

Reviews

THE NEW JEROME BIBLICAL COMMENTARY edited by Raymond E. Brown, S.S.; Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J. and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. *Geoffrey Chapman. 1989, £60.*

This excellent book is much more than an update of the Jerome Commentary of 1968. In his Foreword Cardinal Martini tells us it is 'about two-thirds new,' and makes on its behalf well-justified claims. It 'condenses the results of modern scientific criticism with vigor and clarity,' 'without neglecting ... Christian tradition...'. No less true or important, it will 'also be an instrument for rich ecumenical dialogue.' It has itself arisen out of that dialogue, in which scholars have now for long been making strides towards unity, as they help one another to discover afresh both what their colleagues in other communions and what they themselves believe.

The editors, whose names alone are enough to create expectation of excellence, have their own Preface, in which they write of the changes in biblical scholarship in the last quarter of a century. They are right in their claim that this volume 'enables readers of all religious persuasions to see a representative group of Catholic scholars at work—not the isolated and allegedly liberal few, but almost seventy contributors 'so widespread that they 'exemplify the range of exegetical variation to be found in any community of scholars.' (Seventy-four are listed.) This preface is also a very good guide on how to work with this book. The contributors, who include seven women, supply not only commentaries on the biblical books but also 'topical' articles which it is recommended be read before starting the commentaries. The latter include many paragraphs which are in themselves useful small articles.

The topical articles comprise a wide range of subjects which include Biblical Archaeology. 'Theories of dating and historical reconstructions based on pre-1970 data have had to be revised drastically. ... Manuscript discoveries ... have brought much greater sophistication in our understanding of noncanonical works contemporary with or similar to the biblical books....' On the more philosophical side, 'New perspectives have been advanced in hermeneutics'—which provides a title for one of the articles. Others include Apocrypha; Dead Sea Scrolls; Other Jewish Literature, Text and Versions, Modern Old Testament Criticism, Modern New Testament Criticism, Jesus (on the 'Jesus of History'), Paul, Early Church, Aspects of Old Testament Thought. For many new students the articles on biblical criticism will probably make the most thorough introduction to a new world; others may turn to Early Church in search of foundations for concepts, such as the Church, which have become of paramount importance but whose origins are shadowy and only partially documented in any early literature. As is stated in the article entitled 'Jesus', 'In what are commonly accepted as historical memories from Jesus' ministry ... he is singularly silent on foundational or structural issues.' The reader is thus reminded that we must understand Jesus as not founding a separate religion but renewing Israel. Yet 'it is remarkable how quickly the

44

Christians became community-minded'; they knew themselves as belonging to a community both new and old, or to a new community with roots in the old.

No criticism should be or is likely to be made of this great venture except from a sympathetic point of view; granted this, one can find instruction even in those topical articles, such as Church Pronouncements, which seem *regretfully* necessary. The article tells with sympathy and understanding the story of gradual acceptance and deepening knowledge in the Roman Catholic Church of biblical origins.

Divino Afflante Spiritu, issued in 1943, 'urged Catholic exegetes to grapple with difficult problems, hitherto unsolved, and to arrive at solutions in full accord with the doctrine of the church, as well as in harmony with the indubitable conclusions of profane sciences.' This comes rather near to prescribing the impossible, and various decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission here quoted, exhibit some surprising declarations about historicity; however, the present volume in itself and the wide representative spread of its contributors are clear evidence that no doors to truth are closed but the way is open to the frank scholarship which leads to deeper faith and deeper understanding, such scholarship as is shown everywhere in this book.

A few miscellaneous comments: John Paul II makes a telling attack on fundamentalism quoted in Church Pronouncements. 'Attention must be given to the literary forms of the various biblical books in order to determine the intention of the sacred writers. And it is most helpful, at times crucial, to be aware of the personal situation of the biblical writer, of the circumstances of culture, time, language, etc., which influenced the way the message was presented.... In this way, it is possible to avoid a narrow fundamentalism which distorts the whole truth.' On women's ordination it is reported that, on one occasion at least, PBC member scholars voted 17 — 0 that the NT does not settle the question and that twelve members believed that neither Scripture nor Christ's plan alone excluded the possibility.

