

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Latest Commentary on the Bible

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Philippine Studies vol. 17, no. 3 (1969): 617–624

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

*The Latest Commentary on the Bible**

THE effusive encomiums written by various scholars and quoted on the jacket of *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* lead one to suspect exaggeration. How many books can really rate as “masterly,” “best work of its kind,” “significant tool,” “a landmark,” and “a major event in biblical scholarship”? But even a brief perusal of the *JBC* will dispel initial scepticism.

This work is appropriately named after St. Jerome, the greatest of the commentators on Scripture among the Fathers and a pioneer in biblical criticism. The *JBC* is not an introduction to the Bible but an actual commentary referring to every verse of the Bible and briefly explaining important words, implications, contexts, etc. Of its eighty articles, about sixty are strict biblical commentaries. The rest deal with introductory questions (such as the Pentateuch, the Synoptics, Inspiration) and background material (geography, archaeology, history). Each article begins with an outline — of the biblical book commented upon or of the topic discussed — and is liberally sprinkled with references to pertinent material in other parts of the *JBC*. The general index offers further help to the reader in finding information. The generous bibliographical data heading each article and scattered within it is unfortunately not indexed, no doubt because of its abundance.

The four main maps on the inside covers and on a double fold-out page between the OT and NT articles, along with smaller maps of the Exodus route and Jerusalem, are adequate. But how did the art editors choose a big fold-out map that gets its extreme edge regularly crumpled and that forces the

* THE JEROME BIBLICAL COMMENTARY, edited by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. Two volumes in one. New York: Prentice-Hall Publishers, 1968. xxxvi, 637 pp., 889 pp.

reader to turn the book around in order to confer the maps of Palestine? It would seem preferable to have smaller maps of Palestine on regular-sized pages that would be legible without the need of gymnastics, and the extra leaf could be used perhaps for early Jerusalem and the tribal and monarchical boundaries.

Another mote in the eye, which however cannot be easily removed in a new printing, is the order of the articles. The NT material is arranged chronologically, with the Synoptics leading the list and Johannine material plus 2 Peter closing it. The OT arrangement is eclectic: traditional listing of the Law and the former Prophets; a chronological ordering of the latter Prophets with Chronicles and Daniel-Machabees inserted in the appropriate spots; the wisdom literature and psalms. But what is the rationale behind the final sequence: Ruth, Lamentations; Baruch; Tobit, Judith, Esther; and Jonah? This question will long tax the ingenuity of the more curious. Luckily the clear and large print of the table of contents will help the reader locate the desired commentary easily enough, in spite of the untraditional and somewhat incomprehensible arrangement.

A serious problem for potential buyers in Asia could well be the price. But if the cost of US\$25 for a single book should appear at first sight to be prohibitive, it should be recalled that this book is virtually a whole library.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER COMMENTARIES

Despite the 1,560 pages bound within a single cover, the book handles easily and is only a mite bulkier than the *Catholic Commentary of Holy Scripture* (1,300 pages) and *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (1,160 pages). The larger and lighter print of the *JBC*, in contrast with these two volumes that are virtually identical since they come from the same publisher, makes for pleasant, unstrained reading. The attractive off-center titles give a hint of the modern interpretations that are to follow.

It might seem unfair to compare the *JBC* with the *CCHS* (1953) and *PCB* (revised edition, 1963). These represent pioneering efforts to produce a single commentary providing a survey of modern biblical scholarship and have effectively served as models for this new work. But the fact remains that the *JBC* has substantially improved upon its exemplars in almost every way.

The *JBC* has generally longer articles than *PCB* and *CCHS*, except for Exodus (in *JBC* 21 pages vs. 33 in *PCB*), Samuel (16 vs. 19), Isaiah 1 (18 vs. 27), Proverbs (10 vs. 14), archaeology (18 vs. 25), Israel's neighbors (13 vs. 18). Greater length indicates fuller treatment, if not necessarily a better commentary. The NT articles are considerably longer than those in *PCB*; e.g., Mark (41 pages vs. 21 in *PCB*), Matthew (53 vs. 30), John (53 vs. 26), Romans (41 vs. 14), 1-2 Corinthians (39 vs. 19). Climaxing the twenty-odd topical articles are four masterful essays in biblical theology: "Aspects of OT Thought" by J. L. McKenzie; "Aspects of NT Thought," D. M. Stanley and R. E. Brown; "Pauline Theology," J. A. Fitzmyer; "Johannine Theology," B. Vawter.

