

## A. J. GORDON AND THE IMPACT OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

BRUCE SHELLEY, PH.D.\*

Christianity is a religion of the Book. Orthodox believers, at any rate, prior to the rise of Biblical criticism, always thought so. Their preaching amplified its texts. Their prayers claimed its promises. And their conduct reflected its precepts. That is why "the scientific study of the Bible" in the 1870s and 1880s filled many American pulpits with uncertainty and fear.

During the generation following the Civil War, a number of American churchmen sought to restate the message of the Bible in terms of the increasingly popular evolutionary theory and the new views of "scientific" history imported from Germany. Under the stimulus of several New England pastors—Theodore Munger at the United (Congregational) Church in New Haven;<sup>1</sup> George A. Gordon at the Old South (Congregational) Church in Boston;<sup>2</sup> Newman Smyth at the Center (Congregational) Church in New Haven;<sup>3</sup> Washington Gladden, a transplanted New Englander, at the First Congregational Church in Columbus, Ohio<sup>4</sup>—a "New Theology" emerged.

One of the hallmarks of this theology for the new age was a fresh understanding of the Bible. Professor William Arnold Stevens summarized this new attitude in 1891. Addressing the Rochester Theological Seminary he said,

If we admit that Christianity is a historical religion, that it bases its claims ultimately upon the actual occurrence in human history of certain visible and audible events, it is idle to deny the right and the duty of ascertaining just what those events were, not only from the Bible, but from all other sources. . . . I will not demand from any critical scholar, who sets about testing the genuineness of a certain document of Scripture, first to believe that the document is the word of God; or if he seeks to ascertain the real nature of any fact related in Biblical history, first to believe in such and such a statement of it.<sup>5</sup>

\*Professor of Church History, Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Denver, Colorado.

1. Theodore Munger, *The Freedom of Faith* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884).
2. George A. Gordon, *Ultimate Conceptions of Faith* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903).
3. Newman Smyth, *Old Faiths in New Light* (New York: Scribner's, 1887).
4. Washington Gladden, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Boston: Houghlin Mifflin, 1891).
5. "Biblical Science and Higher Criticism," *The Standard* (October 22, 1891) and reprinted in *The Magazine of Christian Literature*, Vol. 3 (December, 1891), p. 208.

Seldom did these nineteenth-century Biblical critics appreciate the influence their philosophical presuppositions had on the "assured results" of their "scientific" studies of Scripture. For example, the Hegelian distinction between external ideas and temporary forms was widely employed without a credit line as to its source.<sup>6</sup> A later generation would see clearly that this "scientific" study of Scripture was not as objective as its adherents had assumed. Conservative churchmen of the time were inclined to reject the new movement chiefly because it posed a threat to the Bible as they had come to know it: as a source of texts for their revealed dogmas, as a divinely delivered message for the conversion of sinners, and as an ethical code for their pietistic morality.

Recent studies of the period have disclosed various sources of this conservative response. Kenneth K. Bailey has summarized the reaction of Southern white Protestantism.<sup>7</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher was told the story of the Princeton Theology with its doctrine of Biblical inerrancy.<sup>8</sup> And Norman H. Maring has surveyed the changing views among Baptists.<sup>9</sup> Another major source—the so-called "Bible School" men or premillennial movement—awaits careful examination.<sup>10</sup>

Few men from this "premillennialist" school stood as near to the tides of change in Biblical studies as did Adoniram Judson Gordon, Pastor of the Clarendon Street Baptist Church in Boston from 1869 until his death on February 2, 1895. Gordon was only a short distance from New Haven where Smyth and Munger were preaching and writing. He was in the same city where his namesake, George A. Gordon, ministered on Copley Square. And he served not too far from Andover Seminary where five professors were charged with heresy during his years in Boston. Perhaps no other leader of the "Bible School" men had a comparable opportunity to confront the ideas of the "New Theology." And yet Adoniram Judson Gordon neither accepted the views of the "progressives" nor crusaded against them as later fundamentalists would do. Gordon's own views of the Bible and his reaction to the rise of higher criticism provide not only a view of the man but a perspective on a major source of fundamentalism, the evangelical premillennial movement.

