

*Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine.* By Raymond E. Brown. New York: Paulist, 1985, 176 pp., \$8.95.

Over the past three decades, a handful of writers have established themselves as the vanguard of American Roman Catholic scholarship. The author of this book is one of them, and the person to whom it is dedicated, J. A. Fitzmyer, is another.

This little book is a collection of essays, many of them published in an earlier form elsewhere, that seek to position Brown in a "centrist" (his designation) position in the spectrum of current Catholic Biblical scholarship. He detects opponents on both the right and the left, though most of his energy and his sharpest remarks are aimed at those who are more conservative than he.

In the first chapter, "Historical-Critical Exegesis of the Bible in Roman Catholicism," Brown offers a potted history of the rise of historical-critical exegesis in the Catholic communion, with selective quotations from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Paul VI. Brown says that Catholicism came to historical-critical exegesis more slowly than did many Protestant groups but has now embraced these approaches more officially and openly than any of them. He then defends these developments against two groups: (1) "revisionists of a literalist or fundamentalist tendency" who are "annoyed by biblical criticism because it underlines the human elements in the Bible"; and (2) revisionists "for hermeneutical purposes," who may find Biblical criticism barren, or who argue that "biblical works, once written, have a life of their own," or those "who seek to use Scripture in support of a cause" (including various Marxist and feminist interpretations). Brown concludes: "The future lies not with the rejection of the historical-critical method (which I regard as a permanent contribution to human knowledge), but in the refinement of the method, so that it will answer appropriately posed questions even more accurately, and its contributions to the larger picture of biblical interpretation can be seen in better perspective." The weakness of this essay is that some of Brown's opponents are cast in stereotypical and reductionistic garb: They allow no place for the "human element" in Scripture, they read the Bible ahistorically, and so forth. Such arguments take care of the lunatic fringe but do not deal squarely with the best of his opponents' positions.

In the second chapter, "Critical Biblical Exegesis and the Development of Doctrine," Brown begins with a discussion of what he understands "infallibility" to mean with respect to Catholic teaching. His most crucial point, I think, is this: "Even though we may insist that a doctrine is infallibly taught by the church, that doctrine is historically conditioned and may have to be reshaped as we come to perceive more fully just what issue really was at the heart of the divine revelation and how much of the way in which that issue was once formulated represents changeable conceptions." With all respect, that kind of formulation opens a barn door large enough to accommodate almost any-

thing, including the reformulations advanced by, say, Bultmann or Cupitt. Such theological positions Brown himself would of course want to disavow, but it is hard to see how his own formulations would enable him to do so on any unambiguous methodological basis. Discussion of various doctrines in the rest of the chapter make for fascinating reading for any Protestant. Brown himself admits that the move from an apparent trajectory in the NT documents to a later full-blown theological statement is one thing, but the move to a full-fledged theological statement where there is no NT evidence in support of the doctrine is another. Yet even so he manages to defend the infallibility of the doctrines of the perpetual virginity of Mary and of her immaculate conception. I remain surprised that a mind capable of finely-honed and gentle skepticism regarding the NT documents can so easily be persuaded by the slender and skewed evidence of non-Biblical, later ecclesiastical documents. And that is quite apart from the more foundational question about the locus of authority for the Church: Is it located in Scripture, or in a deposit of faith entrusted to the Church (a deposit that includes Scripture) and that is interpreted, sometimes infallibly, by her?

Chapters 3 (rather short) and 4 (rather long) deal with "Liberal Misunderstanding of the Interaction Between Biblical Criticism and Dogma" and "Conservative Misunderstanding of the Interaction Between Biblical Criticism and Dogma" respectively. The latter deals in particular with the infancy narratives and constitutes a reply to Catholic conservatives J. McHugh and R. Laurentin. The fifth chapter is devoted to "The Contribution of Critical Exegesis to an Understanding of Mary and Marian Doctrine." Here Brown rapidly surveys the more important NT texts to arrive at a fairly minimalist understanding of Mary, one that would comport quite nicely with most Protestant views. This, in his view, fosters the possibility of ecumenical study. Nevertheless such results do not in his view jeopardize Roman Catholic dogma, since that dogma will ultimately depend on the magisterium, not on Scripture, as he has outlined his position in chap. 2. Chapters 6 and 7 similarly survey rather cursorily what the NT says about the Holy Spirit and about the "local church" respectively, and in each instance there is an attempt to draw lines from these summaries to modern "centrist" Roman Catholic teaching. The eighth chapter, under the title "The Preaching Described in the Book of Acts as a Guide to Early Christian Doctrinal Priorities," focuses attention on what the author of Acts was trying to get across to his audience, allegedly in the 80s of the first century, not on what the named preachers (Peter, Paul, etc.) were trying to say to their respective audiences. There is no "both/and" in Brown's thinking here, but a very sharp disjunction. The chapter especially underlines "the time-conditioned character of the biblical accounts" while trying to draw some commonalities in the various sermons.

As usual, Brown's work is invariably well written and clear. The book is clearly an "in-house" document, written by a Catholic for Catholics. To an outsider it provides not only fascinating insight into the immense diversity found especially in the academic circles of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church but also a startling portrayal of how one learned theologian in the Church of Rome must adopt, to remain faithful to his Church, the most incredibly fideistic stance toward the decisions of the magisterium while his own critical proclivities drag him in an opposite direction when he handles the Scriptures themselves.

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