

A NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY¹

Our age may have many defects but it also has its virtues. One of them is a resolute search for authenticity, for the real and the genuine. This has shown itself in various ways, among which we can number the 'return to original sources', urged so long ago by Leo XIII. The revival of biblical scholarship in the last sixty years and the increasing and widespread practice among the laity of reading the Bible are among the most reassuring signs of the Church's vitality at the present day. But a growing familiarity with the word of God is accompanied by a realisation of the difficulties that lie in wait for the ordinary reader. Higher Criticism is no longer the menace it was, but most of us carry about, as the familiar furniture of our minds, vague reminiscences of what the critics have said, so that when we read the Pentateuch we are aware that it has been carved up into four, if not more, sources and that R (or even R 1, 2, 3), is said to be the author rather than Moses. When we read the lovely oracles of the second part of Isaiah we remember that obscure Germans have taught that they were written by a committee and that they are prophecies *post eventum*. Compared with these matters, the standing still of the sun for Joshua, or whether Jonah was or was not eaten by a whale or by another as yet zoologically unverified sea-monster, are comparatively easy questions.

There is however a more fundamental difficulty. The Bible is a collection of Semitic literature, written long ago by people whose ways of thinking and expressing themselves are completely different from our own. To proceed, for instance, as one did, from a study of the classical languages to that of Hebrew (long now, alas, forgotten) was to go from a familiar world to one wholly without contacts with it. It was not merely that the beginnings of Hebrew, notoriously difficult, filled one with dismay, but that the whole approach to the language bore no relation to what one had been used to. The trouble, however, is deeper even than that, and one gradually realised that Hebrew literary standards were entirely different from our own. As one pondered on the strangely beautiful history of the patriarchs, with its prophetic glimpses of the future, or on the murkier story of the kings, one realised that this was a special sort of history in which poetry, prophecy and narration were all mingled. And what was one to make of *Judges* or, at the opposite pole, the *Canticle of Canticles*? What degree of poetry and allegory was there in the accounts of the Creation, and the Fall of Man? All these were, scholars at a purely philological level seemed to have all the answers so fundamentally, questions of literary forms, and although the scripture, that they could tell you whether 'bara' meant 'created' or not, they gave

¹ *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (Nelson; £4 4s.).

one little help in discerning the *kind* of literature one was dealing with. Sometimes, a particular matter tailed off into theology (e.g. the Fall of Man); the student wanted to know what he was committed to, and then the exegete would shut up like a clam. The theological student, looking for the bread of life, was offered the stony fare of philological exactitude. This phase has not yet quite passed.

There was another matter that concerned the student, rather than the ordinary reader, though it was (and is) of vital importance to the priest through whom normally the people will receive their information about the Bible. The question is, what exactly is the theology of the Bible, whether O.T. or N.T., on certain points? This is not at all the same thing as finding foolproof texts to support dogmas but rather what, under the guidance of the Church, does the Bible teach, and how far does it go in certain given questions, such as the Trinity, for example? It is a case of the Bible being allowed to interpret itself and of the student being guided to build up for himself, by comparison and contrast, the data of the Bible on a given subject. There are now many scholars in Europe working along these lines and the results of their labours will be of immense practical importance to the pastoral clergy, because such teaching will be essentially communicable to the people. The blessed words '*kerygma*' and '*kerygmatic theology*' have been heard in many places for a long time,² but Catholics in this country have still to be introduced to it.

Then there is the question of the vernacular versions offered to us in such quantities in recent years. Naturally, the ordinary reader wants an intelligible and readable text and on the whole likes to have 'Biblical English' (which has perpetrated some strange horrors—e.g. (D.V.) 'and *other some* fell upon stony ground') rendered down to current English. But is there not a danger that some of the vigour of the original will be lost? and, what is more important, are not the literary forms of the Bible sometimes obscured in modern translations? Granted, for instance, that the strophic pattern of some of the psalms is difficult to discern, is there any reason for translating and printing them as if they were prose? Thus, although we were dismayed at first to learn that the Editors of the *Commentary* had taken the Douai Version (or what passes for such in modern times) as the basis of their exegesis, for it is one of the least readable versions of the Old Testament and of much of St Paul, yet we think they were justified in their choice. It is honest, undisguised, and its faults must be obvious to all. At the same time it is interesting to observe that the Westminster Version (of which too little is made nowadays), as often as it is quoted in the *Commentary*, appears very well.

² Fr A. Jungmann, S.J., author of *Missarum Solemnia*, is one of its exponents.

It stands on its own legs for dignity, intelligibility and accuracy, and a further editing of it would, we feel, make it a very acceptable text for public reading and liturgical use.

