

# VARIETIES OF THE BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

## A Guide to Form and Function

by William B. Badke

The commentary is a widespread genre in the humanities and, to some extent, in the social sciences. It is found in literature and philosophy but is most prominent in the study of ancient writings, particularly in biblical studies. The goal of the commentary is rather simple at first glance. Edgar Krentz writes: "The commentator seeks to explain a text so that a modern reader of an ancient text can understand it."<sup>1</sup>

Yet the wide variety of commentaries shows that complexity and diversity of approach abound. With the biblical commentary, the complexity and diversity increase because the *Bible* is not only a literary work, it is also the book of the Church. Thus it speaks both to the ancient world and to the world of today.

Despite the variety and number of biblical commentaries, there is surprisingly little literature on the biblical commentary as a genre. Krentz writes: "Commentaries are frequently written, often consulted, but little discussed."<sup>2</sup>

This paper will attempt to describe the various approaches which biblical commentaries have taken and to ascertain what biblical scholars expect a commentary to do. The discussion which follows is not so much a survey of commentaries as an analysis of the nature and function of commentaries being produced today.

Commentaries may be classified as bearing certain distinctions or as existing between various poles relating to form or function, such as the comprehensive-popular, exegetical-homiletical, and so on. It must be remembered, however, that any polarity may intersect any other at any point. Thus a popular commentary may be either exegetical or homiletical or a combination of both. As well, few commentaries are found exclusively at one pole. Most exhibit some characteristics of both poles between which they are ranged.

### CHARACTER

Probably the most readily apparent polarity is the comprehensive-popular. Comprehensive commentaries, usually based firmly on Hebrew or Greek texts lying behind the translations, are written for the intermediate to advanced biblical scholar. Their goal is to include all the material deemed important for the full understanding of the biblical text in its ancient setting, whether that material comes from philology, linguistics, ancient history and sociology, textual criticism, or critical views concerning sources and compilation. Edward Hobbs has described this form as "a filing cabinet of possibly helpful clues to a reader."<sup>3</sup> The comprehensive commentary usually treats the biblical text as any other ancient text would be treated, looking for the meaning found in its original setting and, for the most part, avoiding applications to today.

Examples of such an approach include *The International Critical Commentary*,<sup>4</sup> *Hermeneia*,<sup>5</sup> *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*,<sup>6</sup> and the *Word Biblical Commentary*.<sup>7</sup>

At the other pole is the so-called "popular" commentary. If the comprehensive commentary presents the full process leading to the result of explicated meaning, the popular commentary focuses on the results rather than the process.<sup>8</sup> This type of commentary, written for the reader not trained in advanced biblical scholarship, assumes that such a reader does not wish to wade through vast amounts of data. The reader wants the conclusions of the scholar, not his research notes. Examples of some of the more useful of such commentaries include the *Cambridge Bible*,<sup>9</sup> the *Tyndale Commentary* series<sup>10</sup>, the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*,<sup>11</sup> the *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*,<sup>12</sup> and the *Good News Commentary*.<sup>13</sup> Included here as well would be many of the homiletical and devotional commentaries described below.

There are, of course, commentaries which exist in the middle or show characteristics of both the comprehensive and popular. *Black's New Testament Commentaries*<sup>14</sup> (known as Harper's in the U.S.A.) are equally prized by scholars and interested general readers. The *New International Commentary* series<sup>15</sup> places technical points in footnotes so that the scholar may have access to such information but the general reader will not be put off by it.

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Most commentaries today, whether comprehensive or popular, are more or less "critical," using the methods of "higher criticism" by which biblical books are studied in their cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts, and some reference is made to the sources and traditions out of which the biblical writers arranged their material. Popular commentaries tend to assume the results of higher criticism while comprehensive commentaries show the actual process of higher critical research. Other than some devotional commentaries, works which take no thought for critical issues are rare today.

A second polarity relates to the text used as the basis of the commentary. Among comprehensive commentaries, an established text may be imposed on the commentator, as is true for the *New International Greek Testament Commentary*<sup>16</sup>. Most, however, do their own textual criticism and establish their own text (as, for example, *Heremeneia*<sup>17</sup>). Some comprehensive commentaries have majored on the establishment of the text, describing their commentaries as "notes" on the text. Yet the notes are usually full enough to permit these works to be labelled as comprehensive commentaries (see, for example Selwyn's *The First Epistle of St. Peter: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Essays*<sup>18</sup>).

