

The Bible in the Church since Vatican II

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The fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Vatican II provides an opportunity to reflect on the extraordinary changes which have taken place in the Roman Catholic Church in the attitude to and use of the Bible. At the time of Vatican II the Church was still emerging from a shell-shocked and timorous period following the vigorous repression by Church authorities of the excesses of the Catholic Modernist movement in the opening years of the twentieth century. True, the door to fresh air had been opened by the cautious encouragement of biblical studies in the papal encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943). True, the Pontifical Biblical Commission had issued its far-sighted statement *On the Historical Truth of the Gospels* (1961). But repression, caution and fear were still the order of the day. The anti-Modernist oath was still in force and had to be sworn by all candidates for major orders or for teaching posts in Catholic theological institutions. It would remain in force for some years to come, though no doubt accepted with more and more reservations both by those who administered it and by those who swore it. The sea-change which was to take place was initiated at the Council by the great Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. This survey should fittingly conclude with the confusingly but aptly similarly-named *Verbum Domini*, Benedict XVI's own reflection on the Synod of Bishops on the Bible (2010).

The Bible Falls Open

In pre-Conciliar days the attitude persisted that the Bible was for Protestants, just as the sacraments were for Catholics. Protestant emphasis on and devotion to the Bible, and widespread reservation towards the sacraments – limitation of the sacraments to the two sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, departure from the principal of *ex opere operato*, and particularly hesitations about the nature and effectiveness of the Mass – had confirmed the parting of the ways. In addition, the vigour and daring of Protestant scholarship on the Bible had

induced a Catholic fear of biblical scholarship even before this was reinforced by the caution induced in reaction to Catholic Modernism. The Bible, and especially the Old Testament, was for Protestants alone. They had their family Bibles, whereas good Catholics would rely on the Missal for their acquaintance with the Bible, and would (in the English-speaking world) at most possess a New Testament in the archaic Douai Version, or perhaps the brilliant but quirky translation of Ronald Knox.

The first, and perhaps the most important of all official changes, was the new Lectionary of 1967. The range of the scriptural readings of the old missal had been woefully restricted. They included little from the Old Testament. The gospel readings were confined almost exclusively to Matthew, and the other reading was overwhelmingly Pauline, in snippets wrested from their contexts and almost wholly unintelligible. The new Lectionary was a triumph of ingenuity, providing semi-continuous readings from each of the gospels in turn in three successive years, and generous helpings of John at the highlights of the Christian year in Lent and Eastertide. The readings from Paul were now made potentially more intelligible by being also semi-continuous around the three-year cycle – a homilist might occasionally divert from the gospel to focus on a Pauline Letter spread over several Sundays. Admittedly no entirely-satisfactory solution to the problem of including the Old Testament was found: a third cycle would have been confusing and any semi-continuous selection of readings would have needed to be spread over several years. The solution chosen (except for the readings from Acts in Eastertide) was to pair the Old Testament reading with the Sunday gospel over the years. The result of this masterly re-arrangement was to increase vastly the familiarity of both clergy and laity with the breadth and richness of the Bible. As Newman so wisely insisted, ‘Its pages breathe of providence and grace, of our Lord, and of His work and teaching from beginning to end’ (*Essay* 1884, #13).

Such opening to the faithful of the riches of the Bible was surely instrumental in another fundamental change, as the whole Bible became better known, and its use became clearly encouraged by the Church, namely the widespread adoption of the Bible as an instrument of prayer and meditation, that is, the ancient customs of *lectio divina*, and the public and private recitation of the Divine Office. The former had, of course, long been a feature of monastic life, but not particularly of the widespread counter-Reformation and Jesuit spirituality; the latter was confined to monastic observance and perhaps cathedral liturgies. Since Vatican II many parishes have followed the advice of the Church in making the public celebration of Lauds and Vespers an important part of

