

# Bible Reading Made Easy

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'People buy the Bible in such quantities as to make it a best-seller. But they do not read it very much and they understand it less'. So says Fr N. J. McEleney, C.S.P., general editor of the *Pamphlet Bible Series*, which is being published by the Paulist Press, New York, at 75 cents a number.

The series is the most effective thing that has yet appeared to help ordinary people of general education to read the Bible and understand what they read. A short notice of the first four pamphlets appeared in *Life of the Spirit* in May 1960. Up to the present (January 1961) twelve pamphlets have appeared, bringing the series up to the book of Judges. No. 1 is an introduction to the Pentateuch; then follow two each for Genesis and Exodus, one for Leviticus, two each for Numbers and Deuteronomy, one each for Josue and Judges.

They help the ordinary reader first of all by their covers, which are bright, light, and modern. Whether their general *décor* meets with your artistic approval or not, there is no doubt that it catches your eye and arouses interest. Inside the cover of each pamphlet there is first a commentary by a member of the Catholic Biblical Association of America; then the Biblical text; and finally a self-teaching quiz on commentary and text. An occasional pamphlet, like the first of the series, contains no text, only commentary and quiz. Whether these quizzes add greatly to the pedagogic value of the series I leave to the judgment of school-teachers. They are at least quite entertaining—for example:

*Choose the correct answers in the following:*

1. The Yahwist tradition is so called (a) because scholars discovered the name on old pottery; (b) it generally calls God by his personal name of Yahweh; (c) Moses liked the word.

2. The story of the violation of Dina is disgraceful because (a) the Bible should not mention sex; (b) her brothers were involved; (c) the retaliation was greater than justice demanded.

The answers to each quiz are given in the same number, which is an improvement on the technique of the newspaper quizzes on Christmas day.

The biblical text is in the translation published by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, and since it is the work of the same C.B.A. whose members have written the commentaries, a word or two about it here

will not be out of place. Its concern for propriety is such that in the franker passages of scripture it replaces the Hebraic euphemisms (which though not current English idiom, are yet quite intelligible) by medico-legal court-room expressions, which are incongruous, not to say repellent, in the context. To use the word 'immorality' for what has hitherto always been translated (and understood) as 'fornication', is an unpardonable misuse of language. The old Vulgate-Challoner forms of Hebrew names are retained—Noah is still Noe, Joshua Josue, and presumably Nebuchadnezzar (though the series has not reached him yet) is still Nabuchodonosor. This seems to me a regrettable and unrealistic decision. These details are perhaps indicative of a certain lack of imagination which gives a touch of drabness to the translation. But on the whole it deserves to be welcomed as straightforward, unpretentious, and free of archaisms.

It is the commentary introducing the biblical text of each pamphlet that is the important element in the series. What the commentators set out to do they do very well. The reader is shown over the strange newly excavated antiquities of modern biblical scholarship; he is introduced to J, E, D, and P. The complexities of biblical compilation are explained to him. Time and again he is warned against a too simple historicist attitude. The Bible is not giving us history in the modern sense—let alone accurate scientific description (Genesis 1); it tells us sacred stories, it is concerned with 'salvation history', it is teaching us religion not science, it is theology rather than history, it employs quasi-epic and other literary forms which cannot be judged according to the standards of modern historical writing. In all these ways the point is laboured that the truth of the Bible is not necessarily, indeed not usually or characteristically, factual truth. In a time when the minds of all men, including the writers of these commentaries and the writer of this article, are saturated with 'scientism' or naïve realism, by which I mean the automatic tendency to assume that the only standard to measure truth by is the standard of *facts*, of which there are only two sorts, scientific and historical—in such a time this point cannot be laboured too much.

