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# An Event in North American Biblical Scholarship

## A Review Article

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THE PUBLICATION OF *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, An Illustrated Encyclopedia*,<sup>1</sup> must certainly be considered a landmark in the history of biblical scholarship on the North American continent. Although two hundred and fifty-three contributors, representing fifteen different countries, took part in the undertaking, the vast majority are now teaching in universities, colleges, and seminaries of the United States; twelve are Canadians. To achieve within five years a dictionary of such comprehension and scope is in itself a tribute to the competence and co-operation of American biblical scholars.

Over seventy-five hundred entries cover every biblical term to whose understanding scholarly study has contributed, as well as all matters of ancient Near Eastern learning, whether history, literature, or religion, which may contribute to a better understanding of the Bible.

An extensive introduction is provided for every book of the Bible, as well as for the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old and New Testaments, and other early Christian literature. The articles on "Assyria and Babylonia," "Egypt," and "Israel" are complete histories in themselves by world-famous scholars—A. L. Oppenheim, J. A. Wilson, and H. H. Rowley, respectively. The latest results of archaeological investigations are accounted for, and an abundant assortment of black-and-white pictures, plans, sketches, and explanatory maps is provided. Volume I includes with the twenty-four full-colour maps from the *Westminster Historical Atlas of the Bible*. In addition, each volume has eight pages of full-colour photographs of exceptional clarity and brilliance. All biblical names are entered with acceptable pronunciations. Succinct and up-to-date bibliographies are generally provided with each article, unless the material itself does not warrant further reference. Cross-references to other articles are frequent, thus facilitating the use of this truly encyclopaedic dictionary. There is scarcely any notion relating to the biblical period or to biblical studies which is not at least noted in the work. Such extensive coverage necessarily entails some overlapping, e.g. articles on "Spirit" and "Holy Spirit," "Biblical Criticism" and the "History of Biblical Criticism," "Inspiration and Revelation" and "Revelation," "Christ," "Jesus Christ," "Incarnation,"

1. New York-Nashville: Abingdon Press (Toronto: G. R. Welch Co.), 1962. 4 vols. \$48.75.

and "Teaching of Jesus." In most cases, however, a different point of view justifies the duplication.

A dictionary of such scope cannot pretend to contribute to the advancement of research, nor is this the purpose which the editors have set themselves. The pastoral character of the work is evident in the fact that it is directed primarily to the busy preacher (I, p. xx). The needs of the college and seminary student have also been kept in mind, as well as the church-school teacher and general reader of the Bible. Consequently, technical language is avoided as much as possible, although Greek and Hebrew originals are always given for significant words. Nonetheless, such a work is far from useless to the scholar, for biblical studies are so highly specialized today that even the scholar often needs a concise summary of contemporary research in his own studies. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* will provide such information.

The outstanding merit of the work lies in the fact that it provides a mirror of contemporary biblical scholarship. Contributors have not, for the most part, been interested in advancing personal or radically new positions, but have confined themselves to a sober presentation of the various opinions with no more than an indication of their own preference. Confessional bias, polemic, and apologetics are studiously avoided. Peculiarly Protestant positions are generally stated as such; attention is drawn to Roman Catholic positions on some occasions, though not as frequently or in as well nuanced a manner as a Roman Catholic reviewer might desire. It might be argued that this failure to discuss controversial issues such as biblical authority, typology, and the divorce clause of Matt. 5:32 detracts from the thoroughness of the work. On the other hand, the book might never have been completed if agreement had to be reached on all these issues. Moreover, the policy adopted renders the work more serviceable to the Roman Catholic student.

