

# An Analysis of Harry Emerson Fosdick's 'A Guide to Understanding the Bible'

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Fosdick's book, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, is clearly and beautifully written. The author shows good knowledge of modern biblical research, as well as ability to control the wide material, from which he selects what suits his purpose, presenting it plastically and eloquently. He bases his approach to the ethical and spiritual values of the Bible almost wholly on an evolutionary historicism; his position in the mid-current of modern biblical scholarship without himself being an original investigator, renders his conclusions strikingly typical of the school to which he belongs, reflecting the prevailing intellectual atmosphere of the past generation in biblical scholarship.

At the same time one cannot but be aware that Fosdick's book reflects a period of biblical scholarship which is now drawing to an end, while a new period is dawning. In his book the author has, to speak candidly, written the obituary of a whole scholarly approach and method of investigation, making both their inherent merits and their limitations clear to the thoughtful student. While no trained scholar of today would deny the great importance of the evolutionary principle in history, much less its value in clearing up many seemingly enigmatic phenom-

ena of biblical literature, we are today acutely conscious of the danger of assuming unilinear evolution of institutions or ideas. Two dangers stand out clearly; first that of reconstructing history to suit hypotheses *a priori* of the direction of development; second that of identifying *description* of evolutionary historical stages with *insight* into the true meaning of these successive stages.

Thus Fosdick adopts a fundamental error of modern scholarly research in making the evolution of the religion of Israel begin with the most primitive ideas and practices in order to point a contrast between the alleged low level of early Israel and the high level evident in later books of the Old Testament. Of course, one cannot deny that there were early survivals from still earlier stages of religious culture; the great mistake is to construct a system out of such survivals, arbitrarily disregarding or rejecting all contrary evidence for a higher level of ethical and spiritual life and thought, which is explained away or treated as later interpolation in earlier sources. Thus we have the familiar figure of Yahweh as a purely anthropomorphic nature deity, limited to a single shrine or tribe, brutal and sanguinary in character, represented by a fetish or image, pacified by human sacrifice. . . . This extraordinary picture is constructed only by eclectic selection of passages which are interpreted in such a way as to suggest the picture in question, disregarding the fact that the oldest narrative sources, in particular the Yahwist, as well as the earliest

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legal corpora, presuppose a much higher level of ethics and a much more advanced faith in God. In this connection the author disregards entirely the already published works of Gressman and Volz, where similar objections to current criticism are stated.

Moreover, our knowledge of Israelite religious history is not really made any easier by this schematizing reconstruction; actually historical interpretation becomes harder than it was originally. Modern scholars have failed completely to show how this alleged transformation of early Israelite religion to a pure monotheism could have taken place and what basic forces there were which could have altered the picture of God so radically. It is quite impossible to attribute all this to the activity of the prophets, since their activity itself presupposes an established belief in God as judge, redeemer and foreseeing planner of Israel's future. The familiar pattern of a nomadic stage followed by a peasant phase is totally inadequate, because a specifically religious innovation cannot emerge from a change of material status. Moreover, Canaanite religious syncretism exerted more disintegrative than constructive force, so it cannot be held responsible for such a radical change in the religion of Israel. With insight far surpassing his lesser contemporaries Wellhausen recognized that no satisfactory explanation of this change can be given, while Eduard Meyer pointed out the futility of the cliché which radical scholars often employed in order to explain the source of Israelite monotheism: "Yahweh God of Israel and Israel people of Yahweh."

The author also exaggerates the social mission of the prophets, who came primarily to proclaim the imminence of divine judgment on a sinful people, not to propagandize for a social ideal. It is a strange misunderstanding of the prophetic point of view

to say with the author that God was identified by the prophets with an unattained social ideal. On the other hand the author fails entirely to mention such fundamental matters as the wrath and the stern severity of God, which formed so large a part of the prophetic message, presumably because they do not seem to fit well into the rising evolutionary curve from primitive polytheism toward the concept of the God of love. The author fails completely to reckon with the fact that the prophets were closely associated with the cultic life of Israel, a relation clearly expressed in their expectation of a new temple at the same time that they continued to combat the old temple. Similarly, the author does not even recognize, much less explain, the same paradox in Judaism, where preachers of a faith with cosmic scope at the same time attribute a special place to the holy people and its temple. The underlying reason for this lack of insight on the part of the author is his neglect of the covenant idea which is so characteristic of the conception of Israel's relationship to God in Old Testament literature. Instead the author adopts certain general religious ideas derived from the individualistic spirit of Hellenism as his guide through the essentially different conceptual world of the Bible. With such guidance it is scarcely surprising that he stakes out a short cut through the Bible which consistently excludes not only Old Testament cult but also New Testament teachings about the Church, its sacraments, its liturgy, and its expectation to the return of Christ. Here it becomes obvious that the choice of the authors' factual data for his purpose is determined by his subjective premises rather than by any scientific method.

The second outstanding danger indicated above is that mere description of evolutionary stages is treated as

equivalent to real understanding of what is essential in any phenomenon belonging to the history of the human spirit. However, phenomena of this order can be understood only when their basic principles and intrinsic forces through which they receive their structure are known. For biblical religion this means that one cannot pass over the central concept, that God bears a special relationship to His people, a relationship appropriately designated by the words "covenant" and "election." Only when we fully recognize the centrality of this conviction in the faith of Israel do we grasp the true inwardness of biblical teachings, which not only convey the *teaching* of God but also bear witness to the acts of God, through which reality makes itself felt in history. In this way we learn to see the world of early Israel, the age of the Prophets, and the period of post-exilic Judaism in a new light, standing not only in logical, but also in living, relationship

to the divine act of revelation in Christ.

It is, of course, true that the Old Testament becomes much less easy for the modern mind to understand as soon as we abandon certain widely assumed premises of modern thought. Nor can it be any longer subordinated to the New Testament by the simple method of drawing a line of evolution over it to culminate in certain selected high points of the New Testament. On the contrary, it demands careful study of its own dialectic representation of the process by which God reveals himself to man. Only in this way can the Old Testament receive due recognition for what it claims to be—normative to all believers in God. This claim of the Old Testament—embodied in the Church's recognition of its place in the canon of Scripture—demands the most careful and serious effort at real understanding on our part.