

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church

Pontifical Biblical Commission, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome, 1993; 130pp., £4.99; ISBN 88 209 1927 3

This small paperback contains two items. The major one is a document produced by the Pontifical Biblical Commission on 'The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church', but it is preceded by an address given by the Pope on 23rd April, 1993, on the occasion of the official presentation to him of the document and simultaneously of celebration of the earlier encyclicals '*Providentissimus Deus*' and '*Divino Afflante Spiritu*', both of which were devoted to the same theme.

The present document and the two encyclicals are all concerned to encourage the study of the Bible as Sacred Scripture. The Pope's address highlights what he considers to be permanently valid elements in the earlier documents. Catholic exegetes were exhorted to counter liberal exegesis, not by retreating from biblical criticism, but by becoming better at it than their adversaries. They were to seek for the spiritual message, not as a separate exercise but by means of exegetical science. The inspiration of the Bible was understood by analogy with the incarnation: 'so too the words of God, expressed in human languages, became like human language in every respect except error'. Nevertheless, 'historico-critical' study was commended. The sacred books 'have been dictated by the Holy Spirit himself', and therefore the guidance of the Spirit is necessary for their interpretation. At the same time right interpretation necessitates fidelity to 'the Church'. The Second Vatican Council stated: 'All that has been said about the manner of interpreting the Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church, which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the word of God.' Consequently biblical interpreters should remain close to the preaching ministry, participating in it themselves and maintaining relations with others who exercise it. The ultimate goal of the Scriptures is indeed 'to put believers into a personal relationship with God'.

Commenting on the new document, the Pope commends the use of all the new methods of study but 'with the historico-critical basis freed from its philosophical presuppositions or those contrary to the truth of our faith'. We must concentrate neither on the human aspects of revelation (the mistake of the historico-critical method) nor on the divine (the mistake of fundamentalism). The Bible needs to be translated and inculturated for different peoples. May the Catholic scholars, then, be guided by Jesus Christ, and may the Virgin Mary serve as a model to them.

All this is a surprising mixture of languages to say things that many a conservative Protestant would say and indeed could hardly express any better, and things that are typically Catholic in their stress on the role of the Church (I suspect that only one denomination is seen within this horizon!).

The actual document itself fills out the summary given by the Pope (who had confessedly read it before it was presented to him). It emerges that the occasion for the document is the rise of new synchronic methods of biblical criticism alongside the traditional diachronic historico-critical method.

The first main section is intended to be descriptive of the various methods. It regards the historico-critical method as indispensable, but notes that sometimes it did little more than dissolve the text into sources and ignored the message of the final form of the text. More recently, it has paid more attention to 'an analysis of the editorial process' which enables us 'to understand far more accurately the intention of the authors and editors of the Bible, as well as the message which they addressed to their first readers'. In itself the method should be objective and neutral with no *a priori* principles accompanying it. It can accommodate synchronic as well as diachronic approaches.

The document moves on to consider briefly the characteristics of rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis and semiotic analysis (structuralism), indicating the value and the possible limitations of each. It discusses the 'canonical' approach (distinguishing the approaches of Brevard Childs and Sanders), the light thrown by study of Jewish interpretative methods, and the light thrown by a study of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a text (*i.e.* the history of its effects on subsequent readers and their interpretation of it). Illumination of the text can also be gained by sociological, cultural anthropological, and psychological methods. And people coming at the text from their own context, as in liberation theology and feminist approaches, have also something to contribute. The danger of tendentiousness in both of these contextualised approaches is stressed. Finally, there is a section on the Fundamentalism which tends 'to treat the biblical text as if it had been dictated word for word by the Spirit' (where have we recently heard that before from a somewhat authoritative source?) and refuses to accept that the Word has been expressed in human language 'by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources'; consequently it 'places undue stress upon the inerrancy of certain details'. And, of course, it 'separates the interpretation of the Bible from the Tradition'.

The next sub-section deals with 'hermeneutical questions', and recognises that some theories (*e.g.* Bultmann's) are inadequate. The literal, spiritual and 'fuller' senses of Scripture are discussed, rather too briefly to be helpful.

The third section discusses 'characteristics of Catholic interpretation'. Inevitably this is about the relation of biblical interpretation to tradition;

the Bible itself contains much reinterpretation of tradition. The important place of the Fathers of the Church in establishing the main lines of interpretation is discussed. A place is found for 'all the members of the Church' in interpretation, but it is pretty weak.

In the fourth section, on 'interpretation of the Bible in the life of the church', it is stressed that exegetes do not have a monopoly. The message of the Bible is actualised in the church. There follow some notes which could be guidelines for a Bible study group – determine the literal sense accurately; interpret Scripture by Scripture; find what Scripture is saying to the present situation; avoid tendentious interpretation which may be based on theoretical principles at variance with the Bible or which are contrary to 'evangelical justice and charity' (e.g. racism).

In attempting some general evaluation of the document, we would comment, first, that the earlier impression of an extraordinary mixture of technical scholarship, Catholic dogma and practical down-to-earth advice on Bible study is confirmed. Maybe it seems extraordinary only to an outside, Protestant observer. One also gains the impression that rather too much ground is being covered in a short compass with the result that some topics are covered too quickly to be really helpful.

Second, the document does not really explain how to interpret an actual text. It has a lot to say about critical methods, and clearly a major concern is to justify the most recent methods to scholars, warning rightly against their misuse and commending, again rightly, their positive uses. However, critical methods of the sort described are not what people primarily use when they are explaining a text. When the document does get down to the exegesis and application of a text, it descends to a rather simple level.

Third, without being patronising, surely we can welcome and approve of the thoroughly positive attempts that are being made here to allow the Bible to speak and to free it from liberal exegesis. Unfortunately, it is precisely at the point of how one practises the historico-critical approach without the alien presuppositions that made the liberal interpretation of Scripture so innocuous and weak that the document gives us very little guidance. Perhaps all of us who try to do so find ourselves setting off to walk a tightrope with no very clear instructions on how to survive till we reach the other side.

Fourth, the Protestant is puzzled by the continuing subordination of biblical interpretation to the Church and the Tradition. One cannot see how a Luther or a Calvin should have arisen and survived in this context ('Are you alone right?' they are said to have asked him. Well, yes, he was right, but they had forgotten the legions on his side.) The role of the Bible in challenging the Tradition somehow does not get a proper hearing.

Fifth, it is the Fundamentalists who get the most stick, despite the fact that the present Pope himself cites approvingly those parts of the earlier documents which give them most support. Who are these

Fundamentalists? Apparently the Protestants who defended the Fundamentals in 1895 and their successors. We are given blanket descriptions of these people and their errors which certainly fit some contemporary Christians, but which are by no means true of all and emphatically not of those excellent men who stood out against liberalism in 1895. If the truth be told, although Fundamentalism is here attacked most strongly, it is the Fundamentalists who have stood closest to the truth of the Gospels when liberals and Catholics between them have succeeded in hiding and misunderstanding it.

But, finally, one cannot but be heartened by the tone of many remarks in this little book which so emphasise the importance of Scripture, of understanding it aright, and of reading and studying it diligently in the church. Ultimately, we may believe, not even the Tradition of the Church can muzzle the lion itself. Equally, however, we must confess that Protestants – including the Fundamentalists and Evangelicals – all try in our own ways to muzzle that same Word of God and must also learn to submit to it.

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Editor's note: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* has now been published also by SCM Press (London, 1995; 176pp., £9.95; ISBN 0 334 02589 3), ed. J.L.Houlden, with comments.