Biblical literature itself has set the limits within which the various notions are treated. Dogmatic implications of biblical data are hardly ever discussed. This self-imposed limitation is salutary and consonant with the contemporary revival of biblical theology. The biblical data themselves offer a challenge to the dogmatic or systematic theologian; the more objective the description of this material the greater the service which the biblical scholar renders theology and the Church. K. Stendahl's contribution on "Contemporary Biblical Theology" (I, pp. 418-32) is programmatic in this regard. The *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* has at least made us aware of the different world of biblical literature, but Dr. Stendahl considers "the experience of the distance and the strangeness of biblical thought as a creative asset, rather than as a destructive or burdensome liability." He would therefore limit the biblical theologian to a descriptive task, since it is imperative that the "original" be spelled out in its own terms with the highest degree of perception possible. In this task, the believer has the advantage of automatic empathy with the sacred authors, but must beware of modernizing; the

agnostic may join in the task provided he observes rigorously the canons of descriptive scholarship. The descriptive task is the special challenge of our age.

No period of Christian theology has been as radically exposed to a consistent attempt to relive the theology of its first adherents. The ideal of an empathetic understanding of the first century without borrowing categories from later times has never been an ideal before, nor have the comparative sources for such an adventure been as close at hand and as well analyzed [I, p. 425b].

The question of relevance becomes a problem of hermeneutics. The authority of the canon takes on new importance, for all contemporary literature is relevant for the descriptive task, while only the books of the canon are normative for the believer.

The old question of whether the Bible rests on the church or the church on the Bible is a misleading question from the point of view of the historical alternative. To be sure, the church "chose" its canon. But it did so under the impact of the acts of God by which it itself came into existence. The process of canonization is one of recognition, not one of creation *ex nihilo* or *ex theologia* [I, p. 429b].

The programme outlined by Dr. Stendahl is exemplified in the articles dealing with notions of importance to biblical theology. The contributors have confined themselves to presenting the biblical data in the light of ancient Near Eastern history, culture, and religion. This is particularly evident in such articles as those dealing with the "Church" (P. S. Minear), "Covenant" (G. E. Mendenhall), "Faith" (E. C. Blackman), "Love in the NT" (G. Johnston), "Law in the NT" (W. D. Davies), "Christian Ministry" (M. H. Shepherd, Jr.), "Resurrection in the NT" (J. A. T. Robinson), "Righteousness in the NT" (P. J. Achtemeier), "Son of God" (S. E. Johnson), and "Virgin Birth" (D. Moody). The article on the "Letter to the Romans" is most encouraging to a Roman Catholic reviewer. F. W. Beare does not treat the letter as a *locus* of theological controversy, but outlines the teaching of the Apostle in the light of his teaching purpose and the Old Testament background to his thought. God does not deal with man as a judge; the forensic interpretation of *dikaioō* is far from satisfactory, despite the all but unanimous interpretation of Protestant theologians from the time of Luther. God's pronouncement itself makes a man righteous; justification is not to be regarded as a legal fiction. Expiation is not a matter of divine anger to be appeased by sacrifice, but of divine love that removes the stain of sin which makes communion with God impossible. This ability to rise above confessional controversies in order to question the Word of God directly on its own ground is a most encouraging invitation to ecumenical dialogue. Roman Catholic scholars have a duty to their Protestant brothers to show them how *authentic* Catholic Tradition is related to Sacred Scripture. The contemporary concern for biblical theology in Dr. Stendahl's terms should facilitate this task, but more dialogue and co-operation is necessary, even between Roman Catholic exegetes and theologians.