Gordon's writings and ministry mark him as one of the early leaders of the premillennial movement and reflect the four major interests of the "Bible School" men during those days: revivals, missions, Christian living and the Lord's return. His support of revivals brought him in touch with the greatest revivalist of the time, D. L. Moody. For example, the

6. Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 132.
7. Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 1-24.
8. Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), pp. 18-39.
9. Norman H. Maring, "Baptists and Changing Views of the Bible 1865-1918," *Foundations* I, 3-4 (July, October 1958).
10. See C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1958), pp. 65-68.

Gordon materials at Gordon College, Wenham, Massachusetts, contain a hand scrawled note from the great revivalist requesting Gordon to direct in his absence his Northfield Conferences during 1892 and 1893.

Gordon's leadership in the missionary cause is reflected in several ways: in his position as associate editor of *The Missionary Review*; in his attendance at the Centenary Conference on Foreign Missions in London (1888); in his address "The Holy Spirit and Missions" before the first International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement (1891); and in his chairmanship of the Executive Committee of the American Baptist Missionary Union.<sup>11</sup>

The spiritual life of the believer, which remained a major note in Gordon's preaching, is revealed in his sermons, in the pages of *The Watchword*, his own newspaper, and in the volume, *The Ministry of the Holy Spirit*, which he completed only months before his passing.

Perhaps, however, the subject which set him off from his Baptist fellows more often than any other was his doctrine of the premillennial coming of Christ. Shortly after *The Watchword* was launched, Gordon printed the call to the Prophetic Conference to be held at Trinity Church in New York City on October 30, 31 and November 1, 1878. Gordon was at that early date deeply involved in the new movement, being a member of the Conference signing committee.<sup>12</sup> As it turned out, the fresh enthusiasm for the Lord's return was not everywhere welcomed. The Conference provoked several critical articles from certain orthodox newspapers. Gordon, therefore, felt it necessary in his report of the Conference to defend the participants as a group of men who stood firmly for the "plenary inspiration" of the Scriptures, "election," "total depravity," "literal resurrection and judgment," and "eternal punishment."<sup>13</sup> The Clarendon Street pastor thus identifies his premillennialist brothers as adherents of the "old theology" or men who repudiated the innovations of the "New Theology."

As the years passed, Gordon's involvement in the premillennial movement seemed to deepen. In 1881 he wrote in his newspaper: "*The Watchword* was not established for making a specialty of the doctrine of Christ's second coming, but, with the Lord's help, we do mean to lend its influence for re-affirming this truth, which has so largely dropped out of the creed of latter-day Christians."<sup>14</sup> Thus Gordon, along with scores of other American churchmen, came under the spell of "the premillennial scheme of interpretation" brought to these shores by John Nelson Darby and by the writings of the Plymouth Brethren.<sup>15</sup>

11. See H. C. Mabie's address, "Dr. Gordon's Relation to Missions," delivered at Gordon's funeral, *The Missionary Review*, VIII, 5 (May, 1895), pp. 350-355.

12. *Watchword* I, 2 (November, 1878).

13. *Ibid.*, I, 3 (December, 1878), p. 41. These five points of the "Old Theology" support Kraus (*op cit.*, pp. 59-60) in his contention that the premillennial movement was led by those of the Calvinistic persuasion.

14. *Ibid.*, III, 5 (February, 1881), p. 82.

