is said to have taken place in Alexandria in the first century when the Jews, festively arrayed, went forth in long processions to the island of Pharos, and there with songs and addresses commemorated the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek tongue; but the present anniversary, unlike that of long ago, will be remembered throughout all lands, wherever the English language is used.

The current interest in that event of 1611 is due in large measure to the fact that the Bible, within the past half-century, has come to have fresh vitality and charm through the application of scientific principles of interpretation. The occasion, therefore, is a suitable one on which to consider in the broadest manner the question of the relation between the interpretation of the Bible and the progress of Christian civilization.

The theme has a dark side as well as a light one. Interpretation of the Bible has crippled and retarded, as certainly as it has promoted, Christian civilization. If it has made the Bible to be wings to the human spirit, it has also made it into gyves and fetters. It has put truth on the scaffold and wrong on the throne no less truly than it has honored truth and promoted righteousness.

In the first place, interpretation of the Bible has crippled and retarded the progress of civilization when it has declared itself to be final and unchangeable. Whenever one generation or age has bequeathed to another an absolute trust in a particular interpretation of the Bible, or, in other words, when it has handed down as authoritative and neces-

sary certain doctrines which it claims to be adequate statements of the truth of Scripture, it has in so far done to succeeding times two evils: it has perpetuated through them its own imperfect vision of truth, and it has effectually kept them from any quickening contact with the original utterances of revelation. It is sufficient to give one illustration of this baleful influence of interpretation.

In the second, third, and fourth centuries there was developed in the Church, under the influence of a considerable number of eminent writers, a system of orthodox theology. During the same period Christianity became the dominant factor in the crumbling empire of Rome. It became a highly organized and, toward the last, a firmly centralized institution. The system of theology and the institution were vitally related, and the power of the institution upheld and the system essentially unchanged for a thousand years.

Now this system of doctrine was believed to be biblical, to rest at every point on unquestionable evidence of Scripture. Hence as time passed this supposed interpretation of the oracles of God gained increasing authority. Throughout the entire Middle Age there was no fresh and original interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, as far as the practical belief of men was concerned, the word of Scripture was a negligible quantity by the side of the doctrine of the Church. The Fathers eclipsed the prophets and apostles. For hundreds of years, from Procopius of Gaza to Aquinas, the only work corresponding to our exegetical literature consisted exclusively of quotations from the Fathers. The consummation of this species of interpretation was *The Golden Chain* of St. Thomas. The springs of the Bible were sealed. Only so much of its teaching was accessible as had been apprehended by the Fathers, and even this was mixed with numerous and important elements from pagan philosophy.

Now even if the Fathers had been model interpreters, if they had known Hebrew and had possessed the historical spirit, if they had held tenable views of the origin of the Bible and had appreciated the development of doctrine which it contains, nevertheless it would have been disastrous for subsequent generations to have looked back to their interpretation as an authoritative and inspired standard. This would have been intellectual slavery, and it would also have been the renunciation of direct fellowship with the inner spirit of the Scriptures. But the Fathers were *not* model

interpreters. They were children of their respective ages, and those ages, say from Justin Martyr to Augustine, were not favorable to the development of safe interpreters. And it is true not only that the Fathers were not model interpreters—which, of course, ought not to be expected of them—but also that from the standpoint of the present they were totally unreliable interpreters. Hence the dominance of their interpretation from the fifth to the fifteenth century, though by no means the sole cause of the intellectual and spiritual stagnation of the Middle Age, was most certainly *one* cause of that stagnation.

Again, interpretation of the Bible has crippled and retarded the progress of civilization by maintaining that one part of the Bible is as true as another. This has been the working theory of all interpreters who have regarded the Bible as supernaturally inspired. In what specific ways this has worked against the progress of man might be shown at great length, for it has seemed to give divine sanction to a thousand social and political abuses, but two or three instances will suffice for the present purpose. In the first place, the position that the entire Bible is homogeneous and all parts equally true has perpetuated the imperfect ethics and in some cases the un-Christian institutions of the Old Testament. The Israelitish invasion of Palestine with its attendant slaughter or enslavement of its inhabitants has given encouragement to many an atrocious crime against humanity. The Deuteronomic law of divorce, which probably regulated an evil in its day, was cited in the time of Jesus in support of a most lax view of the marriage relation, and now, after nineteen centuries of Christian history, our own divorce customs and legislation are decidedly nearer the Deuteronomic and Old Testament standard than they are to the standard of the New Testament. The existence of slavery in ancient Israel was appealed to by clergymen both in the South and in the North in the days before our Civil War in support of the institution on American soil. The spirit of narrow religious exclusiveness which characterized the attitude of the Jewish people toward the Gentiles—a spirit that left the great mass of humanity out of God's covenant of mercy and favor—has through a false interpretation been perpetuated in the Christian Church, and here and there, especially in past centuries, has characterized the Church's attitude toward the heathen world.

