

Book Notes

The New Revised Standard Version comes with notes and references by Howard Clark Kee in **The Cambridge Annotated Study Bible** (Cambridge University Press), an extremely handsome book, beautifully printed and bound. The NRSV (1989) is a revision of the RSV (1952), itself a revision of the American Standard Version (1901), in turn based on earlier revisions of the King James Version (1611). The scholars involved, all American, include several Catholics as well as an Orthodox and a Jewish representative, in an overwhelmingly Protestant team. The translation remains essentially literal, with most of the changes due to the absence of a common gender third person singular pronoun in English. Masculine-oriented language is eliminated as far as this is compatible with the historical situation of ancient patriarchal cultures. This often means saying 'they' rather than 'he', and so on. In the New Testament, in particular, inclusive language often means that 'sisters and brothers' in the text is footnoted as '*Greek* brothers'. On the other hand, mercifully, we hear nothing of Yahweh: the text maintains the RSV's preference for the Lord (often in capital letters). Kee, now at the University of Pennsylvania, has carried out archaeological work in Israel and Jordan and worked in manuscript studies. His best known book is *Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* . . . Done almost single-handed, the annotations are very helpful, at least as regards historical and sociological background. Summaries of the meaning, on the other hand, in the margins, have too little space to be very illuminating. The Parable of the Dishonest Manager (in Luke 16), glossed as making the point that 'one can learn even from the dishonest', becomes pretty vacuous. But the introductions, cross-references, maps and tables of chronology and measures, and so on, make this a very desirable book. The writings regarded as authoritative by the Orthodox as well as those treated by the Council of Trent as canonical appear separately, again with notes by Kee, in **The Cambridge Annotated Study Apocrypha**. The NRSV also appears as **The Cambridge Daily Reading Bible** (Cambridge University Press, 1995, £22.95 hardback, £12.95 sewn paperback), with the text divided into readings that would take only 5-10 minutes a day and take the reader through the whole Bible over a period of two years.

The non-canonical as well as the canonical gospels, in the Scholars Version, appear as **The Complete Gospels**, edited by Robert J. Miller (HarperCollins, 1994, £12.99). The claim here is that the four canonical gospels need to be understood in the context of all twenty of the known gospels, or fragments and reconstructions of gospels, from the early Christian era. The famous 'Q', for example, appears as the first gospel,

although an increasing number of scholars doubt the necessity of postulating it. Parts of the Fourth Gospel appear as the hypothetical 'Signs Gospel'. The Gospel of Thomas shows that, contrary to the popular image of him as an apocalyptic preacher of salvation and damnation, Jesus was actually a wisdom teacher. The Gospel of Mary shows the first attempts to deprive women of the leadership roles they had. And so on. The translation zips along. Joseph 'did not have sex with [Mary] until she had given birth to a son' (Matthew 1:25). 'Congratulations to the poor in spirit!' (Matthew 5:3), the first beatitude goes. And so on. Since many people take 'Christ' to be the family name of Jesus, the translators say, they replace it with 'the Anointed'. One wonders how many readers as ignorant as that are likely to open this book — perhaps it is aimed at the post-Christian New Age generation — but then the very idea of being anointed surely needs discussion. The editors regret that they have to leave in 'distasteful references to slaves' and suchlike. But if taste comes into it, this fascinating collection certainly shows how discriminating the early Christians were in choosing what became the canonical texts.

With **The Sign Language of Faith** (SCM Press, 1995, £12.95), Gerd Theissen, Professor of New Testament at Heidelberg, offers a systematic analysis of how he preaches, together with a handful of sample sermons (one by himself and four by a young woman pastor), in order to help both preachers and their audiences. Noting that 'the sign language of faith' includes liturgy, ritual, architecture, music, works of art, and so on, he insists that, in the Protestant tradition, the sermon is the indispensable focus of the symbolic language of the Christian faith. The preacher's task is to bring new life to the language of the Bible which (Theissen is confident) 'even today gives people the opportunity of entering into dialogue with an ultimate reality'. Of more direct use, perhaps, for Catholic preachers, **Celebrating the Word** (The Columba Press, 1995), by J.D. Crichton, one of the pioneers of liturgical renewal in England, offers homilies for each Sunday of Ordinary Time throughout the three-year cycle, as well as homilies for some major feasts (Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christi, 24 June, Peter and Paul, the Transfiguration, the Assumption and All Saints). In **The Gracious Word** (Dominican Publications, 1995, £7.99), Wilfrid Harrington OP offers detailed commentary on the Scripture readings for each Sunday and Holy Day in Year A, with a great deal of connected material including an introduction to Matthew, an analysis of the Infancy Narratives and an account of the distinctive features of the Passion Narratives. He does not provide the homilies but it is hard to imagine a more useful guide for a preacher, or for listeners in the congregation who despair of hearing an informed and thoughtful sermon on the readings of the day.