

Raymond Brown

Raymond E. Brown, S.S. *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church*, Paulist Press, New York, 1975.

I was so horrified on reading this book that I thought I better do a review of it to try and get back my peace of mind. Let me begin with Father Brown's introduction:

"...In recent years I have had the grace of teaching Protestant students for the ministry as well as Catholic candidates for the priesthood. The Roman Catholic Church could not have made its advance in biblical criticism without Protestant aid. In the first third of the century the torch of biblical criticism was kept lighted by Protestant scholars; and when after 1943 [he means after *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, as we shall see later] Catholics lit their candles from it, they profited from the burnt fingers as well as the glowing insights of their Protestant confreres. It is no accident that Protestant and Catholic biblical scholars have been coming closer together ever since, to the point now of producing common studies of divisive problems. Such ecumenical experience governs the themes in this book, for I hope and pray that the ultimate goal of the Roman Catholic biblical pilgrimage in the twentieth century will be a unified Christianity. (p.ix)

Father Brown is trying to so set himself up that you can't criticize him without criticizing ecumenism. He identifies three divisive areas which are impeding a unified Christianity: 1) the ordination of women, 2) the Papacy and 3) Our Lady. So by means of biblical criticism in union with Protestant scholars, we can re-examine these areas, and hopefully eliminate this divisiveness. This tool which they are using, biblical criticism, is of Protestant origin. The very term "criticism" implies that the Bible is just a human book; if it was a divine Book you wouldn't want to criticize it. They claim that biblical criticism is scientific, and therefore they can't approach the Bible through authority, the Tradition and the Magisterium; that wouldn't be scientific. It is the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone.

Biblical criticism breaks down into three parts: textual criticism, which could be good if used properly. Textual criticism attempts to recover the original text in which a book is written. The Bible is inspired only in the original text. For instance in the Gospel of St. Matthew errors of copyists could have crept in, or marginal notes that were accidentally incorporated into the text. Now there are very few of these and they are all unsubstantial, and they have to be decided on by the Church. But these people claim that the Bible is just full of errors.

Then literary criticism which identifies the literary forms of the Bible could also be good - the books of the Bible are historical, prophetic, etc., but they want to identify fictional literary forms like the myth or *midrash*, which are not in the Bible at all.

Finally historical criticism which we can't accept at all, because it implies that the Bible is errant, in error. Historical criticism breaks down into two parts: first, authenticity, is the particular book by the author it claims? For example, are St. Matthew's and St. John's Gospels, really by St. Matthew and St. John? They will say no, but we can't accept that, because it says in the Bible that St. Matthew and St. John did write these books. Then historicity, is this account of the life of Our Lord really historical? They will say no, which again we can't accept. So then we can examine these divisive areas, the Papacy, for instance, and see that the primacy and infallibility are not in Scripture at all, the accounts of Our Lady are not historical in any way, but just meant to be symbolic, and there is nothing in the Bible which would prohibit the ordination of women. In this paper, I would like to just go after biblical criticism itself, rather than go through the three areas, because once you get biblical criticism, they won't be able to use it for such purposes.

To use biblical criticism in this way Father Brown has to go after the condemnations that were made of this method in the early part of the century. Abbé Loisy an early Modernist was a forerunner of Father Brown, and his condemnation also condemns the Neo-Modernist, Brown. From 1905 through 1915 the Biblical Commission condemned this use of biblical criticism. Pope St. Pius X, in a *motu proprio*, made these decisions binding in conscience. Then in 1943 Pope Pius XII in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* encouraged the scientific study of the Bible. He mentioned textual and literary criticism favorably, but came down strongly for historicity, especially in regards to the life of Our Lord. Then Father Brown is going to say that in 1955, this very same Biblical Commission abrogated these 1905 to 1915 decisions. Let me read Father Brown's summary of this:

“Physical, historical, and linguistic methods, known to us only in approximately the last one hundred years, have produced a scientifically critical study of the Bible, a study that has revolutionized views held in the past about the authorship, origin and dating of the biblical books, about how they were composed, and what their authors meant. In the first forty years of this century (1900 to 1940 approximately) the Roman Catholic Church very clearly and officially took a stance against such biblical criticism. The Modernist heretics at the beginning of the century employed biblical criticism, and the official Roman condemnations of Modernism made little distinction between the possible intrinsic validity of biblical criticism and the theological misuse of it by the Modernists. Between 1905 and 1915 the Pontifical Biblical Commission in Rome issued a series of conservative decisions on the composition and authorship of the Bible. Although phrased with nuance [a favorite term of the Modernists], these decisions ran against the trends of contemporary Old and New Testament

investigation. Yet Catholic scholars were obliged to assent to these decisions and teach them.

