Christ. Rather than being the Judge, Christ is the light in which we pass judgment on ourselves. The truth is that everyday our deeds and words, our silence and speech, are building character. Any day that reveals this fact is a day of judgment.

23 Nov 1949

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

“How to Use the Bible in Modern Theological Construction”

[13 September–23 November 1949]
[Chester, Pa.]

In this paper written for Christian Theology for Today, King directly confronts a question many of his earlier papers had skirted: how does one reconcile the Bible with science? King finds a solution by following the example of biblical critics such as Millar Burrows and Harry Emerson Fosdick. He defines their approach: “It sees the Bible not as a textbook written with divine hands, but as a portrayal of the experiences of men written in particular historical situations,” so “that God reveals himself progressively through human history, and that the final significance of the Scripture lies in the outcome of the process.” Davis gave the paper an A – and wrote: “I think you could be more pointed in just how you apply progressive revelation to theological construction. Nonetheless, you do a good piece of work and show that you have grasped the theological significance of biblical criticism.”

The question as to the use of the Bible in modern culture stands as a perplexing enigma troubling multitudes of minds. As modern man walks through the pages of this sacred book he is constantly hindered by numerous obstacles standing in his path. He comes to see that the science of the Bible is quite contrary to the science that he has learned in school. He is unable to find the sun standing still in his modern astronomy. His knowledge of biology will not permit him to conceive of saints long deceased arising from their graves. His knowledge of modern medicine causes him to look with disdain on the belief that epilepsy, deafness, blindness and insanity result from the visi-

tation of demons. Yet he finds each of these unscientific views in the Bible.

Here is the practical difficulty that has confused the minds of many educated people in using the sacred Book. Some have tried to solve this problem by seeing the old Book, "as an inferior record produced by an inferior race."* Others have attempted to solve this problem by avoiding many areas of the Scripture altogether. Still others have tried to solve the problem by discarding the entire Book. But these solutions are far to evanescent for the person who wishes to think wisely about religion. He comes to see that the influence of the Bible is so embedded in the fibre of Western Culture that to remove it would mean a removal of much of our intellectual heritage.

Before considering a more adequate solution of our problem, we may well state that our generation is not the first to have been distressed and puzzled over some of the modes of thought found in the sacred Book. This attempt to accommodate the sacred Book to changing conditions has appeared over and over again in every age (and in every religion for that matter). Whenever this situation arose early man had one supreme resource: allegory. It was though this method of interpretation that Philo found Greek philosophy anticipated by Moses. This method was also used by the Apostle Paul on many occasions.† Probably the greatest development of this method is found in the works of Origen. This great Christian scholar and apologist frankly admitted that many sections of the Old Testament, taken literally, were to him quite bizarre. When he turned to the New Testament, Origen concluded that the Gospels taken literally were also filled with discrepancies, contradictions, and even impossibilities. Faced with this problem, Origen attempted to find a way out. And allegory was the solution.

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† Cor. 10:4; Gal. 4:21-31.
Faced with the same problem that early Christians was faced with, modern man cannot use the same method of solution, for he is aware of the fact that allegory is empty speculation. As Dr. Fosdick says, "We face the old problem but we cannot use the old solution."* How then are we to use the Bible?

A solution of the modern Biblical predicament lies in an intelligible way of handling the Bible. The interpretation of any portion of the Bible must be both objective and disinterested. All attempts to read one's own opinions and desires into the Bible and then claiming authorith for them must be avoided.† This, in short, is the method used in modern theological construction. For the want of better name this method has been called "higher criticism." It is called "higher criticism," not to suggest superciliousness and fancied superiority as has often been imagined, but in contrast to lower or textual criticism. Instead of dealing with texts the higher critic deals with the sources and methods used by the particular author in question. This process supported by modern instruments of literary, historical, and archeological research has brought about amazing results. The conclusions which are offered from time to time are not always correct, but they are always efforts to increase our understanding of the Scripture. The purpose of "higher criticism" is solely to prepare the ground for constructive building. It sees the Bible not as a textbook written with divine hands, but as a portrayal of the experiences of men written in particular historical situations. As Burrows succinctly states, "Correct interpretation requires recognition of the fact that the knowledge of truth and right revealed in the Bible is not stated in abstract universal propositions, but in specific, concrete applications to particular situations, and in literary, not scientific or philosophical, language."‡

The results of this modern study of the Scripture have brought about two great advances. First we have come to see that the old proof text method of citing Scripture to establish points of doctrine is both un-
Secondly, we are now able to arrange the writings of the Bible in their approximately chronological order. This means that we can trace the great ideas of the Scripture from their elementary form to their point of maturity. This advance has revealed to us that God reveals himself progressively through human history, and that the final significance of the Scripture lies in the outcome of the process.

For the sake of clarity and content we may give brief illustrations of this new and rewarding approach to the Bible. Obviously the length of this paper will not permit me to trace in detail all of the great Biblical ideas, but at least we may discuss in some detail three of these developing ideas.