15. Kraus, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

Gordon was not unmindful of the shady side of Brethren history. When in 1883 he took note of Darby's passing, he compared Darby with Edward B. Pusey, father of Puseyism, the High Church movement in England. He observed how they both started with the same discontent with the Church of England. Then of Darby's party he says, it has been "the bane and torment of the Dissenting churches, alienating their members, and often robbing their flocks of their best and most spiritual members; while the movement itself has presented a most unseemly exhibition of narrow and disorganizing sectarianism."<sup>16</sup> This, however, according to Gordon, in no way subtracts from the Brethren contribution to "Modern Evangelism." The books of the Darby followers, he argues, are the basic source of the late nineteenth-century evangelistic movement.<sup>17</sup>

"The great value of the premillennial scheme of interpretation," Gordon wrote approvingly, "lies in this—that it gives attention to 'dispensational truth,' as it is called. It finds a map of the ages in the Scripture, and studies to locate doctrine, as well as to comprehend it, and to determine its relation to the great whole."<sup>18</sup>

Gordon's views of premillennialism, we should note, were not those of that dispensationalism later inscribed in the notes of the *Scotfield Reference Bible*. He felt, for example, that the papacy was Antichrist and he evidenced no support for the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church which gained wide acceptance after C. I. Scotfield's edition of the Bible appeared.<sup>19</sup>

He was, however, very much a part of the Prophetic and Bible Conference movement in the 1880's and early 1890's. If there was any doubt about his leadership in these circles it was erased in 1889 when his Boston Missionary Training School (later to be named Gordon College and Gordon Divinity School) joined the other pioneers, including Nyack and Moody, in the Bible Institute movement.

As a leading spokesman, then, for the premillennial movement, how did Gordon react to the rising tide of Biblical criticism on these American shores?

Lefferts A. Loetscher and Ernest R. Sandeen have argued that Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield designed the Princeton Theology and especially the place of the Bible as a fortress against the attacks of modern thought. Theological method was constructed on a rationalistic foundation which could safely be compared to Newtonian

16. *Watchword*, V, 8 (May, 1883), p. 171.

17. *Ibid.*, V, 9 (June, 1883), p. 195.

18. *Ibid.*, III, 1 (October, 1880), p. 1.

19. A. J. Gordon, *Ecce Venit* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), pp. 108-131, 242; Ernest B. Gordon, *Adoniram Judson Gordon* (New York: Revell, 1896), p. 325; Kraus, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-96. Such differences seem to justify some distinction between dispensationalists and other premillennialists.

physics. "Princeton . . . took the position of the scientist who observes, arranges, and systematizes but does not participate in his experiment."<sup>20</sup> Upon this foundation the Princeton scholars sought to construct an impregnable doctrine of Biblical authority. They assumed that God would not reveal his truths through a fallible book. Thus they argued that God had so inspired the Biblical authors that every word as recorded in the original autographs was inerrant.<sup>21</sup>

A. J. Gordon held views strikingly similar to those at Princeton and yet his concern for revival and Christian living gave his convictions that subjective quality which the Princeton men tried to minimize. This subjectivity—in more recent terms, "the inwardness of faith"—can be observed both in Gordon's objections to Biblical criticism and in his own view of inspiration.

Gordon believed that a verbally inspired Bible was of vital importance for evangelism. In 1883 he contrasted soul winning in earlier days with evangelism in his own time. Formerly he says, under Wesleyan influence a convert was led to "evidence of conversion" by looking within the heart. "The present school [of evangelists] emphasizes with all vehemence the testimony of Scripture. . . . It discourages appeals to frames and feelings, and puts the whole emphasis on the promise of the Lord."<sup>22</sup> While Gordon is thus minimizing emotions as the basis of one's faith, he is at the same time stressing the importance of the Bible in effecting an inward assurance of conversion.