But this survival of the imperfections of Old Testament ethics, far-reaching and disastrous as it has been to the cause of human progress, is by no means the chief evil which has come from the false principle of interpretation, that one part of the Bible is as true as another. The greatest loss to humanity is of another and quite different sort. If all parts of the Bible are equally divine, then the words of Jesus have no pre-eminence, and the example of Jesus reveals no other spirit than that which filled all the worthies from Adam down. He whose fulfilment of the old made the old practically obsolete is brought down to the level of the oldest of that old.

Consider the monstrous spectacle of an Athanasius elaborating a doctrine of the person of Christ, not out of Christ's own self-revealing words, but out of the eighth chapter of the ancient book of Proverbs! Or consider what it has meant to have successive generations of men nourished in the belief that Christ is everywhere manifest in the Old Testament, that every word of it was mediated through Him, that He was the author of Psalms whose spirit is to the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount as human hate is to divine love! Under the false principle of which we speak His light has been persistently blended with relative darkness; His uniqueness has been bracketed with the commonplace; His example has been reduced to the level of His disciples, yea, to the level of the most ordinary Old Testament saint-hood.

The motive power in the apostolic age was a sense of the personality of Jesus, of His love, His confidence in God, His assurance of the divine presence. This power might and should have characterized every subsequent age. It was the great and singular boon offered to men through Jesus. But this gift has been only very imperfectly realized since the early days, and this failure must be ascribed largely to the age-long supremacy of the doctrine that one part of the Bible is as true and as good as another. This has done much to rob human progress of the strongest and purest stimulus which it has ever felt. It has dealt a paralyzing blow to the influence of Jesus.

We will notice briefly yet another feature of this aspect of our subject. Interpretation of the Bible has crippled and retarded human progress by the assumption that the Bible was intended to furnish a comprehensive standard for

human thought, a standard of knowledge regarding the works of God as well as the will of God. The tragic facts that have flowed from this fatal assumption have come to be recognized in recent years as constituting a heavy indictment of the intelligence and the spirit of the Church. They are too well known to demand more than a passing notice here. It would probably be safe to say that the ecclesiastical interpretation of the first ten chapters of Genesis has, through its hostility to science and its final complete overthrow by science, contributed more than any other single cause of the last fifty years to the loss of prestige on the part of the Church. That interpretation brought to the stake or cast into dungeons some of the foremost men of science of all the centuries; but this evil and loss, though great, was immeasurably less than the consequent undermining of confidence in the Church and respect for its teaching. The Church is paying heavily for its "gift" of interpretation, once vainly supposed to be infallible. It is coming to see the momentous peril to the cause of human progress which lies in the venerable but false assumption that the Bible furnishes a comprehensive standard, historical and scientific no less than ethical.

But enough has been said to indicate how the interpretation of the Bible has blocked the wheels of human progress. There is, however, another and more pleasing aspect of the relation of interpretation to the progress of civilization. By far the greatest service of the interpretation of the Bible to the cause of human progress is doubtless yet to be seen, perhaps in a very remote future, but the past has not been barren of such service, neither is the present barren. Let us fix our attention on three critical chapters in this yet unwritten history. And first on one in the distant past.

Jesus stood in a manifold quickening relationship to human progress, but the Church in defining His services has never taken notice of what He did as an interpreter of the Jewish Scriptures. Yet this was one of His fundamental services to the progress of civilization. He was born at a time when His people were intellectually enslaved by a supposedly divine interpretation of their Scriptures. For Himself and for His disciples He broke the sway of that interpretation. He gave a new, emancipating, enlarging interpretation of the ancient writings. This interpretation

was broadly rational and in a true sense historical. It recognized in the Old Testament a lower and a higher. It set aside certain elements as obsolete, it presented others as of abiding significance for the kingdom of truth. It rescued the Old Testament from the abyss where it lay buried under an all-powerful oral tradition, and brought it forth for a far larger mission than it had fulfilled in the past. Jesus gave an example of interpretation by the side of which history has set no parallel. Had He been studied as an interpreter, the Church might have been saved from all its radically false and harmful conceptions of the Old Testament revelation. It could not have made the Old Testament a *Christian* book; it could not have found its centre of gravity in predictions of the future; it could not have made Genesis an authority on Natural Science.