Any artifice which will serve to drive it home is to that extent acceptable. Although an English reader cannot check a broad grin on finding the Hebrew bondage in Egypt compared to the lot of the thirteen American colonies before the War of Independence, yet he will tolerate the comparison if it serves to convince readers, in the land of modern epic, of the epic quality of the Exodus narrative. Perhaps

that American Moses, George Washington, whose historical reality nobody questions, is a more legendary figure to his countrymen than is appreciated on this side of the Atlantic.

But granted that the members of the Catholic Biblical Association of America ably succeed in doing what they set out to do in their commentaries, the question remains: is this enough to help the faithful read the Bible with a faith-directed understanding? I am convinced that it is not. It seems to me that what is here done is essentially negative and ancillary; it instructs the would-be reader how *not* to read, how to avoid *mis*understanding the Bible. But it gives him very little help in the positive art—and it is an art, like prayer—of Christian Bible reading, of *lectio divina*.

Indeed I would say that biblical scholarship by itself is not equipped to provide such positive guidance. What is needed is some theological direction. Biblical scholarship of its nature cannot transcend the human authorship of the scriptures, which it analyses into JEDP, places in historical contexts, classifies in various literary forms. But a true understanding of scripture proceeding from faith must be primarily attentive to the divine authorship, because what the reader is concerned to study is the word of God.

He requires therefore to be instructed on the positive implications of inspiration; the only implication in all likelihood that will ever have been brought to his notice is the negative one of inerrancy, and the problems raised by inerrancy are clearly at the back of the whole effort of these commentaries. He will need to be made aware of the full mystery of revelation. He will have to be shown how the final revelation of God in Christ gives coherent unity of meaning to the whole of scripture. He will need to be introduced to some of the great revelational themes or patterns, and to be encouraged to develop an attitude of mind that responds sympathetically to such patterns. In a word he will need to be equipped with positive exegetical principles.

It would be quite unfair to suggest that such positive principles find no mention in this series. There are occasional, rather chary, references to the traditional typologies. The whole series opens with a short discussion of the New Testament problem of the fulfilment of the law. Readers are left in no doubt about the divine authorship of scripture. The very expression 'salvation history', which is used more than once, is a theological concept bound up with the key concept of revelation.

But it is significant that the concept is not explained at all. These references to positive theological principles are all in the nature of

asides, of allusions to something that writers and readers alike, being Catholics, can take for granted; they are quite secondary to the careful expositions of the conclusions of biblical scholarship. I would prefer the emphasis reversed.

I hope it will not be thought that I am decrying biblical scholarship. I have no doubt at all about the value and the necessity of introducing the ordinary Catholic reader to Messrs J, E, D, and P. To try and understand the Bible while ignoring the achievements of modern criticism would be like trying to appreciate some orchestral music on the assumption that the noise is all produced by one player on one instrument. A Catholic theological understanding of scripture is blocked and stultified for lack of the discriminations that biblical criticism affords.

Perhaps, too, the kind of positive theological and exegetical commentary I dream of is outside the scope of such a series as this. If so, at least it should be recognized that this series demands theological supplementation. Above all it should be acknowledged, and above all by biblical scholars, that for a true understanding of holy scripture biblical scholarship is not enough.

## Reviews

MARTIN BUBER AND CHRISTIANITY, by Hans Urs von Balthasar; The Harvill Press, 15s.

Martin Buber, though perhaps not an entirely representative Jew either in formation or in outlook, has nevertheless stood in our time for most of what really matters in the continued existence of the Jews. He is an appropriate partner for a Catholic theologian to choose in this ice-breaking 'dialogue between Israel and the Church'—a real dialogue in the sense which Buber himself has given to the word: a deeply irenic but uncompromising confrontation of two opposing positions. Dr Balthasar's talent for sympathetic interpretation of somebody else's sense of life needs no advertisement (Buber joins an already very motley company which includes Karl Barth and the Little Flower), and his tensely imbricated German has been turned expertly into English by none less than Alexander Dru, doyen of translators.

Jews and Christians have always been at loggerheads, and it is not too much to say that it was in the logic of that strife that it should have led in the end to