

Reviews

OPENING UP THE SCRIPTURES: JOSEPH RATZINGER AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION by José Granados, Carlos Granados and Luis Sánchez-Navarro (*William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008*) Pp. 160, £13.99

Once, when consulting a work of scholarship on the Gospel of John, I read that to understand the resurrection accounts (John 20–21) as reporting actual historical events was unacceptable as a basis for their interpretation. It is from this kind of assumption in a certain type of biblical criticism that this book seeks to free us. For the conviction of this collection of articles from the *Ressourcement* series is that the assumptions of historical-critical exegesis need to be challenged, particularly in an ecclesial, faith-based context. As the editors write in their introduction ‘critical reflection regarding the foundations, scope and limits of the historical-critical method is necessary, and will, in turn, allow for fruitful advancements in biblical studies’ (p. xxi).

The series, published by Eerdmans, ‘understands *ressourcement* as revitalisation: a return to the sources, for the purpose of developing a theology that will truly meet the challenges of our time.’ The series thus seeks to serve the theological tradition of the Catholic Church and this book is no exception. In *Opening up the Scriptures* the articles come from the pens of Catholic biblical scholars including Albert Cardinal Vanhoye and the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger who sets the tone. The first article is the complete text of Ratzinger’s New York conference address in 1988 on the crisis in biblical interpretation. His assessment of the ‘foundations, scope and limits of the historical-critical method’ (to borrow the editors’ phrase) is taken up by the other contributors, and the collection concludes with another address by Ratzinger given in 2003 to mark the centenary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. We are asked to consider the relationship between science and faith (Ignace de la Potterie), the possibility of biblical theology (Paul Beauchamp, Bruna Costacurta) and the contemporary situation in exegesis (Klemens Stock). Particular consideration is given to the relationship of interpretation to Church and papal documents, not least the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council, a topic addressed specifically by Cardinal Vanhoye, although it is present throughout.

What is at stake here, then, is the interpretation of the Word of God; an ecclesial concept based on faith, that, as Vanhoye reminds us, means both Scripture and Tradition, the single sacred deposit of Divine Revelation. ‘In the context [of *Dei Verbum*], we realise that that which has been handed down includes Scripture and Tradition at the same time, or, otherwise said, Tradition takes in Scripture’ (p. 105). An ecclesial warning bell is thus sounded for a historical-critical method that is not self-reflective. In other words, this book takes to task an approach to scripture that in its search for scientific ‘fact’ throws off the claims of the text itself, holding as the measure of interpretation putative, non-ideological, ‘real’, sources behind the biblical text. Such a method, the contributors suggest, is blind to its own assumptions and subjectivity since such ‘real’ sources, constructed by this method, are equally open to the criticism of partisanship and indeed, of fabrication: the search for ‘fact’ is always coloured by the experience of the researcher and endeavouring to disassemble a complete text in the search for

'authenticity' misses the point of studying scripture in the first place. 'In the end, one no longer learns what the text says, but what it ought to say, and what components it can be reduced to' (p. 2). If you do not believe the Word of God (scripture and tradition) you cannot interpret it, or, at the very least, you cannot interpret it in the Church: so these articles conclude. What is more, and as a corollary, the contributing scholars cast doubt on the legitimacy of approaching the Bible as anything other than the *Verbum Dei*.

With all of which I mainly agree, with the *caveat* that history not be forgotten altogether. If we are concerned to emphasise that Scripture is the Revelation of God, the manner in which He appears in this record is through His actions in history. As James Barr noted in lectures given at Oxford in 1997, 'the historical elements and relationships of the Bible are a prime ingredient, perhaps the one foundational ingredient, in the conviction that history is an integral part of all arguments for the truth and validity of Christianity' (Barr, J., *History and Ideology in the Old Testament* (OUP: 2000) p. 12).

Another reservation I have with the book, although its articles are informative and its arguments agreeable, is the feeling that we have heard all this before. Barr considered the limits of historical-criticism in 1997 and he was already speaking of the dangers of the backlash against this type of approach to scripture, namely, ignoring, as noted, the proper place of history. John Barton in *Reading the Old Testament* (DLT: London) considered in 1984 (2nd ed. 1996) techniques of exegesis other than historical critical method. And the article of Cardinal Ratzinger that provides the jumping off point of this book is from 1988, twenty years before the work's publication. It must be said, however, that all of these articles represent translations of full texts hitherto unavailable in English.

On the other hand, it may be that such an assessment of the foundations of biblical interpretation continues to be necessary. Certainly the conviction of Benedict XVI is that there is still a need for the warning bell. His recent book on Jesus can be seen as a response to scholarship that denies the historical reality of many Gospel stories. If it is the case that Catholic biblical scholarship still represents a misleading and unfounded scepticism in this regard then perhaps this book is timely after all.

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THE CHRISTOCENTRIC COSMOLOGY OF ST MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR
by Torstein Theodor Tollefsen (*Oxford University Press, 2008*) Pp. viii + 243,
£50

The thought of the early Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor continues to be a growth industry among Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran scholars. Torstein Tollefsen, a convert to Orthodoxy from the Church of Norway, has already published one book under this title, a doctoral thesis from the University of Oslo Press. The work under review is a revision of that earlier study, but – as the author explains – the original title so perfectly summarized his claims about the thought of the seventh century Greek Father that he felt it best to let it stand, despite the likely confusion to bibliographers. Organised by reference to four key themes, Tollefsen's work combines a history-of-ideas approach with a speculative attempt at the conceptual reconstruction of Maximus's ideas, encoded as these are in a complex language and (especially) syntax that is not always patient of easy decipherment, as many who have sought to struggle with it can attest.

The heart of Tollefsen's account is a proposition central to all Christian metaphysics: God makes created participations of his being exist outside himself. But