It may seem, in view of these statements, as though the service which Jesus rendered to the cause of civilization by His interpretation of the Old Testament was, after all, only a "might have been." But this was not the case. For Jesus Himself and His work would have been impossible had He not interpreted the Old Testament as He did, had He not recognized its defects, had He not appreciated its supreme aim, had He not discovered in it true nourishment for His pure spirit. Through His own personal achievement, therefore, if as yet in no other way, His interpretation of the Old Testament stands, I think, in a most intimate relation to Christian civilization.

A second service rendered by the interpretation of the Bible to the cause of human progress was that of the sixteenth century. Again, as in the time of Jesus, the sway of an ancient tradition was to be broken, and this was done by the reformers. As Jesus had rescued the Old Testament from beneath the oppressive mass of the oral law, so Luther and Calvin, with others who shared their spirit, rescued the Bible from beneath the canons and decrees and theology of the Church. But the parallel between their act and His must not be carried too far. It was their mission to lead a part of the Church back to the fountains of Scripture rather than to bring forth the waters of those fountains in their purity. Their service to the progress of civilization in connection with the Bible was that they uncovered it, and awakened a thirst for it. They thrust it anew as leaven into the society of their day. But of this new

feeling for the Bible, this exaltation of its teaching above councils and popes, though it was indeed significant for the progress of Christian civilization, we shall not speak, for we are concerned exclusively with the *interpretation* of the Bible. Now in this field the service of the reformers was negative rather than positive, but still, though negative, it was of great and abiding importance. This service, most consistently and conspicuously rendered by Calvin, was the rejection of the allegorical method of interpretation, which had wrought havoc with the sense of Scripture since the days of Origen. Luther denounced this method in his usual vigorous fashion, but never escaped from its fascination. The cold, logical, legally trained intellect of the Genevan reformer first gave an interpretation of Scripture free from the poison of the ancient Alexandrian leaven—would that it had been free also from bondage to the theology of the early Church!—and Calvin's interpretation became the most widely accepted standard throughout Protestant Europe.

This was a great deliverance, how great no one of the present day can begin to realize who has not read the old allegorical explanation of Scripture. If that method of interpretation had remained in force down to our time, and if we could suppose that, in spite of the continuance of this method of handling the Bible, the modern development of science would have taken place as it has, then there can be no doubt that the Bible would occupy to-day very much the same position as fell to it in the Middle Age. It would have little direct influence on the actual life of the age. A book which could be construed to mean whatever the fancy of the interpreter wished to deduce out of it would surely have slight power in the modern world.

The interpretation of the reformers had radical faults, and to some of these the inefficiency of the Church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was in no small degree due; but the claim here first put forward on their behalf is that they rendered a very direct and extensive service to human progress in breaking the spell of one of the most fatal errors that ever stood between the Bible and the accomplishment of its mission in the world.

It remains to speak, in conclusion, of a third critical event in the relation of the interpretation of the Bible to the progress of civilization. This is the rise and development of historical criticism, the scientific counterpart of the emanci-

pating act of Jesus as an interpreter of the Jewish Scriptures. One may say that it is yet too early to speak of the service of this new method of interpretation to the cause of civilization, and that is of course true as regards a comprehensive and final estimate; but it is not too early to see that the relation of this historical method of interpretation to human progress is one of vital significance.

It is doubtless conceivable that, just as the principles of interpretation involved in Jesus' use of the Old Testament have been, as principles, fruitless down to the present age, so the scientific method of interpretation may yet, through the exaggerations of radicals, the reaction of the conservative masses of the Church universal, the encyclicals of popes, or through the unknown influence of the conversion of great nations like China and India, be set aside for indefinite periods and be replaced by the Origenistic method, or by another equally wide of the truth. But such a fate would no more alter the facts of the present period with its absolutely unparalleled appreciation and influence of the Bible than the medieval forgetfulness of the earthly life of Jesus destroyed that life's eternal significance for the progress of man.