Among popular commentaries, a particular translation is often chosen as the basis for comment, rather than having the author provide his own translation. Here we would find the *Cambridge Bible*<sup>19</sup> (using the *New English Bible*), the *New Century Bible*<sup>20</sup> (using the *Revised Standard Version*), and the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*<sup>21</sup> (using the *New International Version*). At the other pole is the commentary which establishes its own translation, such as the volumes of the *Black's New Testament Commentary*<sup>22</sup>. The *Anchor Bible*<sup>23</sup> has so majored on the establishment of

both the original text and a new translation based on that text that, though it is in every sense a commentary, its volumes are subtitled: Introduction, Translation, and Notes.

In general, it may be assumed that the imposition of a particular text or translation will restrict somewhat the commentator's freedom in interpretation, though the better commentaries will not hesitate to challenge a reading if they feel it to be false.

A third polarity is the general-specific. Most commentaries, including all those cited so far, may be labelled "general" in that they interpret the text using the tools of many disciplines. There are some commentaries, however, which focus on one discipline or seek to meet a particular need.

There is a scattering of textual commentaries which deal only with the establishment of the texts of biblical books. The *Anchor Bible*,<sup>24</sup> which majors on the text, is saved from such exclusiveness by the addition of detailed comments incorporating other disciplines. Specifically textual commentaries include *Preliminary and Interim Report on the Old Testament Text Project*,<sup>25</sup> and Metzger's *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*.<sup>26</sup>

There is a small number of strictly historical commentaries, dealing with historical and cultural backgrounds of biblical books. Included here would be such works as Blaiklock's *The Acts of the Apostles: An Historical Commentary*<sup>27</sup> and Ramsay's *A Historical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*.<sup>28</sup>

There are a few commentaries which concentrate on literary criticism. Form criticism, the study of the creation and history of the sources used to produce a biblical book, is the focus of the *Forms of the Old Testament Literature*<sup>29</sup> commentary series. Redaction criticism, the study of the manner in which the biblical writer compiled and adapted his

sources, is the focus of Gundry's *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art*.<sup>30</sup>

At least one series of commentaries has been produced for persons seeking to translate the Bible into other modern languages. The *Helps for Translators*<sup>31</sup> series of "Translator's Handbooks" provides concise exegetical insights into the text but also gives information on the translation of the text in various cultures.

Theological commentaries are a growing specialized form. Theology in this sense may be defined as the historical study of God and His relationship to the world. These commentaries make use of the discipline of biblical theology, which attempts to discern the development of theological understanding through the time of the writing of the Bible. Thus theological commentaries point out the theological development evidenced in each biblical book and place each book in the context of the biblical canon as a whole. The *Old Testament Library*<sup>32</sup> series, while having no explicit statement of its approach, is predominantly theological. As well, the *International Theological Commentary* and the *Augsburg Old Testament Studies* feature a theological approach.<sup>33</sup>

A related specialized form is the homiletical commentary. This type, unique to commentaries on the Bible, gives pastors the sort of information they need to prepare biblical texts for preaching.<sup>34</sup> Two recent series which provide homiletical insights on biblical books are the *Proclamation Commentaries*<sup>35</sup> and the *Communicator's Commentary*.<sup>36</sup> These cannot be considered as substitutes for comprehensive commentaries, but as specialized aids in final sermon preparation, once initial study of the text is complete.

As well, because the Bible is the Church's book, we find the devotional commentary for the lay reader who is seeking to apply the text to daily life rather than

to dwell only on the explication of the meaning of the text itself. The article by Orr, revised by Danker, labels many of these as homilies rather than commentaries.<sup>37</sup> Often, to be sure, they are merely collections of sermons on a biblical book, as in Boice's *Philippians: An Expository Commentary*. Yet, when done with the full background of biblical research as the basis, they can provide valuable insights into the biblical text, as, for example, in Boice above and in the *Bible Speaks Today* series.<sup>39</sup> Devotional commentaries exist by the hundreds though most, unfortunately, show little evidence of advanced prior study of the text.