Nothing, Gordon felt, especially profitless theological controversies, should mute the call of men to repentance. By 1887 the "New Theology" of Andover was clearly in view when he wrote:

We imagine that the serious theological strifes which are now agitating New England are the result of an ambition to be wise above what is written. If, instead of speculating about future probation, our scholars would occupy themselves with present evangelization, how much trouble they would spare the churches.<sup>23</sup>

A devout submission to the words of Scripture, Gordon believed, was also necessary for the nurture of the believing soul. In January 1884 "the new Professor of Theology" at Andover (George Harris) penned an article for the *Andover Review* titled "The Structure of Sacred Scripture." This evoked from Gordon what is probably his first written notice of

20. Loetscher, *op. cit.*, p. 21; Ernest R. Sandeen, "Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism," *Church History*, XXXVI, 1 (March, 1967), p. 73.

21. Sandeen, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

22. *Watchword*, V, 9 (June, 1883), p. 196.

23. *Ibid.*, IX, 6 (August, 1887), p. 121. In an editorial in 1882 Gordon wrote: "Speculation is as unprofitable in theology as it often is in business. We have no time to waste over questions which can never be answered. The great facts of ruin and redemption stare us in the face. Let us give our whole attention to make the latter repair the former, without prying too curiously into the philosophy of either." [*Watchword*, V, 2 (November, 1882), p. 25.]

the rise of Biblical criticism. In a *Watchword* editorial he wrote: "Biblical criticism, so called, affords little comfort to a devout and serious minded. It seems to be a kind of laborious diversion of learned and advanced theologians. But true soldiers of the Cross have little serious respect for these carpet-knights of divinity."<sup>24</sup>

The choice was as simple as that: Biblical criticism or the new life in Christ. "In reading some of the lucubrations of the higher criticism," he said in 1887, "it seems as though it had deliberately selected the grit and ignored the grains. Let such as like this way, grind their teeth on this biblical criticism; but such as prefer food to fault-finding will eat the grain of the Word."<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Gordon saw Biblical criticism as a threat to the unique place of Jesus Christ. In the first issue of *The Watchword* he referred to the professed exaltation of Christ in the "New Theology": "Among the favorite methods of depreciating the plenary inspiration of Scripture now common is that of magnifying the authority of Christ's personal teaching above that of his apostles." This Gordon rejects for he feels that it is impossible to magnify Christ's authority "while denying his teaching in regard to the development of doctrine under his apostles."<sup>26</sup>

How can one properly accept the Christ of the Gospels, Gordon argued, without accepting his own words recorded there? This is made plain by Jesus' words concerning certain books of the Old Testament. By the 1890's, when many critics had rejected the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of Scripture, Gordon pointed out what this suggests about Christ's testimony.

The Higher Criticism tends inevitably to the lower faith. If Moses did not write the Pentateuch (*sic*) and Isaiah did not write Isaiah, then there must be an explanation of our Lord's words in attributing these books to those authors. The inference most natural to be drawn is that Jesus Christ was mistaken in some of his utterances. And not a few accept this conclusion.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear, however, that Gordon is not among that growing company of critics.

For these reasons, then, Gordon did not welcome the "results of modern scholarship." He considered this picking the Bible to pieces a threat to evangelism, to the Christian life of the believer, and to the exalted place of Christ in theology and life.

What did he offer in the place of a collection of human documents subject to the scrutiny of the literary critic? He set forth a Bible verbally and plenary inspired, inerrant in its statements of fact as well as its

24. *Ibid.*, VI, 5 (February, 1884), p. 98.

25. *Ibid.*, IX, 2 (April, 1887), p. 25.

26. *Ibid.*, I, 1 (October, 1878), pp. 1-2.