On the basis of *PCB* and *CCHS*, some might expect a few pages on measures and money as well as a treatment of biblical languages. (Corrigenda: in the Index under Hebrew: language, 64 (?); script, not 77, but 69:16-17.) This reviewer was disappointed in finding no full discussion on the Deuteronomic History in a single place, nor any mention about apocalyptic as wisdom material (with G. von Rad) rather than as prophecy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND BIBLICAL QUESTIONS

The bibliographical references throughout the volume are thoroughly up to date and include titles in German, French, Italian, Spanish. The contributors do not merely cite the classical or main works of older scholars (as seems often to be the case in *PCB*), but also include numerous articles dated in the past two years. With the constant references to current research the reader can not fail to have an open mind on biblical questions. The Bible is not a catalog of absolute,

eternal and static propositions. Only from continual study and comprehension of the human aspects of the Bible can we expect gradually to enter into the limitless riches of God's message as its different facets are revealed from varying perspectives.

It is in this light that we must view the different opinions expressed on so many important points, as for instance, the purpose of the book of Ruth or the literary form of Jonah. The pamphlet commentaries that have gained wide popularity in recent years often present a neatly rounded and complete picture of a biblical book or chapter, which might at times be misleading, since such a view is far simpler than the reality. The *JBC* commentators frankly admit two or more basically opposed views though only one can be developed. This type of incompleteness may not be as reassuring and satisfying as the simple rose-colored picture. But the editors envisioned "an audience of educated readers who wish *to study* the Scripture," sincerely concerned about the interpretation of Scripture as far as human endeavor has succeeded in unlocking its treasures. This honest attitude toward the Bible and scientific research, along with the brevity and compactness of the commentaries, will surely stimulate readers to consult the latest bibliography on the more important and pressing biblical questions.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

It is refreshing to see how the *JBC* contributors followed the fearless spirit and directives of Pius XII — to whom the volume is dedicated — in his famous letter on biblical studies, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. There is not the self-conscious apologetic tone nor the excessive concern about modernism that the *CCHS* could not avoid. The *JBC*, with its exegesis and biblical theology solidly based on scientific research of non-Catholic scholars as well, would have been impossible fifteen years ago for a number of reasons. The writers have worked single-mindedly in the search for the meanings intended by the individual authors of the OT and NT times, as Pius XII and the Fathers of Vatican II insisted upon. Correct exegesis

has to be historical, with its sight on the times and circumstances of the original authors rather than on the later developments of ideas and doctrine in Christian theology.

An adequate review of the *JBC* would have to include a summary of the latest interpretation in every field of Scripture and presuppose a careful examination and appraisal of each article. After perusing the volume and comparing it with other commentaries, only observations such as those made above are justifiable. But a few comments can be added about three topics in which the reviewer has been particularly interested.

CULT, MAGI, SPECULATION

Catholic scholars have generally frowned on Mowinckel's theory of an enthronement feast for Yahweh as king of Israel, but there is nothing particularly un-Catholic in the hypothesis. Only linguistic and historical reasons are leveled against it by R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, pp. 540-506. Protestant scholars, like H. J. Kraus in his weighty commentary on the Psalms, object that God who is king from all eternity without interruption cannot be conceived as enthroned and beginning his rule again each year. However, the liturgy celebrates the events of Christ's life as though they are occurring again: "*Hodie Christus natus est*"; "This is the day that the Lord has made," for the resurrection. Catholic faith insists that the sacrificial death of Jesus on Calvary is re-presented and renewed in every Mass. Such a liturgical background could be expected to provide sympathetic understanding for the theory of a liturgical enthronement: the Israelites could cry out that "Yahweh has become king" on that particular day for them as they were worshipping. This cultic and kerygmatic explanation has been espoused — if somewhat belatedly and in varying degrees — by E. Lipinski (*Biblica*, 1963, pp. 405-460), W. L. Moran (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, V, 445-446) and now by J. J. Castelot in the *JBC*, 76:151-154. Identifying the occasion for this liturgical enthronement in a New Year's Feast, however, would seem to be more difficult (*JBC*, 76:149-150), but is considered probable in the *NCE* (X, 392-394, under "New

Year"). The *JBC* can be relied upon to present new views in biblical matters, but its commentators have clearly not been badgered into accepting every aspect of the theories just because they are new.

