

Reviews

HEBREWS [Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture] by Mary Healy, *Baker Academic*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2016, pp. 316, £13.99, pbk

The *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture* series seeks to bridge the divide between the scholarly commentary, with its emphasis on detailed exegesis, historical criticism and engagement in ongoing academic debate, and popular introductions for the man and woman in the street (or in the pew). As the name suggests, the pew in question here is in a Catholic church, and Healy's contribution on the *Letter to the Hebrews* is typical in its frequent references to the *Catechism* and other magisterial documents, with Benedict XVI being a particular favourite.

The task that this series sets itself is no easy one, and to take it on in regard to *Hebrews*, which is indeed, as Healy notes in her introduction, a text with complex argumentation written in difficult Greek and with an internal logic that is not always easy to follow. But, as she also notes, it is a text that particularly needs and merits such a treatment, in virtue first of its unsurpassed theological profundity and secondly of the nature of its appearance within the Church's liturgy, which is notably partial and unsequential. This is particularly unfortunate in a text which so clearly demands to be read as a whole and indeed which was probably, as the author remarks, written to be delivered as a sermon to an attentive and well-informed audience.

It is therefore pleasing to report that this book performs its task admirably, such that the reader with no previous exposure to *Hebrews* should be able to work through it without difficulty, gaining a solid grounding in the Epistle's unique thought-world and thus a considerable enrichment of his theological apprehension of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. The more academic reader will inevitably also recognise that some matters of scholarly debate or theological difficulty have been treated less than comprehensively, but this is inevitable in such a book and Healy makes no attempt to gloss over such matters. Rather she – presumably deliberately – whets the appetite for a deeper engagement, without leaving one feeling frustrated at any point.

Of particular note is the author's ability to summarise a complex and contentious issue in a manner that is accessible without being simplistic. Notable examples include her prudent treatments of the authorship and dating of the Epistle and the location of its addressees – like all wise scholars she is agnostic on the first question, while acknowledging that of particular proposals Apollos is the least improbable; and she offers

good arguments for a pre-70 dating linked to a strong case for Rome as the place to which the Epistle was originally sent. Within the body of the commentary there is an excellent treatment of the notion of rest (clearer, more succinct and just as helpful as Attridge's vastly more extended excursus), and a nuanced and helpful treatment of 'faith' in *Hebrews* 11:1. Elsewhere, a 'sidebar' on the separation of priests from people in the second temple period as part of the background to the Epistle's treatment of Christ as High Priest is a genuinely important contribution to scholarship captured in just a couple of paragraphs.

Inevitably there are some gaps: for example, one would have welcomed a slightly more extended consideration of *Hebrews'* eschatology, particularly the contentious question of how much cosmic future eschatology is to be found in the Epistle. Similarly, the problem of whether *Hebrews* predicates the theological virtue of faith to Christ is somewhat neglected. A more critical reader might lament the absence of engagement with some recent important contributions to *Hebrews* scholarship, notably that of Gelardini, whose theory that the Epistle began life as a synagogue sermon for the ninth of Ab is of potentially huge importance in the field. Analysis of the footnotes shows that the author is perhaps over-reliant on the commentary of P.E. Hughes – an excellent contribution, but now almost forty years old. Of non-Anglophone scholarship only the work of Vanhoye is in evidence.

Yet that same analysis of the footnotes reminds us that, while this book is the work of a first-rate scholar (Healy is professor of Sacred Scripture at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, and a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission), it is not a work designed to showcase her scholarship, which she wears indeed with an attractive and engaging modesty. Rather, the notes and sidebars, along with informative and interesting illustrations, direct us to the wider ecclesial context in which she seeks to place the text. Notes direct us to, among other places, the writings of Augustine and Aquinas, speeches of John Paul II, the *Catechism* and C.S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*, and for every passage of the Epistle we are given OT and NT parallels, references in magisterial documents and (where they exist) the appearances of the passage within the Roman *Lectionary*. Sidebars fall under two categories, 'Biblical Background' and 'Living Tradition', offering us a valuable interplay of the historical critical and the reception critical. So, for example, in the section on *Heb.* 3:7-11 (which is a citation of *Psalms* 95 (94 LXX)) we are offered both a learned disquisition on Jewish methods of biblical interpretation and an overview of later Christian uses of the psalm. Elsewhere enlightenment on the text is offered from the writings of fourteenth-century mystic Nicholas Cabasilas on the relationship between the incarnation and the passion, the *Catechism's* teaching on hell, and a twentieth-century Rabbi's take on the Sabbath in biblical and post-biblical Jewish tradition.

This book, then, is first and foremost a work of teaching. Readers looking for the very latest scholarship on *Hebrews*, or for careful and

detailed exegesis of the Greek text should look elsewhere. But readers looking to gain real insights into the masterly theology of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, integrating it into and thereby deeply enriching their Catholic faith, will not find a better resource. Perhaps, in addition, non-Catholic scholars of the scriptures will be surprised by the extent to which reading the Epistle avowedly within the Catholic tradition leads not to dogmatic eisegesis but to first rate biblical scholarship.

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MARTIN LUTHER: RENEGADE AND PROPHET by Lyndal Roper, *The Bodley Head*, London, 2016, pp. ix + 577, £30.00, hbk

Among characters with a claim to have changed the course of history, Martin Luther has few rivals. His own consciousness of being the harbinger of a new age could hardly have been better expressed than in his change of name: Luder became Luther, with clear echoes of Eleutherius, meaning ‘the Liberator’, and his sermons and writings quickly became an inescapable reference point for Christian communities determined to define themselves in terms sharply at odds with the established church.

The indomitable passion with which he went about his business turned Luther into the first great propagandist in the age of print. In addition to erudite theological tomes, he penned hundreds of pamphlets in stirring but accessible German. These were often illustrated with satirical woodcuts that succeeded in taking Luther’s message to sectors of the population previously untouched by the written word. By one count, 183 editions of his works appeared in 1523 alone, and the responses they elicited led to a staggering tenfold rise in the output of the budding German printing presses. When combined with Luther’s commitment to rendering the bible in a language intelligible to speakers of the wide range of dialects that stretched from the Low Countries to Poland, the movement served to propel the German language as the ideal cultural vehicle through which the long resentment against Italian and French domination could be expressed in close association with Luther’s relentless complaints against the church of Rome.

Of course, the most important aspects of Luther’s legacy are theological: his insistence on the literal meaning of scripture and his bold rejection of tradition whenever it seemed to him to contradict that meaning; his denigration of any practice, whether devotional or sacramental, that seemed like an accretion that could get in the way of an intense personal faith in Christ; his doctrine that justification comes exclusively