A final specialty is rare and often unrecognized. This is the commentary with an agenda, a work in which the biblical text is used as a platform to propound a philosophical, theological, or political position. Martin Luther's *Galatians* was an agenda commentary<sup>40</sup> (establishing justification by faith in contradiction to the "papal" position on salvation), as is Miranda's *Being and the Messiah: The Message of St. John*. (a treatise on liberation theology using passages from John's writings as a basis).<sup>41</sup>

Two commentary series which combine special features should be noted. *The Interpreter's Bible*<sup>42</sup> has two comments on each passage—one exegetical and the other a combination of homiletical and devotional. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*,<sup>43</sup> while billed as an expository (homiletical) commentary, actually combines the theological and homiletical forms.

Two further, more minor, polarities may also be included. First is the liberal-conservative polarity, which arose at the same time as the development of higher criticism (basically the Eighteenth Century) and continues strongly today, though many works occupy a middle ground.<sup>44</sup> The liberal position saw the *Bible* as the best religious insights of

man or as man's response to the revelation of God. The conservative position argued that the *Bible* itself is the revelation of God given through human writers, so that the product could be justly called God's message to man without error. Particularly in the historical *Old Testament* books and in the *New Testament* Gospels, these positions will evidence themselves in skepticism about historical accuracy on the one hand, and attempts to defend historicity on the other. Liberals will stress the development of *Scripture* through the evolution of traditions in the religious community, while conservatives, though conscious of traditions, will see these in the context of progressive revelation from God. The debate itself is by no means minor to those participating in it, but it plays a relatively small role in determining the forms of commentaries. Both sides use all the forms described above and both show evidence of considerable scholarly ability.

Finally there is the polarity of the actual production of commentaries—as sets or as independent volumes. The majority of commentaries today are, in fact, produced as sets. This provides the reader the advantage of knowing (usually) what may be expected from each new volume as it comes out. Sets are, however, notoriously uneven in quality, especially those few sets produced by one commentator only.

Since they are generally produced over fairly long periods of time, they may evidence the scholarly methods of more than one generation. As well, sets change their approach to the text at times, as is evident in the *Anchor Bible*,<sup>45</sup> which began as a commentary for the general reader (popular) but soon became geared for the advanced biblical scholar (comprehensive).<sup>46</sup> Most sets seek to guarantee uniformity, but in turn they give the commentator limitations of length, format, and so on.

Individual commentaries, while rarer and often ignored in favour of commentaries belonging to sets, have provided unique and valuable approaches. The five-volume work on Acts — *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part I. The Acts of the Apostles*<sup>47</sup> gives as comprehensive a treatment as any biblical book has received. Hughes' *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*<sup>48</sup> provides valuable insights from the church fathers.

Other distinctions in commentaries could be described — one-volume versus multi-volume, translation versus English original, and so on — but the characteristics of these are fairly self-evident.

#### FUNCTION

Beyond the forms in which commentaries come lies the related issue of the function of biblical commentaries: What do users of commentaries on the *Bible* expect to gain from them? Until we can answer that question, we have not explained the usefulness of the various forms of the commentary. While the literature on commentary function is scarce, those who have stated their views reveal a large measure of consensus.

The primary need to be met by the commentary appears to be the explanation of the biblical text. That might seem rather obvious, but it is a difficult prospect for the commentator, since he is dealing with ancient languages in ancient settings. Krentz points out the problems which must be overcome if the meaning is to be clear to the modern reader: the distance of language and cultural gaps, literary associations unknown to the modern reader, and the mysteriousness of the social and religious world of antiquity.<sup>49</sup>

Not only is there the problem of communicating meaning across time, language, and cultural gaps, but there is the need, as well, to make the ancient writer's meaning relevant to the modern reader. Bernard Anderson writes of the commentary: "Its purpose is to

help people understand the language of Scripture – human language whose meaning is often obscure, ambiguous, allusive, historically conditioned, but language which, in the conviction of the Christian church, God uses as the chosen mode of communication to the end that people may know who their God is, may understand their vocation as the people of God, and may receive guidance on how they are to live, act, and worship.<sup>50</sup>

