

# Reviews

**THE LANGUAGE AND LOGIC OF THE BIBLE: THE ROAD TO REFORMATION** by G.R. Evans. Cambridge University Press, 1985. Pp. xxiv + 192. £22.50

This is a sequel to Dr Evans' 1984 study subtitled *The Earlier Middle Ages*. The central interest there was in applications of the linguistic arts to biblical studies in the twelfth century. Here the intention is to pursue a path from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, but the reader must be prepared for some strenuous exercise and frequent returns to the point of departure. At times, as with the earlier study, this leap-frogging of the centuries becomes dizzying despite the liveliness of many of the positions briefly touched on.

The lines of enquiry here are broadly defined by the authority of Scripture and the rules and practice of exegesis. Thirteenth-century Dominicans such as Hugh of St Cher and Albert the Great receive due credit for their efforts to see the sacred writers as thoughtful mediators of God's word while allowing for the sometimes embarrassing limitations of human authorship. The bedrock of medieval exegesis was the Fathers, as it still was for the Reformers even if they were more ready to express their distaste for certain interpreters (Luther is cited for his dismissal of Jerome as 'a barefoot friar'). But Dr Evans does not find a sharp line between the sacred writings of the Bible and the Fathers in the Middle Ages (p. 22) although it is firmly drawn by Aquinas when he says that our faith rests on a revelation made to the apostles and prophets, not on a revelation, if such there was, made to other teachers (Ia 1.8 ad 2). This is consonant with his insistence that there can be no conflict between Scripture and tradition and that nothing is to be taught as of faith except what is contained either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture.

The claim that the pope and the bishops were the official interpreters of the word did not go unquestioned in the Middle Ages, and the author offers some instructive parallels between the critical positions of Marsilius of Padua and William Tyndale. It is odd that when she treats *sola scriptura* she mentions the questions raised by Duns Scotus (preferring a 1912 edition of the Oxford teaching, superseded by the 1950 critical edition of the *Ordinatio*) and not his answers, where he has a telling quotation of Augustine, saying he would not believe the gospel if he did not believe the Catholic Church, a saying that Bellarmine would surely have echoed.

When the rules of interpretation are dealt with, some of the subtlety of Beryl Smalley's account of William of Auvergne's discussion of senses of Scripture disappears in the bald statement that William would have nothing to do with 'spiritual' interpretations of the conventional sort (p. 44). Certainly, around 1230 he was reacting against distorted moral and allegorical readings claiming to be meanings of the text, but he was also defending a restrained use of the spiritual sense in justifying comparisons. If Weisheipl was right, Aquinas's response (if it was a response) was part of his inaugural disputation as a master in Paris in 1256. What once passed for a quodlibet on the senses of Scripture does, as Dr Evans suggests, support the older view of spiritual meanings of things signified by the literal sense, but the response to the objection that no confirmatory authority attaches to spiritual senses indicates that Aquinas clearly associates this with the variety of likenesses found there as a basis for comparison. If *similitudo* enters the literal sense, it is with the meaning that the sacred author himself gives to figures in the text (one does not have to go to William of Nottingham for a recognition of that), not a later interpreter. That surely is what is at issue too with Eck's account of the Johannine talk of 'the Word' for the Son of God: it is figurative and it rests on a comparison, but this is an embedded comparison of

the text itself and so belongs to the literal sense. Tyndale says as much too and only says what Aquinas would have said. Nor was Wyclif saying any more than Aquinas when he asserted that the *vis vocis* makes it possible for the literal sense to carry a probative force which the spiritual is unable to carry.

The author draws attention to various refinements of exegesis derived from applications of the linguistic arts. Perhaps unintentionally, the impression is given that speculative grammar was something other than grammar based on Donatus and Priscian (p. 53). Apart from the short-lived vogue of modism in Paris at the turn of the thirteenth century, there was a continuing tradition of speculative grammar with precisely that textual basis: the *Barbarismus Donati* was the usual context for discussion of figurative language, *Priscianus maior* for modes of signification, *Priscianus minor* for a kind of logical syntax. Also a reader might suppose after the genuine novelties of the *Logica modernorum* that there was something new in Walter Burley's talk of the copula as a 'third party' in the sentence (p. 57). In fact this is simply the language of Aristotle's *De interpretatione* in the Latin dress it was given by Boethius. Elsewhere the treatment is open to similar misunderstandings when later medievals are chosen to represent positions inherited from more influential predecessors.

Finally with regard to the practice of exegesis there is a tendency to underestimate familiarity with the Scriptures as a whole in the Middle Ages. Anyone who has seen those eminently portable friars' Bibles that have survived in Oxford should take a more sanguine view of the accessibility of the text. Care about the quality of the Latin text is also well attested even if few had the concern of a Roger Bacon for the Hebrew and Greek. The whole story of the friars and the vernacular is not there in the ordination of the 1242 General Chapter of the Dominicans that forbade translations from the Latin of sermons, collations and other sacred writings (p. 82), probably in an effort to curb an activity that had already begun and certainly continued, leading to versions in French, Catalan, Castilian, German and Armenian.

While the developed educational system of the friars, in which biblical studies had a large place, is outlined, the attribution of a commentary on the whole Bible to Hugh of St Cher (p. 96) needs some qualification. Like the concordance this appears to have been a collaborative enterprise, and in the case of the Apocalypse Robert Lerner has uncovered divergent styles in two commentaries passing under Hugh's name. The picture of university training is also blurred at points. The bachelor's determinations were simply an anticipation of a role regularly performed after disputations as a master when he had incepted. The collegiate system, from which Wyclif profited at Oxford (p. 93), had its origin in Paris and its counterparts elsewhere in Europe, as at Louvain although, as at Oxford, it only provided for an elite minority of masters and students in the Middle Ages. Despite an extended discussion the limits the systematic theological approach of the medieval question literature imposed on the use of the Bible do not emerge as clearly as they should.

This little book may stimulate interest, but the subject deserves a more methodical and sustained treatment.

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**VATICAN II BY THOSE WHO WERE THERE** edited by Alberic Stacpoole O.S.B.  
*Geoffrey Chapman, 1986, Pp. 365. £15.00.*

People who were at the Council—and I include myself, who just scraped in for the final session—are a bit like old desert rats, for ever reliving the campaigns of yesteryear. Restaurants like Marcello's in the Borgo Pio, though the owner has changed and the prices are absurdly inflated, can still release moments of nostalgia for the diminishing band of veterans. Fr Alberic had the idea of gathering some of them together before they pass away. Bishop Christopher Butler's hope in one of the two prefaces (the other is by Cardinal