their prayer-rhythms, enlarging their prayers from the less biblical devotion to the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross. In many parts of the world where the scarcity of priests has made a full Eucharistic service impossible, the people regularly meet the Lord even on Sundays in a service of the Word. This has been a particular boon in far-flung places of the world, where Christian parishes and communities are isolated by long or impassable distances, such as Africa and Australia. As *Dei Verbum* 21 so luminously attested, ‘In the sacred books the heavenly Father meets his children with great love and speaks with them, providing power and energy for the Church’. Similarly, there has been a heartfelt renewal of *lectio divina* throughout the Church in countless family and other groups, as a laudable practice in Lent and at other times, as an orientation at the beginning of meetings and simply for daily sustenance. In many Christian circles it has become customary to begin a meeting, lecture or discussion with a short piece of *lectio divina* to ensure openness and fidelity to the Word of God in the subsequent discussions. Especially in this respect the part, privilege and prophetic function of the ordinary faithful, so stressed in *Lumen Gentium*, has come to expression. The Bible is the book of the whole Church, and there is no need for a priest or professional to preside over its use. Both ancient and recent Church teaching has stressed that this prayerful reading of the scripture is the true use of the Word of God to occasion an accessible and heartfelt way of meeting the Lord and of drawing his Word into our lives. Such reading and enjoyment of the Bible has gone hand-in-hand with literary and rhetorical studies, the appreciation of the Bible not merely as stilted religious texts, but as great and humane works of literature.

The Emergence of Catholic Biblical Scholarship

These movements have been strengthened by, and in turn have encouraged – there is no point in writing books which nobody reads – Catholic biblical scholarship. At an early stage came the *Bible de Jérusalem* movement. This great work, in gestation at Jerusalem since 1946, reached the English-speaking world through Alexander Jones’ *Jerusalem Bible* in 1966. Alex Jones’ purpose in producing an English edition was to provide not so much a biblical translation as a translation of the theological introductions and notes. It encapsulated so much of the discoveries and insights of a wide range of biblical scholars that it has proved a unique resource for translation into many languages, and for continuous up-dating in further editions. In England the pioneering work of the Catholic Biblical Association, under such heroic figures as Dom Bernard Orchard and Reggie Fuller, had already produced the *Catholic*

Commentary on Holy Scripture (1953). This commentary played its own important part in wider Christian biblical scholarship, constituting the only acceptable single-volume English-language commentary on scripture, as successor to the ageing Peake's *Commentary* of 1920. Its second edition in 1969 included a tiny but highly significant step in the movement towards the ecumenical scholarship: no longer were non-Catholic commentaries and works stigmatized with a warning asterisk. However, this second edition was immediately up-staged by the American Catholic *Jerome Commentary*, also published in 1969, and astonishingly attaining a second edition under the same editors 25 years later, as *The New Jerome Commentary*. This latter still holds its own among a plethora of newer single-volume commentaries, combining historical articles and articles on Church teaching on the Bible with competent textual articles.

The *Jerome* also signified to us in Europe the emergence of a rich stream of American Catholic biblical scholarship. This has continued to hold and confirm its place at all levels of scholarship and writing with such series as *Sacra Pagina*, commenting on each book of the Bible, and the major project of the *Anchor Bible Series*, now edited by the Catholic John Collins. The leaders of this movement, such as Joseph Fitzmyer, John P. Meier and Raymond Brown, won the recognition and indeed acclaim associated with a host of honorary doctorates from secular universities and presidency of international associations of professional biblical studies such as the Society of Biblical Literature and the Society of New Testament Studies. Fitzmyer became known as a world leader in Aramaic studies, Meier for his gigantic work on the historical Jesus, and Brown for his exhaustive studies of the *Birth* (1977) and the *Death* (1994) *of the Messiah*.¹ Raymond Brown in particular contributed to Catholic biblical studies at all levels by the valuable explicit combination of historico-critical exegesis with loyalty to Catholic teaching in his popular biblical courses and their very wide distribution on tape. Also worthy of note have been the respected and authoritative positions enjoyed among international scholars by a number of Australian Catholic biblical scholars, such as Brendan Byrne and Francis Moloney.