The whole issue of relevance is raised because the *Bible* is not simply ancient literature but the book of the Church, that is, of believers. The ramifications of this are several. First, despite the attempts of many comprehensive commentaries to elucidate only the ancient meaning of the text for scholars, there is a growing call for explanation of the text in the context of the believing community. Marvin Brown writes of the commentary: "It must be clear about the audience-situation of the text, and about the audience-situation of the commentary. If it recognizes these two situations, then it may perform a service of mediation; not simply between reader and text, but between world and world, understanding and understanding, interpretation and interpretation."<sup>51</sup>

Bernard Anderson writes: "The modern commentary will manifest to a significant degree the 'double loyalty' of the interpreter in his or her contemporary social setting: loyalty to the professional guild and the university on the one hand and to the community of faith and the theological enterprise on the other."<sup>52</sup>

Second, there is a growing resistance to the commentary as simply "a filing cabinet of possibly helpful clues to the reader."<sup>53</sup> Users of commentaries are recognizing that biblical books present unified messages which in turn must be seen in the context of the biblical canon. The demand, therefore, is for a movement away from merely explaining words, phrases, cus-

toms and allusions, to explanation of the small points in the context of larger passages. Krentz writes: "There is a test that one can apply to any commentary. Does the commentator provide an outline that expounds the text's sequence of ideas and their interrelationship or is it merely a listing of a sequence of topics that does not really illuminate the text?"<sup>54</sup>

This concern arises because biblical books are seen as carrying messages about God in this relationship with the world, messages which the believing community wants to grasp.

Third, commentary readers, as part of the believing community, want to learn the message of the book more than they want to be confronted by the agenda of the commentator. Here the whole issue of presupposition comes in. It is obvious that no commentator can be totally objective about the text he is explaining. Some commentators, in fact, have deliberately set an agenda and have spoken to it out of the biblical text simply because they believed that pure objectivity was out of the question anyway.<sup>55</sup> Yet commentary readers appear to want the commentator to attempt at least to be as objective as possible. Dillon writes that the primary task is to make the text clearer to the reader, not to present the exegete's personal philosophy.<sup>56</sup>

A possible solution to the problem of presupposition and the difficulties which can be created when the commentator uses the biblical text as a sounding board for his own ideas, comes from the suggestion that the commentator consider the history of the interpretation of each passage. The idea is that, in the context of the believing community, no commentator writes in isolation but rather in the environment of all the interpretations of *Scripture* which have gone before. While such an approach could be used wrongly to limit the legitimate freedom of the commentator, this danger is to be balanced against the problem

of the commentator ignoring tradition and overly distorting the meaning of the biblical text merely to put forward an agenda. Brevard S. Childs in his commentary on *Exodus*<sup>57</sup> has included special sections on the history of exegesis. Thomas Leahy has stated that, in the biblical commentary, because the *Bible* is the canon of the Church, the history of interpretation of the text may be considered part of the meaning of the text itself.<sup>58</sup> The issues of objectivity and presupposition are now, however, by any means solved even when the history of interpretation is considered. Perhaps Anderson's statement that the commentator should at least state where he stands is the most workable solution to the problem.<sup>59</sup>

Further smaller points arise from what is seen as flaws in many commentaries: too much detail on too little text; too little detail on too much text; the resistance of commentators to taking a stand on difficult interpretive issues, and so on.<sup>60</sup> These criticisms point out the very high demand which readers place on commentators. Commentaries are tools for what must be seen as a vital enterprise – the explication of the book of the Church – and their users take them very seriously.

It will only be as more literature on the commentary as a genre appears, and more analysis of it is made, that the commentators now writing will address the criticisms being made. In the meantime students of the *Bible* may continue to rejoice over the array of commentaries available to them.

#### NOTES

1. Edgar Krentz, "New Testament Commentaries: Their Selection and Use," *Interpretation* 36 (October 1982) p.373.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Private correspondence cited in Massey H. Shepherd, "What Should a Commentary Be or Do?" in *The Commentary Hermeneutically Considered*, ed. Edward C. Hobbs (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies and Modern Culture, 1978), p. 1.