“After forty years of rigorous opposition, the Catholic Church in the 1940's under the pontificate of Pope Pius XII made an undeniable about-face in attitude toward biblical criticism. The encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) instructed Catholic scholars to use the methods of scientific approach to the Bible that had hitherto been forbidden to them. Within about ten years teachers trained in biblical criticism began to move in large numbers into Catholic classrooms in seminaries and colleges, so that the mid- 1950's really marked the watershed. By that time the pursuit of the scientific method had led Catholic exegetes to abandon almost all the positions on biblical authorship and composition taken by Rome at the beginning of the century. No longer did they hold that Moses was the substantial author of the Pentateuch, that the first chapters of Genesis were really historical, that Isaiah was one book, that Matthew was the first Gospel written by an eyewitness, that Luke and Acts were written in the 60's, that Paul wrote Hebrews, etc. This dramatic change of position was tacitly acknowledged in 1955 by the secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission who stated that now Catholic scholars had complete freedom. with regard to these decrees of 1905-1915 except where they touched on faith or morals (and very few of them did).” (pp.6,7)

The little book *Rome and the Study of Scripture* put out by the Abbey Press at St. Meinrad, purports to be all the Roman documents on the study of Scripture, yet they have left out *Pascendi*, *Lamentabile*, and the Oath Against Modernism, all crucial documents in the study of the Bible, as well as *Humani Generis* in which Pope Pius XII tried to plug up the holes he had left in *Divino Afflante*. Then they end with this 1955 thing that they are claiming is a Roman Document. In the footnotes they always tell you where you can find a particular document in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, what Congregation put it out, etc. It turns out that this particular document is just a book review of the *Enchiridion Biblicum*, a collection of Roman biblical documents in Latin, a new edition having come out in 1955. The book review appeared in a German Benedictine magazine: Excerpts from *Das Neue Biblische Handbuch, Benedictinische Monatschrift*. The review is signed A.M., but there seems to be no doubt this is the Very Reverend Athanasius Miller, O.S.B., secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. ¹

So in no way is this a Roman document; it is not in the *Acta*, or any other official register. *The Sword of the Spirit* is an excellent little book by Monsignor Steinmueller, a consultant of the Biblical Commission, who was there at this time, 1955, and he has this to say:

“I was a consultant of the first Pontifical Biblical Commission from 1947 (after the publication of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*) to 1971; and I never heard any intimation that any decrees of the Commission were ever revoked...Recently some Catholic scholars have asserted that the decrees were implicitly revoked by *Divino*

Afflante Spiritu (1943) and that this is confirmed by two articles written by AS. Miller and A. Kleinhaus, who seem to restrict the scope of the decrees to matters of faith and morals (cf. *Jerome Biblical Commentary* Vol II, p.629) [This is an article by Brown. This 1955 thing seems to be his invention.] The articles referred to were unauthorized and were condemned by the voting Cardinal members of the Commission. A. Miller and A. Kleinhaus were to be brought before the Holy Office because of the articles, but were saved from this ordeal through the personal intervention of Cardinal Tisserant [the Cardinal Prefect of the Biblical Commission at the time] before the Holy Father. It was my friend Father Miller, O.S.B., who told me the whole story before his return to Germany.”²

Evidently Father Miller was shipped back to his monastery in Germany after this event. Imagine trying to push this thing as a Roman document abrogating the former decisions of the Biblical Commission, and what is worse, getting away with it! It is a complete phony!