First let us turn to the idea of God. At the beginning of the Old Testament we are immediately struck by the anthropomorphical interpretation of God. He walks in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day,* shows to Moses his back,† and is so localized that he lives on Mount Sinai and can be thought of as being with his chosen people only when they carry with them a box called the ark. Moreover, the early Old Testament God was a tribal God. Yahweh's love for Israel was so great that it often caused vehement hatred of Israel's enemies. Even more significantly, he was a god of war, battling for the triumph and victory of his people.§ And so the early Hebrews could say with ease, "Yahweh is a man of war: Yahweh is his name."$ The proof-text method of citing Scripture to establish points of doctrine is unsound and inconclusive.5 For the first time in the history of the church, we of this generation are able to arrange the writings of the Bible in approximately chronological order.6

But compare the picture of a god who walks in a garden in the cool of the day with the view that, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth."7 In the early Old Testament God loved his chosen people, but hated his enemies. Think of the difference in atmosphere when you read, "God

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5. Burrows, Outline, p. 52: "The proof-text method of citing Scripture to establish points of doctrine is unsound and inconclusive."
6. Fosdick, Modern Use of the Bible, p. 6: "For the first time in the history of the church, we of this generation are able to arrange the writings of the Bible in approximately chronological order."
7. Fosdick, A Guide to Understanding the Bible: The Development of Ideas Within the Old and New Testaments (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), p. 5, quoting Exodus 15:3: "Even more significantly, he was a god of war, battling for his people and leading them to victory. The ascription in the so-called Song of Moses, 'Yahweh is a man of war: / Yahweh is his name,' is typical of the earliest traditions."
so loved the world." Compare the early Hebrew's statement, "Let not God speak with us, lest we die," with the words of Jesus, "When ye pray, say, Our Father." As one realizes this immense development of thought, he immediately finds a growing understanding of the meaning and the relevance of the amazing things that Jesus revealed about God.

Secondly, let us turn to the idea of man. In early Old Testament days the tribe was the basic unit of society. In this leval of thought the individual man was hardly recognized apart from the tribe. "The social fabric was everything and in it the separate threads were barely distinguishable items." There was no sense of injustice when the leaders of Israel saw the sin of Achan not as his alone but all his family's. He stole, and the whole family was put to death. Yahweh was "a jealous God" and threatened to visit, "the iniquity of the father upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate me." This is not an early reference to the laws of heredity, but it is reference to the solidity of the tribe or to use [strikeout illegible] Fosdick's term, "corporeal personality." With the new chronological arrangement of the Bible one can pass through the pages of the Old Testament and watch the old idea of the "corporeal mass" diminish like melting snow. He can hear Jeremiah saying, "O Yahweh, my strength, and my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of affliction"—that is personal religion. He can watch Ezekiel as he revolteth wholeheartedly against tribal solidarity. Each individual is penalized exclusively for his own iniquity. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." He can finally come to the consummation of the whole idea in Jesus who found the center of all spiritual values on earth in personal lives and their possibilities.

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8. Fosdick, Modern Use of the Bible, p. 17: "Even in earthly justice the individual was treated only as part of the group. When Achan secreted booty from Jericho his whole family was put to death; . . . When Jehovah visits 'the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate' him, we are dealing not with a premonition of modern ideas of heredity, but with a very ancient idea of corporate responsibility in which the separate rights of the individual had no place."

9. The quotation is from Jeremiah 16:19. See Fosdick, Guide, p. 65: "O Yahweh, my strength, and my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of affliction—that is personal religion."

10. The quotation is from Ezekiel 18:20. See Fosdick, Guide, pp. 67–68: "each [individual] is penalized exclusively for his own iniquity. 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die.'"
Consider a third and last illustration of this new approach to the Bible. The hope of immortality seems to be a missing aspect in early Hebrew religion. While the early Hebrews did believe that the physical body survived after death, they did not believe that the soul as an immaterial reality survived. The body's future state in sheol was vague and ghostly. There was a shadowy simi-existence which the Psalmist called "the land of forgetfulness."* But if one knows the new approach he can notice how the old idea of sheol gradually loses its meaning. He hears the Psalmist as he cries, "God will redeem my soul from sheol."† In passing from pre-Christian Judaism into the New Testament one sees the belief in immortality reach its greatest expression in the words of Paul: "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality."‡ What a great journey, from a shadowy simi-existence to a profound belief in the immortality of the soul.

This is the new approach to the Bible. Here the phrase "progressive revelation" becomes a reality. We can start with the major ideas of the scripture and follow them as they develop from the acorns of immaturity to the oaks of maturity, and see them as they reach their culmination in Christ and his Gospel.

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11. Fosdick, Guide, p. 264: "'God,' cried the psalmist, 'will redeem my soul from sheol.'"