4. International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896- ).
5. Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971- ).
6. New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978- ).
7. Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1982- ).
8. So John M'Clintock and James Strong, "Commentary," Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, Vol. 2 (1868; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), p. 428.
9. Cambridge Bible Commentary. New English Bible Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963- ).
10. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957- ); and Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968- ).
11. Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976- ).
12. Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980- ).
13. Good News Commentary (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983- ).
14. Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1957- ).
15. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951- ); and New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972- ).
16. Op. Cit.
17. Op. Cit.
18. Edward G. Selwyn, The First Epistle of St. Peter: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Essays (London: MacMillan, 1947).
19. Op. Cit.
20. New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967- ).
21. Op. Cit.
22. Op. Cit.
23. Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964- ).
24. Ibid.
25. Preliminary and Interim Report on the Old Testament Text Project, 5 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1973-1980).
26. Bruce M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (London: United Bible Societies, 1971).
27. E.M. Blaiklock, The Acts of the Apostles: An Historical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959).
28. William M. Ramsay, A Historical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (New York: Putnam, 1900).
29. Forms of the Old Testament Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981- ).
30. Robert H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).
31. Helps for Translators Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1961- ).
32. Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961- ).
33. International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983- ); Augsburg Old Testament Studies (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977- ).
34. See C.H. Spurgeon, Commenting & Commentaries (1876; reprint ed. London: Banner of Truth, 1969); Fred B. Craddock, "The Commentary in the Service of the Sermon," Interpretation 36 (October 1982) pp. 386-389; on p.387, Craddock states: "Midway between the text and the sermon lies the commentary."
35. Proclamation Commentaries: The New Testament Witness for Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975- ); and Proclamation Commentaries: The Old Testament Witness for Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977- ).
36. Communicator's Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1982- ).
37. J. Orr and F.W. Danker, "Commentaries," International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 738.
38. James Montgomery Boice, Philippians: An Expositional Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).
39. The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968- ).
40. Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians 1535, in Luther's Works, Vols. 26-27, ed. J. Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963).
41. Jose P. Miranda, Being and the Messiah: The Message of St. John (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977).
42. Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952-1957).
43. Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982- ).
44. See the argument of Terrence E. Freitheim, "Old Testament Commentaries: Their Selection and Use," Interpretation 36 (October 1982) pp 364-366, to the effect that liberal commentators are less likely than conservatives to allow their personal faith to impinge upon their commenting. This statement is open to debate, but it does warn conservative commentators to be careful to do justice to the text as it stands.
45. Op. Cit.
46. See the comments of H. Bamberger, "Some thoughts on the Anchor Bible," Christian Century 92 (April 30, 1975) pp. 440-442; and Orr and Danker, op. cit., p. 742.
47. The Beginnings of Christianity: Part I. The Acts of the Apostles (London: MacMillan, 1920-1933).
48. Philip E. Hughes, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).
49. Edgar Krentz, op. cit., p. 374.
50. Bernard W. Anderson, "The Problem and Promise of Commentary," Interpretation 36 (October 1982) p. 347.
51. Marvin Brown, "The Commentary in Biblical Hermeneutics," in The Commentary Hermeneutically Considered, ed. Edward C. Hobbs (Berkeley: Cen-  
ter for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1978), p. 13.
52. Anderson, op. cit., p. 348; see similar sentiments in Freitheim, op. cit., pp. 358-359, 362-364.
53. See note 3, above.
54. Krentz, op. cit., p. 375; see also John Dillon, "Some Thoughts on the Commentary," in The Commentary Hermeneutically Considered, ed. Edward C. Hobbs (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1978), pp. 15-16; Gordon Fee, New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), p. 35; and Walter C. Kaiser, "What Commentaries Can (and Can't) Do," Christianity Today 25 (October 2, 1981) pp. 24-27.
55. See a discussion of the whole issue in "Minutes of the Colloquy of 11 December, 1977; The Discussion Summarized by Irene Lawrence," in The Commentary Hermeneutically Considered, ed. Edward C. Hobbs (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1978), pp. 22-30; note especially the comment on p. 30 by Victor Gold: "There is no such thing as an objective commentary, any more than there is objective history. Every commentator is promoting his own point of view."
56. Dillon, op. cit., p. 14.
57. Brevard S. Childs, The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).
58. "Minutes of the Colloquy . . ." op. cit., p. 27.
59. See, for example, M'Clintock and Strong, "Commentary," op. cit., pp. 428-429; Kaiser, op. cit., p. 25.
60. Anderson, op. cit., p. 353. †

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