A particular emphasis within American biblical scholarship has been the important part played by women. From the 1970s onwards the feminist school, led by such well-known figures as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether, ensured that the voice of women – and indeed even their silence – in the Bible should be heard, that questions

¹ He died comparatively young, at the age of 70, but not before declaring that he had no intention of writing a third, comparable study on the Resurrection.

should be asked how such patriarchally-dominated writing could be the Word of God. Even those who contested that the feminist voice was too strident could not deny that such emphases underlined aspects of God and of human nature and society which had too long been neglected. As biblical teaching became less exclusively a clerical province, it was women who began to fill the posts equally with men, bringing with them new horizons of understanding of God and of human nature. Linguistic problems generated by the male-oriented bias of the English language have found no easy solution, but in biblical scholarship ‘men’ is no longer taken thoughtlessly to designate both sexes.

In the post-Conciliar years biblical scholarship became increasingly important in the ecumenical movement. Catholic and non-Catholic scholars have become happy to work together, whether in international conferences or in joint team-projects or in biblical teaching for a wider public, for example through the Bible Society or the Bible Reading Fellowship, both originally non-Catholic organisations. Since the sixteenth century the Bible had been more a source of division than a means to unity. Now scholarly agreement far outweighs confessional differences; this may well be more profoundly true of biblical studies than of any other branch of theological study. One such project of international and inter-confessional co-operation was a series of conferences on the Synoptic Problem, under the patronage of Dom Bernard Orchard, ending with a two-week conference in Jerusalem, and resulting in a number of publications and new initiatives. These brought together scholars from many different streams, and the academic agreements and differences were far more significant than any confessional stances. Similarly in the field of biblical translation inter-confessional partnership has become increasingly common. Already in 1966 the *RSV – Catholic Edition* was published, after more than a dozen years of negotiations, perhaps the first Bible in which Catholics and non-Catholics worked together. In subsequent productions, such as the *NRSV*, committees have been careful to include Catholic participants. On the Catholic side, numerous Vatican documents have stressed the importance of Catholics including ecumenical partners in such projects. The renowned text-critic Carlo Martini (later Cardinal Archbishop of Milan) played an important part in preparing the authoritative editions of the Greek text of the New Testament by the United Bible Society. At another level his radio biblical homilies and conferences drew important audiences, well beyond the confines of his own flock. Perhaps the most important achievement in ecumenical biblical work has been the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, a multi-volume commentary, originally written in German, but widely translated.

The most important feature of this development has been the emergence of a Catholic biblical scholarship which can hold up its head on the world stage. Half a century ago it was assumed that Catholic scholars had little of their own to contribute, and held authority only in a ghetto of their own co-religionists. Since Vatican II, however, the respectability of Catholic biblical scholarship has gradually won recognition. Perhaps the most important single recognition came with the publication of the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, an analysis and evaluation of methods of interpretation of the Bible within and beyond the tradition of the Church. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, originally an assemblage of Cardinals, is now an assemblage of some two dozen biblical scholars to advise the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on biblical matters. In this instance their careful work won acclaim well beyond the boundaries of the Church, though the highly respected Anglican biblical scholar Leslie Houlden pointed out that they might have admitted that in no single major development in scriptural studies have Roman Catholics taken the initiative.

Three Emphases

Any attempt to outline the most important developments in biblical teaching during the last half-century must remain highly personal, and no doubt reflect personal interests. I myself would dare to highlight three developments, the redaction history of the gospels, the stress on the Jewishness of Jesus and the re-admission of Alexandrian-style exegesis in the Church.