The vitality of biblical scholarship evidenced in the *JBC* shows itself also in the abandonment of previously held views that were recently widespread. In certain places the touchstone of orthodoxy of a biblical scholar was his answer to the question: Is the story of the Magi midrash? Midrash had grown to be a catchall for any literary type with more or less fictitious elements; popularly, it had become a synonym for fairy-tale. The careful study of Addison Wright that determined the precise limits of midrash as essentially a homiletic commentary on scriptural texts clearly guided the application of the term in the *JBC* to a half-dozen biblical passages and to rabbinic material where it belongs. To return to the Magi, J. L. McKenzie, who had applied midrash generously in his *Dictionary of the Bible*, now blithely ignores the term in his fine commentary on Matthew. Its first paragraph sums up the discussion on Mt. 1-2: "Theological imagination and symbolism play a very large part in the composition of the infancy narratives." This classification, along with the description by C. Stuhlmüller of the "hymnic, doctrinal, and meditative style" of the Lucan infancy accounts should go a long way in clearing up the disease of midrash and in providing preachers and teachers with a succinct and deeply theological understanding of these favorite Christmas narratives.

The *JBC* also provides theological speculation in the question of inspiration and inerrancy. The lucid and remarkably complete summary by R. F. Smith puts proper emphasis on the need of basing theories on the biblical evidence itself. His tentative comments and evaluation of the numerous current explanations indicate the difficulty of the problems and the fluidity in the state of research.

VALUABLE HANDBOOK

The editors have expressed their intention of offering a biblical commentary that would benefit educated readers, stu-

dents and teachers of religion and theory on all levels, particularly seminarians and priests in their task of studying theology and preaching. This reviewer believes that they have succeeded admirably and would heartily agree that for the latter "the present work may well serve both as a basic text in the seminary and as a reference book throughout the ministry — as a foundation and a *vade mecum*."

Nor have ecumenical implications been overlooked. In considering the advantages of inviting non-Catholic scholars to contribute to this work the editors believed it more advisable to produce a commentary written by Catholics.

This would allow readers of all persuasions to see a representative group of Catholic scholars at work — not the isolated and allegedly liberal mavericks, but some fifty contributors teaching in Catholic colleges and seminaries in the United States, Canada, and abroad. Naturally some are more critical than others in their approach to the Bible and thus exemplify the variation to be found in any community of scholars. But this variation itself should destroy once and for all the myth of the Catholic position, as if there were a series of biblical interpretations or positions that all must profess. We hope that our non-Catholic brethren can find in this commentary the same scientific method and love for objectivity that characterizes the best commentaries written by scholars of their own denominations. The heavy dependence of our contributors on non-Catholic research is cheerfully and gratefully acknowledged on almost every page, laying to rest the image of a parochial mentality in some Catholic biblical studies.

The laudatory foreword of the late biblical scholar and Rome's foremost ecumenist, Cardinal Bea, and the *imprimatur* given by Cardinal Shehan of Baltimore should calm any lingering fears about the orthodoxy of the interpretations presented. Of course article differs from article in value and not every statement will receive universal acceptance. Suggestions can no doubt be offered to improve both form and content of the work. We will have the perfect single commentary on the Bible only when we see the Word of God face to face.

Exegetically, pedagogically, ecumenically, the *JBC* is a "happening." Editors and contributors deserve congratulations and gratitude from all who have any interest in reading the Bible intelligently. This superb volume, we can pray and expect, will help fulfill the desire of the Fathers of Vatican II: that for Christ's faithful the approach to Holy Scripture should lie wide open.

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