

‘‘ROMAN CATHOLIC BIBLICAL
SCHOLARSHIP’’

*A Talk given in the Third Programme on
Thursday, 18 November 1954*

Some years ago, when I was asked to make a contribution to the memorial volume to my great master of Jerusalem days, the Dominican Father Marie-Joseph Lagrange, creator of the Biblical School of St Stephen's, Jerusalem, I tried to give some idea of the progress and the prospects of Catholic Biblical scholarship in English-speaking lands. This was in the first months of 1940.

Then, I said, I think quite correctly, that a continental scholar who had made some study of Catholic work on the Bible, published in English and in countries of English speech, would carry away two impressions at least. First, that there were still many gaps to be filled in our Catholic scriptural library in English, so that, by comparison with many continental countries, we might seem poorly provided. Secondly, that much of what there was in English was still very largely borrowed from other, better provided countries and that many works of proved value were no more than translations (and, it might be added, not always good translations) of books that were first published in French, German or Italian. It is a fact that four of the best modern studies of our divine Lord's life and mission (those by Lagrange, Prat, Lebreton and de Grandmaison) are all of them translations from the French, and now form an important part of our scriptural library. I shall have more to say about these two points I have tried to make, but I may add at once that, in my opinion, in the interval between 1940 and 1954, there have been many signs of improvement.

The first and the most important part of Biblical scholarship, here as elsewhere, has been and continues to be the provision of really adequate versions of the Bible in the language of the country. For nearly two hundred years our chief text in English, in this country and in other countries of English speech, was the Douay Bible, made up of the Rheims New Testament of 1582 and the Douay Old Testament of 1609-10, as improved and revised by Bishop Richard Challoner, the Vicar-Apostolic of the London district from 1758 to 1781. The first edition of his revision appeared in 1749, and, while it would be ungenerous to dwell at too great length upon the failings of the version, which are, for the most part, those of many older versions in English, we must admit that, in terms of modern scholar-

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ship, this version is often deficient. A good deal of the vocabulary is archaic, and there are grammatical blunders such as: “Art thou he that *art* to come?” and “*Whom* do men say that I am?” (The latter blunder also occurs, by the way, in the Authorized Version of 1611, and was corrected by the Revisers in 1881.) But to return to the Douay Bible, it is even more important to refer to the mistakes that come from a faulty knowledge of the Greek moods and tenses, and, in the Old Testament part, from a failure to understand the Hebrew verbal system. Happily the bicentenary of the Challoner version saw that version already in the process of being superseded. In the years between 1913 and 1935 Catholic scholarship in these islands (with some help from scholars in the United States) was able to produce a complete text of the Westminster Version: The Westminster Version of the New Testament, under the general editorship of Fathers of the Society of Jesus. One can hardly praise too highly this version with its clear divisions of the text and its abundant explanatory notes. Perhaps one may specially refer to the translations by the late Fr Cuthbert Lattey, one of my predecessors as President of the Society for Old Testament Study, of most of St Paul’s epistles. This Version in its original format is a fine piece of printing, published in four imposing volumes, with a good deal of introductory matter. In 1948 there appeared a one-volume edition of this Westminster New Testament, containing the whole of the text, but a much reduced set of notes. We can now, therefore, recommend to our laity a volume at a popular price that gives us a far better translation than any that preceded it, and one based on the original Greek. The Old Testament part has, unfortunately, made very slow progress, though work is going on in regard to a number of sections that have not yet appeared in print.

I do not think I need say much here about the complete translation of the Bible by Mgr Ronald Knox, which was begun in 1939, continued throughout the war years, and finished, with the issue of the second Old Testament volume (*Job-Maccabees*), in 1949. Mgr Knox has explained his methods as a translator in the articles now collected in a book with the title *On Englishing the Bible*. This Knox version, which is based on the Latin Vulgate, though reference is frequently made to the original languages, has been warmly praised for three good qualities among others—it is lively, it is readable, and it shows a freshness of approach to its subject-matter. These gifts of style and manner would count for little if there were not accuracy, but this version has, in fact, been made with great care, and is remarkable as the work of a single translator, carried out steadily and untiringly amid the trying conditions of a world war and of the almost equally uncomfortable

years of peace between 1945 and 1949. It is good news that a revised single-volume edition, containing the whole of the Biblical text, may be expected to appear without undue delay.

Before I leave the subject of versions, I should like to refer briefly to two American renderings that are a welcome addition to the stock of versions in English. The first is the Confraternity edition, published by the St Anthony's Press of Paterson, New Jersey. This, unlike Mgr Knox's translation, is the work of many hands. Its New Testament part was intended to be, in principle, a corrected Douay Version. In the Old Testament, I am glad to say, the decision has been taken to translate direct from the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek). More recently still, the Bruce Publishing Company of Milwaukee has issued: *The New Testament rendered from the original Greek with explanatory notes*. This is the work of only two scholars, and is of special interest because it is the nearest thing we have, up to the present, to Dr James Moffatt's well-known version. Like the Moffatt version, it avoids archaisms and so-called Biblical words, and translates the language of the original into the English of everyday life.