Father Brown then goes on to an *Instruction* of the Biblical Commission issued in 1964 during the time of the Vatican Council, which he claims says that the Gospels are not historical accounts of the life of Our Lord. Then he is going to say that Vatican II incorporated this Instruction into its decree *Dei Verbum* on the Bible. To follow Father Brown’s argument you have to understand what he means by *form criticism*, which Rudolf Bultman, (1921), a liberal Protestant, used, to claim that the Gospels are the artistic creations of the primitive communities. The Gospels are not historical accounts of the life of Our Lord. They are in *layers* added by the various communities that have turned Our Lord into a mythical person. You have to dig down till you come to the primitive layer, what Our Lord actually said and did, a process he calls *demythologizing*. When you get down to the bottom layer you find that Jesus was a mere man who never claimed to be God.

You also need to know another one of these liberal Protestants, Dibelius (1919) and his *redaction criticism*, which is very similar to form criticism. He claims that the redactor or editor, gathered together all the artistic creations of the primitive communities. The point being that these redactors were not the eyewitness Matthew and John, as had been always been believed, but late disciples, who then added their own artistic creations. By this means these men were able to deny the historicity of the four Gospels. Here is Father Brown on this document:

“The Historical Truth of the Gospels, an Instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1964).

“...Stage One recognizes a limited worldview on Jesus’ part, even if it delicately attributes this to accommodation. Most Catholic scholars would speak more openly of Jesus’ own limited knowledge rather than accommodating himself to the limited knowledge of his time.”(pp.111,112)

Father Brown says that Jesus didn't know that He was God or the Messiah. He denies His traditional beatific and infused knowledge, and claims He had only experimental knowledge.

“Stage Two recognizes that the Christology of the early Church was post-resurrectional in origin and read back into the accounts of the ministry. It allows for development within the pre-Gospel of the Jesus tradition, and is a stage of formation close to what scholars isolate by form-critical analysis.”(p.112)

The Gospels are not historical accounts of the Resurrection by eyewitnesses, but rather post-resurrectional theological insights by later disciples.

“Stage Three acknowledges considerable freedom of authorship by the evangelists. It is a stage of formation close to what scholars isolate by redaction criticism.” (p.112)

The Gospels were not by eyewitnesses but by later disciples who added their own meditations. Here is what the Instruction actually says:

“Stage One: The ministry of Jesus

“...When the Lord was orally explaining his doctrine, he followed the modes of reasoning and of exposition which were in vogue at the time. He accommodated himself to the mentality of his listeners.” [Brown's italics] (pp.112,113)

Of course Our Lord accommodated Himself to the mentality of His listeners. In the Synoptics he is speaking to Galileans who are very simple people. He speaks in a completely different way than He does in St. John's Gospel which deals mainly with Our Lord's Judean ministry. Here He is speaking to a people who are very cosmopolitan, Pharisees and Sadducees, the intellectuals of the day, so of course Our Lord had to accommodate Himself to the mentality of His listeners. But they would say it was rather because of the limitations of His human knowledge.

“Stage Two: The Preaching of the Apostles [Brown puts in italics the parts he want to emphasize, and the following is in italics.]

“...After Jesus rose from the dead and his divinity was clearly perceived.” (p.113)

Of course the Apostles saw Jesus' divinity more clearly after His resurrection, but Brown will then claim the accounts in the Gospels where the Apostles profess His divinity are not historical. Especially when St. Peter was given the primacy: “Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God.” (Matt. 16:16).

Of course the Apostles' faith was weak at that time, and they more clearly saw His divinity after the Holy Ghost descended on them. Now the following passage, the continuation of the above, is not in italics - evidently you weren't supposed to read it:

“...faith, far from destroying the memory of what had transpired, rather confirmed it, because their faith rested on the things which Jesus did and taught. Nor was he changed into a ‘mythical’ person and his teaching deformed in consequence of the worship which the disciples from that time on paid Jesus as Lord and the Son of God.” (p.113)

This is an explicit repudiation of Bultman's form criticism and demythologizing. The Evangelists didn't just add artistic creations after the resurrection which turned Our Lord into a mythical person, but rather the resurrection allowed them to understand more clearly what Our Lord said and did during His public life.

