

# A Commentary Revised

S. Y. BLANCH

---

I FIRST BEGAN to read the Bible seriously as a young man in the R.A.F. I purchased a Revised Version in Calcutta which rather quaintly had part of Ezekiel printed twice—an uncovenanted mercy! But other equipment had I none and my zest for study had seriously ebbed before I got to the end of Leviticus. The new IVF Commentary\* would have been awkward to pack in a kit bag ( $9\frac{1}{2}$  ins  $\times$   $6\frac{1}{2}$  ins,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  lbs) but it would have been worth it. I would have been saved many perplexities. But now twenty-five years later, twenty-five years older, I am asked to review it as a more mature student of the Word.

The one-volume commentary format is familiar—a series of general articles on the Authority of Scripture, OT Theology, the History of Israel, etc., with commentaries on individual books and—a welcome innovation—in some cases a series of appendices to attend in some detail to more abstruse issues, e.g. at the end of Samuel articles on ‘The Institution of the Monarchy’, ‘Seer and Prophet’ and ‘The Sources’, and at the end of Hebrews on ‘The Priesthood of Christ’ and ‘The Warning Passages’.

I hope I shall not be misunderstood if I say that the most satisfactory parts of the Commentary are those in which the author is less inhibited by certain received traditions. The commentary on Ecclesiastes is a model of its kind—succinct, relevant and challenging. One of the reasons, I believe, is that Professor Hendry feels free to say ‘The author does not really claim to be Solomon but places his words in Solomon’s mouth. We may compare the practice of ascribing written works to famous historical personages which was a familiar literary device in antiquity. It was intended to indicate the type, or genus, of literature to which a work belonged. It was not intended to deceive anyone, and none of its original readers would in fact have been deceived’ (p. 571). The book is made to speak to twentieth century man because it is no longer in the strait jacket of sixteenth century theology. Compare this treatment on the other hand with the treatment of Deuteronomy,

where a not dissimilar question of date and authorship arises. I hold no brief for some of the more bizarre suggestions about the provenance and origins of this book, but in this case Professor Harrison labours under the disadvantage that he must somehow stand by Mosaic authorship. He could be right but his opinions seem to rest more upon a received tradition than on a candid examination of the contents of the book. Again, Mr. Payne in one of his appendices on 1 and 2 Samuel says 'It must freely be admitted that the writer of the books drew on a variety of sources', but Dr. Young in his admirable article on the 'History of the literary criticism of the Pentateuch' has problems with what is called the 'multiple authorship' of the Pentateuch. On the whole, I am bound to say, I am happier with historians who make use of sources than with those who write out of the top of their heads. It is this preoccupation with received tradition regarding the Bible that, for example, prevents the commentator on Genesis from making that most magnificent of books as relevant as it might have been to our racialisms, our secular cities, our death of God theologies, our Church-World problems.

The received tradition raises its head again, though only briefly, in Dr. Packer's article on 'Revelation and Inspiration'. I have written 'Amen' in my copy against the following: The Bible was designed 'not merely to provide a ground for personal faith and guidance for individual Christian living, but also to enable the worldwide church in every age to understand itself, to interpret its history, to reform and purify its life continually, and to rebuff all assaults made upon it, whether from within by sin and heresy, or from without, by persecution and rival ideologies. All the problems that ever faced or will face the Church are in principle covered and solved in this book' (p. 16). But even Dr. Packer finds it necessary to say later in the same article, concerning those who question verbal inspiration, 'it amounts to a flat denial that God in His sovereign providence could do what it was evidently desirable that He should do, and so prepare and control the human instruments through whom He caused Scripture to be written that they put down exactly what He intended, no more and no less' (p. 18). Having struggled for several months now with my very inadequate Hebrew through Judges and Samuel, I wish God could have provided an accident-free text, but the fact of the matter is that He has not done so. It is not much help to know that the original is error free if we have no means of discovering what the original was. 'Text corrupt . . . Hebrew meaningless . . . words untranslatable . . . see variants'—this is the bread and butter of any serious Biblical scholar and no dogma of inspiration and revelation can afford to ignore it. Perhaps the clue to our difficulties in this matter is to be found in Dr. Bromiley's suggestion that 'a true doctrine of history and revelation in the Bible will be formulated only when the problem is studied in the light of the similar problem of the incarnation. Christ,

the Word revealed, is both God and man, the eternal Son historically incarnate, two natures, one Person. Neither if one denies the deity nor if one ignores the humanity is the true Christ perceived and believed' (p. 11). Are we really still tied down to this Chalcedonian formula or are we moving to a more dynamic, realistic view of our Lord's person which does not attempt this distinction between the human and divine? This ever was the weakness of Greek theology and I do not see why we should impart it into our consideration of Scripture. Our Lord is most genuinely divine when He is most completely human—subject to the accidents of human kind. The 'humanity' of the Bible is precisely part of its true 'divinity'. What marks the Bible off, for me, from any other 'book', is the quite miraculous emergence of a common attitude to God, to the world and to man which emerges from a collection of documents so obviously disparate in origin, type, date and authorship; so obviously subject as any other book to the accidents of time and the inadequacies of the authors. And this causes me to wonder whether this splendid one-volume commentary will not be the last of its kind. The Hebrews themselves made a clear distinction exegetically in their treatment of the three canons of Scripture—the law, the prophets and the writings. We may be able now, as the consequence of the labours of devoted scholars, to be even more precise and to attempt an interpretation of these documents not on the basis of a received tradition but on the basis of the documents themselves. In short, we shall no longer look for one comprehensive principle of interpretation to apply to books so diverse from each other in form and date and intention. One of the virtues of the Commentary is that despite the general articles which essay a comprehensive principle, the individual commentators are wise enough on the whole to interpret the books in the light of their contents and necessarily, therefore, to appear to disagree with each other. This one-volume commentary could otherwise have unwittingly perpetuated the notion that there is a dogmatic platform on which exegesis may stand outside the Bible itself. But if this is the last of the one-volume commentaries, it occupies a worthy and valuable place in a distinguished line. Yes, I would have been glad indeed of it as a young seeker after truth with only limited space in his kitbag.