1. Redaction history of the gospels is an approach which came to birth after the Second World War. Between the wars much of gospel scholarship was centred on form criticism. This was a movement originating in the work of three great German scholars, K.L. Schmidt, Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius, in 1919–1921. The main thrust of this movement was to discern the particular form of units of the gospel-narratives, and by this means to discern what, if anything, could be considered historical. In fact the whole emphasis of the movement was strongly anti-historical. With truly Germanic authority Bultmann declared that it was impossible to write a life of Jesus or to know very much about his history – a position still held by Gerd Lüdemann in *Jesus after 2000 Years* (2000). Such was his authority that historical research on the life of Jesus was virtually banned in Germany and even more widely – with the

honourable exception of a few such major figures as Joachim Jeremias and Charles H. Dodd.

After the Second World War positive interest shifted to the theology of the individual evangelists, and particularly the synoptic evangelists, Mark, Matthew and Luke, and to the relationship between them. The late 1950s saw a spate of innovative German studies on the individual gospels, Willi Marxsen on Mark (1956), Wolfgang Trilling on Matthew (1959), Hans Conzelmann on Luke (1960). In this movement Catholic scholars certainly played an important part, for both Marxsen and Trilling were Catholics, and others, such as Joachim Gnilka, were also leaders in the field. These initial studies made fascinating reading. The method was, by reading the synoptic gospels in parallel, to isolate the elements proper to each, and thus compare and contrast their theological emphases. The popular theory of St Augustine (espoused by Church authorities in the early twentieth century, and therefore often held to be the ‘Catholic’ theory) that Matthew was the first to be written, was overthrown, and Mark became generally held to be the earliest of the gospels. Matthew’s stress on the fulfilment of scripture and on things Jewish in general indicated that this gospel was written for Christians sprung from Judaism, and still at home in Jewish tradition. Similarly Luke’s sophisticated Greek and his stress on the dangers of wealth and on the openness of the Christian message to the gentiles indicated that he was writing for an audience of gentiles at ease in the Greco-Roman culture of the Eastern Mediterranean. The attention paid to these matters by the Pontifical Biblical Commission during the Council, and by the resultant paragraphs of *Dei Verbum*, encouraged Catholic scholars to pursue such theological discernment. Less easy was it to discern the relationship between Matthew and Luke and to explain definitively the long passages of verbatim agreement between them. Controversy over this, the so-called ‘Synoptic Problem’, still continues, with distinguished proponents on both sides. The major bone of contention is whether or not these long passages should be accounted for by postulating a source, now lost but known to both Matthew and Luke, nicknamed ‘Q’ (for ‘*Die Quelle*’, German for ‘the source’). A team of scholars exists who have set themselves the detailed task of reconstructing what this ‘source’ must have been, while others pooh-pooh its very existence. The reconstruction would show that there existed a group of early Christians, probably in Galilee, whose priorities were markedly different from those which later prevailed in the gospels. But did Q ever exist, or is it simply an unnecessary hypothesis? If the author of Luke knew the gospel of Matthew there is no need for Q at all.

2. The renewed stress on the Jewishness of Jesus has been attributed to the influence of one scholar, Geza Vermes, himself a Jew, and at one time a distinguished Catholic biblical scholar. The first steps in this renewal, so strongly at variance with popular devotion, came in 1967. Since then Professor Vermes has published a whole library of works to illustrate the Jewishness of Jesus. Chief among them is his trilogy, *Jesus the Jew* (1973), *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (1983), *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (1993). The fair-haired, snub-nosed baby of Christmas cards, the ‘English rose’ portrayal of his mother and the aquiline-nosed Christ selected for devotion to the ‘Divine Mercy’ are all challenged by this reversal. Far more important, however, is the interpretation of Jesus against the background of the growth of knowledge of the Judaism – or rather the Judaisms – of his time. Since the discovery and later publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1946 (of which Vermes is the popular translator), and the steady development of archaeology in the land of the Bible, it has become much easier to understand many of the sayings and actions of Jesus. For instance, Jesus’ own self-designation as ‘son of man’ must, according to Vermes, be understood against the background of its use by the charismatic Galilean rabbis of Jesus’ own time, rather than as an allusion to the ‘Son of man’ in Daniel 7.13-14. The coincidence of the regulations for reconciling differences laid down by Matthew 18:15-17 and those given in the Community Rule of Qumran leaves room for tantalizing speculation about Jesus’ relationship to that community. The similarity in the use and application of scripture in the Dead Sea Scrolls throws important light on the New Testament usage of scripture. Especially the use of Isaiah 40 by both John the Baptist and the Qumran scrolls in expectation of the Messiah provides a close link.