The commentary on Mark is excellent, never attempting to impose an answer to puzzles; but why should 'the house' at Capernaum not be that hired by Jesus and not that of Peter? On the famous 'No-one is good except God' the comment assumes apparently that Jesus is conscious of perfection. But it seems unnecessary to assume that his sinlessness was known to him. In this commentary 'Render unto Caesar' appears difficult but the theme is not developed that respect for even a hostile ruler was taught by the early church even in the midst of persecution.

Papias' information about Sayings in Aramaic by Matthew are taken to be related to the Gospel; it is surely more probable that he was referring to something else entirely, and the commentator here indeed recognizes that it tells us nothing about the Gospel we know or its author, who was clearly not one of the twelve. On the subject of the birth of Jesus, 'Both the Bethlehem birth and the virginal conception are potentially so highly influenced by the authors' reading of Old Testament prophecy that the historian hesitates where the believer need not.' 'That Jesus was a healer was an embarrassment to later Christians; therefore, it is certainly historical.' Such decisive pronouncements are rare in the commentary on Matthew. The commentator is usually content to show the character, possible

antecedent influences, and redaction history of a pericope, leaving open to the reader to decide for or against historicity. This is typical of the entire volume.

In the article 'Jesus', for the most part very enlightening, one question seems strangely neglected: *Why* did Jesus think the kingdom was coming soon, or indeed had already in some sense come? Was it not precisely because he experienced God and the kingdom in himself (Luke 2. 41—52)?

Only one misprint was noticed: p. 510a 1.8 up, '... we shall not be far from wrong'. It would be impossible for so comprehensive a book to meet agreement at every point. Far more important is the enormous amount of scholarly information so clearly and fairly conveyed. This Commentary is in fact a veritable Encyclopaedia, and anyone hesitating at the price might reflect on how much is given in one volume, and perhaps obtain a copy for his community by persuading 12 benefactors to contribute £5. Possible improvements to the form of the work might be made by combining some of the lists of abbreviations etc. at the beginning and the addition to the very good subject index of an index of names.

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STEPPING STONES: Joint essays on Anglican Catholic and Evangelical unity. Ed. Christina Baxter, Consultant eds. John Stott and Roger Greenacre. Hodder & Stoughton. 1987. Pp. xiii + 210. £7.95.

It is well recognised that in the Church of England there is a liberal middle, which is tolerant and accommodating—the very soul of comprehensiveness; and two wings that are earnest, sincere and self-generative. The 'higher' such wing, the Anglo-Catholic, is here defended by Roger Greenacre, Canon of Chichester Cathedral and ecumenist vis-à-vis the Catholic Church of France. The 'lower' such wing, the Evangelical, is here defended by John Stott, Rector Emeritus of All Souls, Langham Place—his ministry began there in 1945 as its curate! He has been writing books steadily since 1954. These two were co-convenors of the *Catholic/Evangelical Dialogue from which the book accrues*.

In their joint Preface they begin by citing Clifford Longley of *The Times* that lack of integration between their two wings is 'the internal Anglican disease'; and they insist that their own perception of the wings' mutual relations is rather different. Both are together strongly committed to the Nicene Creed—'according to its natural sense' (which they then immediately begin diversely interpreting!). They are agreed upon justification by grace alone through faith alone: and one is surprised to find—through words of Archbishop Michael Ramsey (when Ebor, before Cantaur)—that Anglo-Catholics unhesitatingly support the cardinal conviction of the Reformation: 'that works cannot earn salvation, that salvation is by grace alone received through faith, that nothing can add to the sole mediatorship of the Cross of Christ...' They invoke the last agreed statement of ARCIC, *Salvation & the Church*, which clearly affirms that salvation is a 'pure unmerited gift' which is 'due solely to the mercy and grace of God' expressed through Christ's 'definitive atoning work'.

When such agreement is recognised, it is sometimes regarded with suspicion as 'an unholy alliance' between co-belligerents—an example given