“This primitive instruction, which was at first passed on by word of mouth and then in writing - for it soon happened that many tried ‘to compile a narrative of the things’ which concerned the Lord Jesus - was committed to writing by the sacred authors...”(pp.113,114)

Ah, they say, notice they didn't say Matthew, Mark Luke and John, especially Matthew and John the eyewitnesses, but just “sacred authors.” These are the late redactors. All you need to do is to give them a little phrase like that and they are in. This *Instruction* does not deny the historical truth of the Gospels, but rather affirms it. Now Father Brown will go on to say that this document was incorporated into *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II.

There is a wonderful book *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber* by Fr. Ralph Wiltgen, S.V.D. on Vatican II. It is not at all a sensational book as were so many on the Council; one I especially remember was by Xavier Rynne, who turned out to be a Redemptorist named Mahoney, who broke his oath of secrecy. He leaked all the inside proceedings of the Council while it was still in session, and his book became a best-seller. Father Wiltgen ran a Catholic news service at the Council, and his reporting was so accurate that all the different factions of the Council came to him with their releases. What he means by the title, *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber*, is that before the Council actually began its sessions, the Rhineland bishops with their *periti*, that is the bishops of Germany, France, Switzerland, Holland and Belgium (about 150 of them), met, and they planned to introduce Neo-Modernism into the Church. Father Wiltgen will say that in part they succeeded, because they were able to introduce into the Council documents, ambiguous phrases susceptible of a Modernist interpretation, and thus in a sense the “Rhine flowed into the Tiber” Neo-Modernism flowed into the Church.

In the Constitution *Dei Verbum* the Neo-Modernist campaign was fought out on three articles, 9, 11, and 19. The Theological Commission drew up the *schema* for this Constitution and it was dominated by these Rhineland men; the *periti* included Father Rahner, Father Schillebeeckx, and Father Küng. In Article 9 they tried to say that the sole source of revelation was the Bible, the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*. Revelation didn't also come from Tradition. That would deny, for instance, that there are seven sacraments; which comes primarily from oral tradition. What they are after especially is the priesthood, the sacrament of Holy Orders.

Article 11 limited the inerrancy of Holy Scripture just to matters of faith and morals; this is something they have been after for a long time. And Article 19 is this Instruction of the Biblical Commission which Father Brown claims denies the historicity of the Gospels. Believe it or not this schema was passed by 83 % of the Council Fathers, a tremendous majority. It was in; all they had to do was to get the signature of the Pope. But a small group of Council Fathers, mainly Americans and Italians, protested to the Holy Father that these articles were Neo-Modernist. The Holy Father was very upset, and he sent a letter to the Theological Commission protesting these three articles. Here is Father Wiltgen:

“The Commission met on October 19 to hear the contents of the letter. The first of the three papal directives concerned Article 9 [the one on *sola Scriptura*], and suggested seven possible renderings. Cardinal Bea explained why he preferred the third one. After some discussion and balloting, the Commission decided to add to Article 9 the words: ‘Consequently, it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws its certainty about everything which has been revealed.’ This had been Cardinal Bea’s choice.”³

So this addition strikes down the bid for *sola Scriptura*. Father Wiltgen continues:

“In regard to Article 11 [the one on the inerrancy of Scripture] the Commission was invited by Cardinal Cicognani, [he is the one who brought the Pope’s letter, and read it to the Commission] on behalf of Pope Paul to consider ‘with new and serious reflection’ the advisability of omitting the expression ‘truth pertaining to salvation’ from the text.”⁴

The phrase “truth pertaining to salvation” is an ambiguous phrase, and in their interpretation it would be used to deny the inerrancy of some sections of the Bible. The Holy Father wanted it dropped, but the Commission refused to remove the dangerous phrase.

“...the Commission decided to reword the phrase as follows ‘...the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.’”⁵

So all they did was make it a little longer, and the phrase “truth pertaining to salvation” is still there. This will allow exegetes like Father Brown to deny the historicity of passages of the Bible which don’t fit their theories. This was done deliberately by these Rhineland bishops. Now here is the article that Father Brown claims denies the historicity of the Gospels: Father Wiltgen:

“With regard to Article 19, Cardinal Cicognani advised the Commission that Pope Paul regarded the words ‘true and sincere’ as insufficient. That expression, he said did not seem to guarantee the historical reality of the Gospels, and he added the Holy Father clearly ‘could not approve a formulation which leaves in doubt the historicity of these most holy books...It was then suggested that the historicity of the Gospels should be asserted without equivocation earlier in the same paragraph; this would preclude any ambiguity concerning the words ‘true and sincere’ which could then be retained.