Similarly, the recent excavations in Jerusalem (e.g. the Pool of Bethzatha/Bethesda) have shown that John, whose historicity has been so often questioned, was more conversant with Jerusalem than the synoptic evangelists. Particularly the excavations of the Pool of Siloam have not only provided a historical background to the story of the Healing of the Man Born Blind (John 9), but its character as a pool for ritual washing has suggested that Jesus did not altogether neglect the Jewish preoccupation with ritual purity. The absence of pig-bones in the rubbish-pits of Sepphoris suggests that Galilee, once considered to be among the most thoroughly hellenized agricultural areas of the Eastern Mediterranean, had at least pockets of strict Jewish observance. No longer can Galilee at the time of Jesus be considered a land of ranches owned by rich, absentee landlords and of impoverished but philosophical peasantry.

3. A third development in Catholic biblical studies in the half-century since Vatican II has been the steady insistence that historico-critical exegesis must be partnered by a Christian theological exegesis. Since the early days of Origen the honour paid to the ‘spiritual’ sense of scripture in theology and spirituality has been a feature of Catholic thought and prayer. Of course Luther in his early and important work *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* strongly objected to the excessive use of allegory in this ‘Alexandrian’ method of exegesis – not without good reason. German Protestant historic-critical scriptural scholarship since the Enlightenment was vociferously critical of this method as unscientific. The insistence that there is room for such a reading of scripture seems to me one of the most important emphases of the apostolic Exhortation of Benedict XVI after the Synod of Bishops on the Bible in 2010. That the historico-critical approach is the *sine qua non* of all exegesis has been clear since the rise of modern critical biblical studies began. No return is possible to the mentality of Origen, who - for all his brilliant and painstaking historical and geographical work – considered the literal or *somatic* sense of the scriptures to be secondary to the *pneumatic* or spiritual sense. Origen’s approach was to see Christ everywhere in the Old Testament, leading to the medieval slogan *Novum in vetere latet, vetus in novo patet*. This could become an all-embracing emphasis: ‘All divine Scripture is one book, and this one book is Christ, speaks of Christ and finds its fulfilment in Christ’, wrote Hugh of St Victor (*De Arca*, quoted in *Verbum Domini*). This reading of Christ everywhere could lead to some fundamental misunderstandings. Thus in official translations of the *Benedictus* the ‘horn of salvation’ (‘he has raised up a horn of salvation for us’) is understood directly of Jesus rather than of the whole Davidic tradition, an unwarranted impoverishment of meaning.

On the other hand, the Exhortation *Verbum Domini* is a fine example of reading the Bible in the light of the tradition, supporting its teaching by a range of well-chosen patristic quotations and Church documents, especially the Pope’s own favourite, St Augustine, and the Vatican II Constitution *Dei Verbum*. This reading of the scripture in the light of tradition is, of course, a peculiarly catholic and patristic practice, quite at variance with historico-critical methods. Furthermore, *Verbum Domini* has an important insistence on canonical exegesis, that is, reading the Bible as a whole in the light of the Spirit, and in view of the living tradition of the Church (#34). A clear theological insight underlies both these approaches: we live in the age of the Spirit, and until the Spirit had been given the scripture could not be fully understood, as John 7:39 explains, ‘for the Spirit was not yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified’ (cf. 2:21-22). The Spirit will lead into all truth and give full

understanding (John 14:26). Read in this light, the scripture speaks directly not only to its original audience but to Christians of every age, and Old Testament prophecies and types can be understood at a level not obvious in an exclusively historico-critical interpretation. It is, however, a confirmation of the methods of exegesis in the New Testament itself, as when the resurrection and exaltation of Christ is explained in Peter's Pentecost speech as the meaning of Psalms 16 and 110 ('David says of him...' Acts 2:25). Such an approach had already featured in the 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, which insists that 'the Church reads the Bible in the light of the paschal mystery', while at the same time warning that 'one must respect each stage of the history of salvation. To empty out of the Old Testament its own proper meaning would be to deprive the New of its roots in history.'

