Comment:
The Oxford Bible Commentary

Measured by church going, Christianity is declining in Britain even faster than in any other country in western Europe. Perhaps certain Protestant attitudes, and even obsessions, surviving out of the context that once sustained and explained them, continue to have a resonance and relevance in public and private life, for better or worse. Northern Ireland is, of course, a special case: accordingly, in this respect, as well as others, unendearing and increasingly unintelligible to most people in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Bible, excitedly and even excitingly thrown open to Catholics forty years ago, at the Second Vatican Council, has become a closed book to most people in Britain, over the same period. How deep rooted and widespread knowledge of Scripture now is among Catholics is a moot question, for all the fine work of many parish bible study groups and the stream of scholarly and popular publications. It is probably over a hundred years since the average family in Scotland, England and Wales, had any serious grounding in Scripture. The extremely clever young people who take part in quiz programmes on radio and television know everything but the answers to simple bible knowledge questions.

Yet, biblical knowledge has never been more impressively available. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* came out in 1989 (published by Geoffrey Chapman), edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy; it runs to 1475 pages and has certainly not been overtaken by advances in scholarship nor had long enough to be absorbed by the Scripture-reading remnant. It is, of course, Roman Catholic through and through, with *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* , and a foreword by Carlo Maria Martini, the Jesuit biblical scholar and Cardinal Archbishop of Milan. Though ecumenical considerations, and assumptions about the consensus about methods and results among biblical scholars whatever their ecclesiastical allegiances, suggested otherwise, *NJBC* finally decided to stick to the policy for the first *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1968) and commission only Catholics to contribute. The authors are, without exception, North Americans.

Oxford University Press has just this month brought out *The Oxford Biblical Commentary*, a magnificent volume, edited by two Oxford scholars, John Barton and John Muddiman. Running to 1488 pages, and weighing in at five and a half pounds compared with *NJBC*'s four and a half, and a bargain at £40 hardback (until February 2002), *OBC* is completely ecumenical, including Jewish as well as Christian scholars, Protestant, Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01767.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Among the seventy seven contributors there are about twenty North Americans, including Joseph Fitzmyer on Tobit, well away from his usual territory. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP is the only other contributor to *NJB* who appears in *OBC* (First and Second Corinthians there, Colossians here). As far as Dominicans go, there is barely a handful among the seventy three contributors to *NJBC* and none other than Murphy-O'Connor in *OBC*. On the other hand, Le Saulchoir and the École Biblique may claim some part in the education of René Kieffer, long settled at Uppsala, and author of the *OBC* article on the Fourth Gospel: an excellent essay, grounded in a bibliography that includes more French and German, not to mention Swedish scholarship, than some of the other entries. But English-speaking friars of the Order of Preachers who might be considered to be Scripture scholars are few and far between.

By comparison, *NJBC* authors include about a dozen members of the Society of Jesus. In *OBC* the entry on Philippians is by Robert Murray SJ. In *NJBC* the entry on the Synoptic Problem (whether Matthew, Mark and Luke knew each other's work), running to nine pages, falls to Frans Neirynck, of Catholic University Leuven: himself a doughty contributor to the debate, particularly in opposition to the highly complicated reconstruction put forward at the École Biblique by M.-E. Boismard OP, it cannot be said that he has the space to make anything as clear as Henry Wansbrough OSB succeeds in doing in *OBC*, admittedly in twenty seven pages.

There is nothing particularly 'Anglican' about Oxford biblical scholarship these days, if there ever was and even supposing one knew what to look for; and there is nothing particularly 'Oxford' about this *Oxford Biblical Commentary*, though no doubt more than half the contributors and of course the editors have studied or taught there at some point. Perhaps the most 'Oxford' aspect of the project is the unprecedented breadth of this commentary, covering as it does all the books recognized as canonical in Orthodox and Catholic as well as Protestant churches, and extending into post-biblical Jewish and early Christian literatures.

Offering verse-by-verse explanation of every book of the Bible, backed by succinctly expounded scholarship, edited to an almost incredible lucidity, and at an affordable price, this Commentary provides all that the reader needs. Well, not quite all. Reading such an attractive commentary as this is like reading the cookery columns in the glossy magazines: you could easily stop there, as most of us do. You have, after all, to get the Bible off the shelf. There will never be another generation steeped in the King James, with stories, parables and proverbs accessible to memory. There might — just — be a few more people for whom these ancient scriptures might come alive, though in a very different way.

F.K.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb01767.x Published online by Cambridge University Press