27. *Ibid.*, XV, 4 (April, 1893), p. 85.

assertions of faith. "*Thy Word*," he wrote in 1882, "is the phrase which God uses again and again to describe the Bible. And we believe that the very words and sentences and sayings of the book were inscribed here by the hand of the Almighty!"<sup>28</sup>

Inspiration, then, according to Gordon, extends to the very words of the text. It also embraces the whole of Scripture. While Gordon for some reason found no cause to emphasize the *plenary* inspiration of the Bible, he doubtless accepted it without adopting dictation as the mode. "Inspiration and infallibility," he said, "we do ascribe to the Holy Scriptures, and maintain that if one part is less inspired than another, then we can have little security in regard to doctrine. At the same time, we may well be cautious in asserting the *method* of inspiration, lest we be wise above what is written."<sup>29</sup>

How God inspired the Biblical writers, Gordon did not pretend to know. He did, however, try to find a place for the individual differences of the various prophets and apostles without adopting the idea that God revealed the concepts while the writers provided the words. He wrote:

The style of Scripture is, no doubt, according to the traits and idiosyncracies of the several writers, as the light within the cathedral takes on its various hues from passing through the stained windows; but to say that the thoughts of the Bible are from the Spirit, and the language from men, creates a dualism in revelation not easy to justify. . . .<sup>30</sup>

Rejecting this dualism, he is compelled to adopt William Lee's position: "The Holy Spirit. . . as the productive *principle* embraces the entire activity of those whom he inspires, rendering their language the *word of God*."<sup>31</sup>

The question of the "inerrancy of Scripture," which occupied so much of the attention of the Princeton men, found a place as well in Gordon's most extended discussion of inspiration in his volume on *The Ministry of the Spirit*. There he emphasized his agreement with the point of view and for one supreme reason: "If it is God the Holy Ghost who speaks in Scripture, then the Bible is the word of God, and like God, infallible."<sup>32</sup>

What, then, of the contradictions of the Bible? Well, here above all, Gordon reveals his insight into the importance of the subjective aspect of the pattern of Biblical authority for he makes no attempt to call upon the "original autographs" as did the Princeton men. No, he argues instead that it should be expected that under "the scientific method" such contra-

28. *Ibid.*, V, 2 (November, 1882), p. 57.

29. *Ibid.*, VI, 5 (February, 1884), p. 98.

30. A. J. Gordon, *The Ministry of the Spirit* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1895), pp. 175-176.

31. *Ibid.* Gordon quotes here William Lee's *Inspiration of the Holy Scripture*.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

dictions should appear. "The Bible is a sensitive plant, which shuts itself up at the touch of mere critical investigation. . . . He who starts out and proceeds under the conviction that the Bible is the infallible word of God, will find discrepancies constantly turning into unisons under his study."<sup>33</sup> By this means Gordon retains the subjective question. He refuses to allow the critic to dismiss the matter of presuppositions. Never! They are in fact crucial. Why? Because the Bible is supremely concerned with God's Word and man's response. Almost the highest proof of the infallibility of Scripture, Gordon insists, is the practical one, that we have proved it so. The prophecies and promises of Holy Scripture will reveal "their face value" to those who have taken the pains to prove them where they count most, in a person's life.

Gordon thus anticipates those twentieth-century critics of the nineteenth-century Biblical critic. He reveals the hidden presuppositions of the "scientific" scholar and insists that the Bible's message is only fully understood by those who submit to the Sender of that message.<sup>34</sup>

Since A. J. Gordon was an accepted leader of the so-called "Bible school" men, to ask, as we have done, "What was his reaction to the rise of Biblical criticism?" is an appropriate historical question, if we are to explain among other things why later Fundamentalists reacted as they did to the spread of liberal ideas in the denominations. One can get, however, a false impression from a mere summation of Gordon's comments. He was not by nature a controversialist. He did not agree