What help, then, has the new *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* got to offer the ordinary reader, whether priest or layman? First let us welcome it warmly as the first fruits of a restored Catholic scholarship, as Mgr R. Knox so generously recognised in his notice of it in *The Tablet*. It is an impressive volume by any standards, impressive as a witness to the learning and sincerity of the scholars who have written it, impressive for its meticulous editing and handsome appearance. No care has been spared to make it a worthy companion to the Sacred Text which it is concerned to elucidate. There is observable throughout the book a filial piety, genuine and never sycophantic, to the Church, the guardian of the inspired word, and an unobtrusive devotion that represents the traditional Catholic regard for the Bible. It must be clear to the non-Catholic that even where conservative critical views are held, the unique concern of the writer is not to toe the party line but to uphold the sanctity and integrity of God's written word. This is an attitude that must always command respect. We have noticed, too, a refusal to score mere apologetical points (Fr Jones's commentary on the Petrine text of Matthew 16, 16 is a model of objectivity), and a calm though cogent statement of critical points of view. Mgr Knox aptly describes the *Commentary* as 'candid and cautious'; it is also forthright, though always measured and courteous.

On the physical side, although the print is a little small, it is clear, and the elaborate system of cross-reference is justified because it works. The index is vast, yet incomplete. There is no name-list of scriptural scholars, and we spent much time trying to recover the title of a little-known book (not mentioned in the bibliography), casually mentioned by Dom R. Russell in his long article. We could wish, too, that references to chapter and verse were printed at the top of every page. At present it is difficult to find a given passage, much less a verse, quickly. There is a considerable crop of misprints, not all of which can be blamed on the printer. The General Editors have obviously taken a large hand in the final form of the book, but there has been no attempt, and we are grateful for it, to impose any 'synthetic' views on the contributors. All speak with their own voice, and their witness to certain fundamental themes is all the more impressive.³

But what will our ordinary reader, especially the layman, make of this massive tome, sometimes rebarbatively learned? Granted the aims of the Editors and the limitations they have imposed on themselves (a commen-

³ We regret that the barbarous-looking 'Yahweh' has been adopted. Mgr Knox has used 'Jave'. The Germans, and even the French at times, one notices, transliterate 'jod' by 'j'.

tary in one volume) it is difficult to see how they could have produced anything different. For lack of space, the style throughout is very condensed, Fr Sutcliffe being particularly skilled in cramming much into a few words. But it makes exhausting reading. Yet to go through *Genesis* or *St Matthew*, for instance, with the Bible and the *Commentary* together is a worthwhile experience, and as sheer exegesis, the commentary on these two books must, by any standards, be regarded as work of a very high order. Again, it must be observed that though, in the recent past, we have had an excess of 'Introduction', if we are to read the Bible with profit we cannot ignore criticism. Gone is the dream of the early Protestants of the father gathering his family round him to read the Bible of a night. Apart from the odd and often barbarous results of such uninstructed Bible-reading in the seventeenth century, nowadays, for good or for ill, we know too much, and if it is one of the chief duties of the clergy to break the bread of God's word to their people, they will find in the *Commentary* at least the foundation of their preaching. Critical theories, too, inevitably affect the exegesis and if we may be allowed to regret some conservative attitudes on the part of some of the contributors, it is mainly because they seem to have led to the exclusion of certain information that throws light on the text itself. Thus, to take a 'neutral' example which has nothing to do with Pentateuchal source-criticism, *Judges* is a very odd book, and we should like to have seen Fr Power, S.J., with his immense erudition, explore the Semitic way of writing history. Fr K. Smyth, S.J., hints at the matter in his commentary on 3 and 4 Kings, but nowhere is it worked out. As it seems to the present writer, we have got beyond the need merely to rebut the views of the source-critics, or the even more fantastic theories of the comparative religionists, and are now in a position quietly to consider what contribution all our modern knowledge has to make to the elucidation of the Sacred Text.

At a philological level, then, the *Commentary* is perhaps the best thing of its kind in the English language, but in the other two matters of biblical theology and literary forms it is less helpful. There is a truly magnificent chapter by Frs M. Bévenot, S.J., and Dom Ralph Russell, O.S.B., on 'Christianity in Apostolic Times' which will be of real help to the clergy in their preaching, but there is less that is helpful on the Old Testament, and nothing that approaches *La Bible et l'Évangile*⁴ of Père Bouyer, who in a short book of some 250 pages throws floods of light on both Testaments by relating them to each other. It may be objected that there was not room for such work, but we think it is rather a matter of a point of view than of sheer space. Fr Bea, S.J.,⁵ describes biblical theology as 'the

⁴ Cerf.