It would be impertinent and picayune for the reviewer of such a work to point out inconsistencies or deficiencies in individual articles. In a work of such scope, it is inevitable that all the contributors will not share the same opinion on related questions, nor will each contribution be as thorough as some readers may desire. If, however, "knowledge and faith are not at odds," as the general editor, George A. Buttrick, so ably states in the Preface (I, p. xxiii), consistency in the crucial area of Christology is certainly desirable in an age of ecumenical encounter. The article on "Christ" (S. E. Johnson) clearly asserts that Jesus' sense of his own mission and person must have been the largest single factor in the process by which Jewish messianism was transformed into Christology (I, p. 570b). The articles on "Incarnation" (E. C. Blackman) and "Son of God" (S. E. Johnson) manifest a similar faith in the messianic consciousness and divinity of Christ. In dealing with the Petrine texts and the "Christian Ministry," M. H. Shepherd Jr. affirms that "the critic who rules out the historical authenticity of all these passages lays himself open to the charge of manipulating the evidence in the interest of preconceived theories" (III, p. 387a). Yet in the extensive and central article on "Jesus Christ," F. C. Grant reduces the person of Jesus to "a nonrabbinic, nonscribal lay teacher of religion" who "took his stand upon a direct, intuitive understanding of God's will and requirements." He met his death because "his free and independent attitude toward the Scripture itself . . . roused the antagonism of the religious authorities." On the basis of this judgment, Dr. Grant then attributes to the primitive church whatever in the Gospel texts "is unessential and complicates the story" (see II, pp. 888-9). By so doing, he not only lays himself open to the criticism of M. H. Shepherd cited above, but he applies the principle of form criticism in a manner which exceeds the limitations of sound historical scholarship.

No competent exegete today would deny that the primitive church, under the guidance of the Apostles, "reinterpreted or re-emphasized Jesus' words" (II, p. 875b). Form criticism of the Synoptic Gospels has proved invaluable in helping us to discover the process and development of such interpretation, although the method must be handled with the greatest delicacy, open as it is to arbitrary and subjective judgments. To infer, however, that such interpretation has deformed the original meaning of Christ's teaching is not justified by the literary argument. Reinterpretation and development need not be deformation, but may equally be homogeneous with the original meaning, whose full virtuality is being unfolded for the benefit of the church. In such a case, the words of Jesus are patient of a variety of analogous applications in the life of the Christian community. The Synoptic Gospels are evidence that this has indeed been the case for the primitive church.

If, therefore, Christian faith looks to the Gospels as its primary source for the knowledge of Jesus Christ, the believer must of necessity place his confidence in the apostolic witness, as it is recorded in the New Testament. The Acts of the Apostles and the New Testament Epistles make it

abundantly clear that the faith of the early church, if it meant anything at all, was an understanding of the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth as guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. To adopt this position is certainly a matter of faith, but it need not impede a full and objective use of all the tools of literary and historical criticism to discover how the early church produced the Gospels. Nor is it necessary to harmonize or minimize the inequalities and discrepancies which are detected in the Gospel record. Faith, however, would seem to demand that the solution be sought in a more transcendent view of the mystery of Christ and the church, than in deformation by the primitive community. The reception of the canon of Sacred Scripture implies at least this or it implies nothing at all. To say otherwise opens the gospel to every possible rationalization and modernization. In brief, we must either let the gospel be a challenge to our understanding in faith or else we inevitably make our understanding the measure of the gospel.

It is certainly a tribute to the ecumenical spirit of the *Canadian Journal of Theology* that the editors should have invited a Roman Catholic to review this outstanding monument to American biblical scholarship. The above remarks have been made in the same ecumenical spirit. Roman Catholic biblical scholarship has advanced considerably in the last two decades, especially since the publication of the Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943). The fruits of this scholarship are still largely confined to scientific reviews, but recent monographs are making them more readily available. Several contributors to *The Interpreter's Dictionary* have taken cognizance of this work not only in their bibliographies but also in the body of their articles. Some Catholic journals and series are cited by the general editor in the list of abbreviations. Two outstanding American publications are, however, conspicuously absent, namely, the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* and the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine translation of the Old Testament—of which three of four volumes have already appeared. Roman Catholic scholars are at pains to acquaint themselves with non-Catholic scholarship and they make use of it with gratitude. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* will be of invaluable assistance to them in this regard. The ecumenical spirit of our time and the contemporary state of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship invite the reciprocal use of each other's work. It is to be hoped that future editions of the dictionary will further extend what has already been well begun.

Through such mutual co-operation, under the providence of God, we shall advance towards greater unity in our understanding of the Word of God in Sacred Scripture and in the Church. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* promises to be of incalculable service not only to biblical studies but also to the ecumenical movement. It should, therefore, be available to every English-speaking exegete and theologian.