“...The beginning of Article 19 was thus amended to read as follows: ‘Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels...whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ...really did and taught for their eternal salvation.’”⁶

So this completely strikes down Brown’s claims for form criticism and redaction criticism. To claim that the Council taught these inept methods is just a bluff. Now watch what Father Brown can do with that weak phrase from Article 11 “those truths pertaining to our salvation” and this is the reason they got it in:

“The Statement of Vatican II on Inerrancy

“...Only gradually have we learned to distinguish that while all Scripture is inspired, all Scripture is not inerrant. The first step in narrowing the scope of inerrancy is to recognize that the concept is applicable only when an affirmation of truth is involved. In the Bible there are passages of poetry, song, fiction, and fable where the matter of inerrancy does not even arise. A second step is to recognize that not every affirmation of truth is so germane to God's purpose in inspiring the Scriptures that He has committed Himself to it. Already in *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) Pope Leo XIII acknowledged that the scientific affirmations of the Bible were not necessarily inerrant, since it was not God's purpose to teach men science.(p.115)

This is not what Pope Leo said. He said that the Bible does not teach science, that is go into the intrinsic nature of things, but rather goes by what sensibly appears. Brown is saying that if you say the sun sets, that's an error; you are denying the Copernican system. This is not an error; this is the way men talk. It is ridiculous to say that the Bible is in error on scientific matters

Eventually the same principle was applied to historical affirmations, but the last frontier has been religious affirmations. Job's denial of an afterlife (Job 14:14- 22) makes it difficult to claim that all religious affirmations of the Bible are inerrant.(p.115)

Job said: “he has kept us for a short time and then let's us go forever.” Brown is saying that this denies the afterlife. It doesn't. And imagine taking advantage of poor Job. He has just lost everything; he is almost in despair; he is almost ready to blaspheme; he is on the verge of suicide, and then claim, that's the Bible teaching religion. It is as if when the high priest tore his garments, and said that Our Lord blasphemed. Ah, there 's a religious error. Can you see the ridiculousness of the claim that the Bible teaches religious error. Brown continues:

Vatican II has made it possible to restrict inerrancy to the essential religious affirmations of a biblical book made for the sake of our salvation.

The Books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the Sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.(pp.115,116)

So you can see what they can do with an ambiguous phrase which was deliberately inserted into the Council documents. This is what Father Wiltgen means when he says “the Rhine flowed into the Tiber.” Let me conclude this paper with an amusing exchange between Pope Paul VI and one of these self-important *periti*. Father Wiltgen doesn 't name the person involved, but I suspect it is Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J.. He had drawn up the draft for the Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, and was lionized in the secular and religious press. As a result. he evidently got an exaggerated opinion of his importance at the Council.

While Pope Paul was considering whether to intervene in the matter or not, he received a letter from a leading personality at the Council - not a member of the Theological Commission - who had taken it upon himself to act as the spokesman for some alarmists at the Council. The writer said that if the Pope reconvened the Commission, as it was rumored, he would be guilty of using moral pressure on the Commission and the Council. Such a step, continued the writer, would damage the prestige of the Council and the Church, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, the United States and Canada, where people were particularly sensitive to any violation of Rules of Procedure.

To this, Pope Paul replied:

“...These principles are no less dear to Romans than they are to the Anglo-Saxons. They have been most rigorously observed in the Council.”⁶

References

- 1 *Rome and the Study of Scripture*, Abbey Press Publishing Division, St. Meinrad, IN, 1964, p.176.
- 2 Msgr. John E. Steinmueller, *The Sword of the Spirit: Which Is the Word of God*, Stella Maris Books Ft. Worth, TX, 1977, pp.7,8.
- 3 Rev. Ralph M. Wiltgen, S.V.D., *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber*, Hawthorn Books Inc., New York, 1966,. pp.181,182
- 4 Wiltgen, *Op. Cit.*, p.182.
- 5 Wiltgen, p.182.
- 6 Wiltgen, pp.183,184.