We may now leave the question of Biblical versions and turn to the hardly less important subject of commentaries on the text. Here I must quite frankly admit that we have, even now, all too few commentaries in English of the type represented by Mgr Patrick Boylan's useful work entitled: *St Paul's Epistle to the Romans: Translation and Commentary*, published by Gill of Dublin in 1934. This book reminds me of some remarks made by the late Dean Armitage Robinson, of Wells, about his old master Joseph Barber Lightfoot, Bishop of Durham. Writing of Lightfoot's commentaries on St Paul, the Dean says; "Lightfoot's notes are terse and masculine; he is never tedious or ambiguous. He refuses to catalogue the interpretations of previous writers; he will not even mention the names of other commentators, unless there is some very special reason". Similarly, Mgr Boylan in his preface tells us that he has not even tried to compose a history of the many books that have been written about *Romans* in the course of the centuries; he has had as his chief aim, he says, "to set forth as clearly as possible the thought of St Paul". In this volume the linguistic arguments and the interpretation of the text are alike set out with clarity and distinction, and no earlier work on the Epistle that is of any value has been left out of account. It is the more regrettable that we have so few works in English of this type, and that anything like a complete series of commentaries at this high level is, for the moment at least, unplanned. It is true that a series corresponding roughly to the Cambridge Bible for Schools is in active preparation. It is also

true that Mgr Edward Kissane, the President of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, has produced within the past fifteen years no less than three notable commentaries on Old Testament books, beginning with his edition of *Job* in 1939, continuing with his two-volume edition of *Isaiah*, and ending, one trusts only temporarily, with his two recent volumes on the *Psalms*. We are, in fact, comparatively well off so far as the *Psalter* is concerned, since in addition to the latest work by Kissane, we have Mgr Thomas Bird's *Commentary on the Psalms* published in 1927, and Mgr Boylan's *The Psalms : A study of the Vulgate Psalter in the Light of the Hebrew Text*, first issued in 1920. One of our greatest needs at the moment is a wholly up-to-date, full-length study of the books of *Genesis* and *Exodus*, to which might be added, as speedily as possible, a thorough study of *Jeremiah*.

Work of this kind is often a long and slow business, and, in the meantime, we have to think of the needs of people who are not, in any sense, professional students of the Bible. Some years ago, at a Cambridge meeting of the Catholic Conference of Ecclesiastical Studies, I ventured to suggest that one of our chief immediate needs was a one-volume commentary on the entire Bible, that would do for Catholic students what Dummelow and Peake and Gore did for the public which they had in mind. I said at the time (it was in 1942 when the war was at its half-way point) that I did not expect any immediate response to the suggestion, but, greatly to my surprise and pleasure, the challenge was at once taken up by a group of scholars, headed by Dom Bernard Orchard O.S.B., now headmaster of St Benedict's School, Ealing. It is not surprising that so great a work, undertaken at such a time, was long in the making. Readers of the late Professor Peake's preface to his one-volume *Commentary*, published in 1919, will recall his reference to the heavy and responsible duties he had faced, the many unforeseen delays, and the steady postponement of the date of issue. Thus the task, begun in 1913 and destined for publication in 1917, called for two further years of additional effort. Similarly, the imposing work, which under the title of *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, saw the light in February of last year, was the outcome of many years of hard work and careful revision.

The Editor and his three assistants were not content to plan and to revise the work of others. All of them took part in the actual writing of the commentary ; one of them (Fr Edmund Sutcliffe S.J., of Heythrop College) contributed no less than eleven articles and commentaries to the completed work. There were, in addition, thirty-nine other contributors, most of them resident in these islands, while a small minority of them hailed from Rome, Innsbruck, Cologne, the British Commonwealth or the United States of America. The volume

itself is quite the largest one-volume commentary so far published, with twelve hundred pages of text and a total number of words, in the main body of the work, estimated at well over a million and a half.

Those who wish to sample the volume may be advised to begin with the articles of general introduction, and, first of all, to make a study of the short but rewarding essay by the general editor and Dr William Leonard on “The Place of the Bible in the Church”. After some introductory remarks on the relation of the Bible to the living voice of the Church’s teaching body, the authors consider in turn, the Bible as the book of spiritual perfection, and the Church’s love of the sacred text, as this is shown in her use of Holy Scripture throughout the Christian centuries, in the history of private Bible reading, and in the progress of Biblical interpretation. There follows, in the same essay, a concise account of modern Catholic Biblical activity, which, while it makes plain the steady growth and development of Catholic scriptural studies, pays generous tribute to the help afforded by other religious bodies, whether Christian or Jewish. “All modern Catholic exegetes”, write the authors, “are directly or indirectly indebted to the tremendous stream of non-Catholic works on biblical subjects, which flows universally over the Western world, for their suggestive ideas, scholarly exegesis, and broad and bold hypotheses”.