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182. In the light of Ernest R. Sandeen's thesis that Fundamentalism was an alliance between dispensationalism and the Princeton Theology until about 1918 (*op. cit.*, p. 67), the question of the source or sources of Gordon's doctrine of inspiration is an extremely interesting one. One is struck by the almost complete lack of references to the Princeton men in *The Watchword* and in "The Inspiration of the Spirit" (Chapter VIII in *The Ministry of the Spirit*), Gordon's most systematic statement on the subject. While he quotes Lee and Gausson (*Theopneustia*) in "The Inspiration of the Spirit," the Princeton men fail to appear. *The Watchword* reflects the Briggs case in an article "Does Sanctification End at Death?" by S. H. Kellogg, a Princeton graduate [*Watchword*, XII, 3 (March, 1890), pp. 60-62]; and in a little article "Christ in the Old Testament: A Bible Study," E. P. Marvin of Lockport, New York, refers to W. H. Green of Princeton in support of uses of types in the Old Testament [*Watchword*, III, 9 (June, 1881), pp. 166-168]. Such references, however, are extremely rare.

Gordon's respect for the subjective side of the inspiration of Scripture—in addition to his own personality traits—may well have come from Augustus H. Strong. The Gordon materials at Gordon College contain Gordon's copy of Strong's *Theology* (1886 edition) signed "Rev. A. J. Gordon, D.D., with kind regards of the author, Augustus H. Strong, Rochester, April 13, 1887." Upon turning to Chapter III, "Inspiration of the Scriptures," one finds it, as other chapters, well marked with underlinings and a few marginal symbols.

34. Man's spiritual preparation for proper understanding of the Bible was underscored by Gordon when he wrote: "I believe the Scripture is the guide, and the infallible guide, of the Christian; but I know that if a Christian has some private prejudice or personal prepossession, he may so deflect the compass of Holy Scripture as to make it lead him entirely out of the way. . . . you must seek the aid of God's Spirit to interpret God's Word for you." ["The Christian's Footprints," a sermon which appeared in *The Beacon*, a Boston newspaper, Vol. I, 4 (March 8, 1884).]



with the Biblical critics and he did not hesitate to set forth his own views, but he did not find it necessary to engage in a crusade to oppose the critics. Perhaps if he had felt greater responsibility for the direction of his Baptist denomination, he, as later Fundamentalists, would have proved more aggressive. However that may have been, at least two reasons help to account for his attitude.

First, he did not believe that higher criticism would endure. Only a few years before his death he wrote: "Higher criticism seems to be carrying all before it now; but soon the rage will be over and it will be laid away among the curiosities of outworn speculation."<sup>35</sup>

This expectation was due to Gordon's striking confidence in the Bible. It was to him more than a warehouse of sermon starters; it was a fountain of spiritual strength and nurture for himself and for his people. One who knew him well wrote shortly after his death:

One seldom heard from his lips any direct argument in proof that the Bible is the Word of God. Familiar as he was with the science of apologetics, he seldom resorted to its armory, or arsenal, or used its weapons. . . he thought the best way to defend the Bible was to use it as the two edged sword of the Spirit. He assumed it to be what it claims, and then so led others to see its wonderful meaning and to enter into marvelous mines of divine wealth, as that they felt its infinite superiority to all other books.<sup>36</sup>

The second reason for Gordon's attitude lies in his awareness of the importance of balancing theological proposition with personal piety—a point not always clearly perceived by later Fundamentalists. "Theological soundness," he wrote,

ought to be the glory of the Church, and it is only when made a buttress to spiritual decay and corruption that it becomes a reproach. Doctrine is the framework of life: it is the skeleton of truth, to be clothed and rounded out by the living graces of a holy life. It is only the creature whose bones become offensive. And it is only a lean Christian and a lean Church whose theological rigidity repels us.<sup>37</sup>

That comment captures much that motivated the Baptist pastor from Boston. And in our day, when appeals for "theological integrity" are sounding from various quarters, that word from Adoniram Judson Gordon ought to find among us an appreciative audience.

35. *Watchword*, XIII, 8 (August, 1891), p. 197.

36. A. T. Pierson, "Holy Spirit Power as Exemplified in A. J. Gordon," *The Homiletic Review*, XXX, 4 (October, 1895), pp. 304-309.

37. *Watchword*, III, 4 (January, 1881), p. 61.