It is important to distinguish two different further senses which may be seen in the Old Testament, the typological sense and the *sensus plenior*. The former is widely used by the Church Fathers without controversy. It consists in later authors seeing persons and event of the Old Testament as types which will be fulfilled in the New, for example the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's dear son, as a type of the offering of Jesus, God's dear Son. The *sensus plenior* concerns the deeper sense of words. In the immediate post-Conciliar era there had been considerable controversy in the Church over the *sensus plenior*, defined by Raymond Brown as the 'additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author'.² Brown insisted on two conditions for this *sensus plenior*: it must be in continuity with the obvious sense of the words, and must also be assured by its use in the catholic interpretation of the text. Nevertheless, there still remain difficulties over the inspiration of such a meaning: if such a meaning is not intended by the human author, would it not be inserted by God almost surreptitiously, not treating the human authors as specifically human, that is, not using their own authorial faculties and skills? If we treat them as saying more than they mean or perceive, are we not putting into their heads ideas which were never there? To this, too, there are parallels, when Caiaphas attests that 'it is better for one man to die for the people...' (John 11:50) or Pilate publicly proclaims Jesus 'king' (John 19:21). Neither Pilate nor Caiaphas intends the fuller meaning perceived by the evangelist in their words.

The nub of the question is surely whether the human author needs to be fully aware of all the implications of what he is saying. Authors, especially poets, sometimes need to be prompted, examined or indeed

² R.E. Brown, *The 'Sensus Plenior' of Sacred Scripture* (Doctoral thesis, Baltimore: St Mary's University, 1955), p. 92.

cajoled into laying out the full meaning and implication of their words, and even so they may find it impossible to do so, or may limit themselves to a particular formulation. The fuller explanation may go beyond the intention of the author in writing the words. In the light of future events an author may be pressed into saying that the realization of a saying or poem, though not envisaged at the time, is in accordance with what was said. In the same way the fulfillment of messianic prophecies of Isaiah, both in the ‘Book of the Messiah’ (Isaiah 7–12) and in the prophecies of the Suffering Servant, could well be claimed as not alien to the author’s intentions, unformulated as well as formulated. This is especially easy to envisage if these prophecies are understood as referring to an individual who is conceived as the personification of the people of Israel. Similarly the use of the Psalm-verse at Pentecost of the resurrection of Christ (‘you will not allow your Holy One to see corruption’) may be seen as a viable extension of the psalmist’s thought. In the same way, the promise to the Davidic king of Jerusalem, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool’ (Psalm 110.1 and Acts 2.34), may be seen to have its fulfillment in the exaltation of Christ, even though the sacred writer ‘was not fully and clearly aware of the *sensus plenior* of his text’.³ All this implies that the fuller sense or deeper meaning must be in continuity with the author’s intentions.

This dimension is an essential element in the personal assimilation of the scripture so strongly underpinned by the Exhortation. It is sometimes claimed that the *lectio divina* approach falsifies or distorts the scripture by its assumption that the scripture speaks directly to the reader in another age. By a canonical reading of scripture, however, which sees the whole Bible as the book of the Church, continuously understood and presented by the Church, in continuity of the Spirit which leads into all truth, it is legitimate to see in the text meanings and applications which were not clear at the time of writing. The full Christological and Eucharistic significance of the feeding of a multitude beside the Lake of Galilee were hardly clear at the time of its happening; they became clearer as the understanding of Christ and the Eucharist deepened. As our own understanding of these two mysteries deepens, so will our understanding of that event grow richer and more fruitful.

³ Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 113.