⁵ *Gregorianum*, 1952, fasc. 1, quoted in A. Feuillet, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, p. 247 (Cerf, 1953).

systematic presentation of the origin, development and gradual perfecting of different religious doctrines *in the successive stages of revelation*; and Fr Feuillet adds, 'While the isolated exegesis of texts makes impossible such synoptic views (*vuees d'ensemble*) . . . and fails to lead to final solutions, the linking of the sacred books to the environment from which they have come, throws light on the wonderful organic development of revelation, and, in addition, eliminates all false problems.'⁶ It is those *vuees d'ensemble* that we miss.

This brings us to the immensely important subject of *literary forms*. Fr Feuillet in his fascinating book on the *Canticle of Canticles*, of which, by the rigorous application of a new method, he has provided a most convincing interpretation, writes, 'The problem of literary forms (*genres littéraires*) is today in the forefront of exegetes' preoccupations. In his encyclical, Pius XII indicates that it is their duty to tackle it boldly (*de front*), with a view to a better understanding of the Sacred Text' (p. 192). It is indeed an arduous task, for it involves a study of the Bible as literature, as a special kind of literature with a divine message. The exigencies of modern scripture studies which have demanded an immense erudition in many different departments, have attracted the laborious scholar whose forte is not always literary appreciation. But the problem of literary forms goes far beyond such subjective gifts. It is a new technique, or an old technique more rigorously applied, to set a piece of biblical literature, whether a psalm or a book, in the historical environment where it was born, to discuss the psychology of the writer, the purpose he set himself in writing the book, and to fit it into its right place in the doctrinal development.⁷ A comparative study of ancient literatures, religions and archaeology has been shown to be helpful, but above all, as Frs A. Robert⁸ and Feuillet have taught us, it is really the old method of allowing the Bible to interpret itself, *but* on the basis of our new knowledge. Not only does this method help in the solution of certain critical problems, but, as the Pope has indicated, its principal importance is the help it affords in understanding the word of God itself. In the *Commentary* Fr Crehan has a clear and careful section on the subject, Dr Leahy considers the actual forms discernible in the Bible, and some application of the method will be found up and down the book, but Fr Saydon's treatment of the *Canticle*, for instance, would have been much more convincing by a more rigorous application of it.

The whole matter is indeed under active consideration by scripture scholars all over the world and much work has been done on it since this *Commentary* was first projected, so that while we are glad to welcome it now, it is perhaps to be regretted that it has appeared just at the

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ A. Robert, quoted in Feuillet, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-4.

⁸ D.B.S. (*Genres littéraires*).

time when Catholic scholarship is in a state of rapid development. Future editions, of which there will surely be many, will no doubt incorporate the tested findings of subsequent scholarship.

In a work so large and from so many authors as this, there is bound to be great variety of treatment and each reader will have his own favourite parts and his own point of view. One thing is certain: the committee responsible for the *Commentary* and their learned contributors have put in the hands of the clergy and the educated laity an instrument of scripture study that cannot fail to be of great assistance in understanding the word of God. But a one-volume commentary at four guineas a copy is beyond the reach of many, and, given the enormous amount of introductory material that must be included in such a book, as well as the size of the Bible itself, we may be allowed to suspect that the days of this sort of commentary are over. Our scripture scholars have shown their mettle, and we hope that one result of this venture will be further commentaries on the individual books of the Bible. They might start with the Gospels.

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REVIEWS

BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY: A Philosophy and Theology of the State. By Thomas Gilby. (Longmans, Green; 25s.)
SOCIETY AND SANITY. By F. J. Sheed. (Sheed and Ward; 10s. 6d.)

Man is made in the image and likeness of God, to know him and love him and serve him in this world and to be happy with him for ever in the next. While the only perfect image of the Father is the Son, yet it is true that man can truthfully address God as Father by virtue of a certain likeness of the creature to the Creator. From the likeness of the image, through the likeness of grace right up to the likeness of glory we can trace the spiritual progress of the human person. So man as such is drawn up outside and above the material world of which he forms a part: though created he is not finally subordinated to the good of the created order, but to divine goodness itself into which he enters in the Beatific Vision. There is the sublime prospect of the development of the personal life of man to its perfection in the direction of contemplation in the order of knowledge and love. But there is another side to human life. Apart from the exceptional case of a call to the eremetical life of solitude, human life is 'political life', the life of men living in community, in society, in the State, a life which inevitably leads to a certain surrender of the personal life. The fact that this surrender is only a temporary one in order that the full personal life may be won again in the light of the *lumen gloriae* does not make it any less desolating to the human spirit. The tension between the human person, made for God, and the