Other introductory articles provide answers to such questions as : How did the books of Scripture come to be regarded as sacred and canonical ? What are the languages in which the Bible was originally written, and what are the chief translations of the Book ? In what various ways is the Bible to be classed as literature ? What do we mean when we speak of the inspiration of the Bible ? What are the rules for interpreting Holy Scripture ? Other articles deal with such subjects as the higher criticism of the Bible (which does not mean, as some people mistakenly imagine, some specially extreme type of criticism, but simply criticism as applied to the books in their literary and historical aspects) ; with the land in which so much of Biblical history took place, the Holy Land of Palestine ; with the history of Israel, the chosen people of God ; and with Biblical archaeology. None of these subjects is exactly easy, but a writer who knows his business can often give the essentials in a few thousand words, and so enable beginners to grasp what is most necessary without having to read a number of large volumes.

There are also, as might be expected, special articles that answer such questions as What does the Old Testament mean ? What was the religion of God’s chosen people throughout the seventeen or more

centuries that separate Abraham from Christ our Lord? and, Who were Israel's neighbours during all those centuries?

One misses here a study of Semitic religion in general, and this may well be one of the subjects to be added in any supplement that may be published in the course of the next few years. For this, it may be said, is one of the problems affecting all makers of large and costly works of this kind—that some part of the matter rapidly becomes out-of-date, while a completely revised edition would be a very expensive affair indeed. Hitherto, the existing one-volume commentaries have not had much done for them in the way of supplements. Some additional pages, now bound in with the main work, were added to Peake's *Commentary* in 1936, but the Dummelow and Gore commentaries have simply been reissued with such minor changes as could be made without re-setting the type. I may express the hope that this new Catholic commentary will be more fortunate in this respect and will receive regular supplements at intervals of not more than five years.

Among the articles preparatory to the New Testament there is one on Christianity in apostolic times that seems to me to be the best contribution to the commentary. It deserves to be carefully studied, and if possible analysed, by all students of the Bible who are making a beginning with New Testament introduction. It is a substantial but readable essay of some fifty thousand words, and discusses its subject in sections that deal with the first thirty years of the Christian church; the community of the faithful; the Holy Trinity and Jesus the Lord; the redemption; the Sacraments; the Christian ministry; and (finally) some practical aspects of early Christian life such as the family, slavery, property and poverty, and the Christian attitude towards the state.

The sixty-three exegetical articles are, as might be expected, the core of the work, and here, as elsewhere, the general level of competence seems to be high. Short commentaries of this kind are an attempt to say in a few thousand words what is said in many thousands of words by the larger works. So the writer of the exegetical article on *Job* has had to give some idea of the book's argument and contents in about thirty thousand words. If one compares this very short measure with the wealth of suggestion, interpolation and textual variants in such works as those by Dhorme, Peters, König, and Driver and Gray, it might seem hardly possible to say anything of value in the space allotted. Yet, within the narrow limits proposed, the writer has managed to give us a commentary that is useful and intelligible in its own right, and is also a valuable introduction to the larger works just mentioned.

Among the New Testament commentaries I should specially

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commend those on St Matthew's Gospel and on St Paul's epistle to the Romans. In the former, one may admire the firm and clear treatment of the so-called "End" discourse in Mt. xxiv, with all due references to the theories recently put forward by the Abbé Feuillet in the *Revue Biblique* and elsewhere. The article on *Romans* gives, in some forty-five thousand words, just the help that most students need who are making their first approach to this glorious but difficult epistle. Throughout the commentary the editors and their associates have had to strike a happy mean somewhere between a long treatise and a mere series of jottings, and, in general, they have succeeded. A word of praise is due to all concerned for the excellence of the index and of the maps; the maps are assuredly the best that have appeared in a work of this kind.

This one-volume commentary is not, one may again emphasise the fact, all that is needed for future study of the Scriptures. Many more specialised books should be and, no doubt, will be written in the course of the next quarter of a century. But it is a book that inspires many hopes for further good work to come. Already the volume has had a truly phenomenal success; it has already proved of the greatest value to our Catholic students for the priesthood in theological colleges and religious houses. They and their professors alike now have at hand a book that has largely done away with dictated notes or hectographed sheets. The cost of even a small scriptural library is a very serious item at the present time, but this commentary, which is after all of relatively small cost, makes it possible to read any book of the Bible with the help of adequate introductory matter and comment, and this is a truly enormous benefit. This book will also be useful to all who seek a better knowledge of the divine treasury of the Scriptures, and those who have long been specialists in these studies will be the first to acknowledge their deep indebtedness to the unwearying labours of Dom Bernard Orchard and of the scholars associated with him in this admirable venture.

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