Whatever may be the relation of the historical criticism of the Bible to human civilization a thousand years hence, or ten thousand, it is now at the beginning of this twentieth century a relation full of vitality and instinct with hope. The services it has rendered and is rendering are enormous. It has not only saved the Bible in the day of the revelations of science, but it has justified the Bible's existence and mission to many of the foremost representatives of science itself. This will surely be held to be a distinguished service to human progress by all who believe that religion is a factor in this progress. Again, the modern method of interpretation is serving the cause of civilization by uncovering, as was never done before, the motives and ideals of that literature which of all the literatures of history is far the deepest, purest, and most inspiring. It is pouring into the channels of civilization, as from a newly discovered fountain of life, the waters that have power over the spiritual nature of man. It has made the Bible, even in this age of science, a greater magnet than it was in the days of Luther, when books were few, when life was simpler and more unsophisticated, and when it was first set forth in the language of the masses.

If then the old stories of Genesis, if the visions of the prophets, if the word of the Master, if the letters of the apostles, really stand in any helpful relation to human progress, if they have an unwasting message and an indestructible stimulus for that which is highest in man, the lover of progress will also be a lover of the historical criticism of the Bible.

Nor is this all. The historical method of interpretation is serving the cause of human progress on a magnificent scale through its influence on those men and women and books that are bringing the Bible message into contact with the great unevangelized nations. No doubt there are many missionaries who know nothing of Graf and Wellhausen, of Baur and Strauss, of Colenso and W. R. Smith and a score of others distinguished in the history of the critical method, but there are few who have not been at least indirectly instructed by these men and whose views of the Bible have not been changed by the development of historical criticism. The interpretation of the Bible which is being promulgated in India and China and Japan is not that of Origen or Luther or Calvin, neither is it that of the extreme critics of our own day; but it is an interpretation that is more and more deeply permeated by the influence of the modern historical method.

It is probably true that the Church ought to have given the Bible to the great nations of the Orient a thousand years ago, but those nations are not wholly losers because this did not take place. If we have regard to the future, to the China or India or Japan of a century or five centuries hence, then we may hold it most fortunate that their evangelization has been left until this modern age. For the value of Christianity as a factor in civilization, at least if we have reference to nations already possessing an advanced civilization, depends on its interpretation of the Bible. If that interpretation is made to consist in rites and ceremonies, as was the case with the medieval Church, it may be doubted whether it is much to be preferred to the purer of the ethnic faiths. If the interpretation of the central teachings of the Bible is erroneous, either in what it says or what it ignores, it may not be worth transplanting to nations which have it not.

It is, therefore, to be regarded as one of the most significant orderings of God in the history of human prog-

ress that the modern scientific interpretation of the Bible has been contemporary with the beginnings of the greatest missionary movement since the age of the apostles.

We have now noticed briefly the three critical events which were chosen to illustrate the helpful bearing of interpretation on the progress of civilization—Jesus' interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, the interpretation of the reformers of the sixteenth century and modern historical criticism.

So long as the Christian religion rests on a historical revelation contained in a book, the interpretation of that book will be one of the most vital questions that the world will have to consider. If this interpretation is according to unsound principles, then, no matter how devout it may be, it will mar or retard the course of civilization, and the greater the ecclesiastical authority behind it, the greater will be its power for evil. If the interpretation of Scripture is a grotesque or hideous mask on its truth, then it makes the Bible minister to grotesque or hideous social and religious institutions. Mormonism holds the Bible among its sacred books, Mohammedanism professes to reverence Jesus and to worship the God of Abraham, the inhuman treatment of the Jews in the Middle Age and in some regions at the present day has been conducted under the banner of the Cross, the devastating wars of the fourth and fifth centuries were waged to establish as a doctrine of Scripture what is now widely recognized as unscriptural, and the Spanish Inquisition, which appears to have been inspired of Satan, carried out its designs in the name of the Trinity!

To have, on the contrary, an interpretation of the Bible which is as a clear and pure glass through which we can see its original sense, an interpretation such as historical criticism is slowly but surely achieving, and to have this interpretation taken up into the personal life where alone it can deeply affect the world, is to insure the best progress not in one element of Christian civilization merely, but in all essential elements.

GEORGE HOLLEY GILBERT.