

**RAYMOND E. BROWN**, *The Death of the Messiah*. A commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels, 2 volumes, (Doubleday; New York 1994) ISBN 0-385-193 96 (vol 1), 0-3 85-19397-1 (vol 2) vii-xxvii. 1608pp.

It is not without a deep sense of loss that the present writer undertakes to write this late coming review. The author of the volume being presented here in this number of *Melita Theologica* has passed away in 1998 and hence needs no such reviewing service to understand the merits and limitations of what turned out to be his last major work. On the other hand, reviews are written also as contributions to scholarship and as a service to readers who would willingly receive illumination and guidance regarding the value of books and other exegetical tools. In this case we are in front of an *opus magnum*. How are we to judge this last major contribution of one of the most influential Catholic exegetes of the Twentieth Century? What are its strengths and/or its weaknesses? How are we to evaluate the methodological options made by its writer as he sought to understand what the Gospels and other sources say about the passion and death of Jesus Christ? Has Brown succeeded in communicating his insights to the 'variety of audiences' (1:viii) he had chosen as his target audiences?

The work's subtitle already spells out its literary genre: "A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the four Gospels". In this volume Brown offers a detailed commentary on every single episode in the Passion Narratives read 'horizontally,' that is, "studying each episode in all four Gospels simultaneously" without ceding however to any 'harmonizing goal' and without losing sight of the 'vertical chain of thought peculiar to each Gospel read consecutively' (1:viii). The four editions of the Passion Narrative are divided into four "Acts" which Brown entitles "Prayer/Arrest"; "Jewish Trial"; "Roman Trial"; "Crucifixion/Burial". Several of these Acts have "Scenes". "The use of 'Act' and 'Scene' to designate the divisions reflects my understanding of the Gospel accounts as dramatic narratives" (1:ix; cfr pp.4-13). In practice, Brown's commentary consists of forty-eight paragraphs of which §3 is dedicated to general bibliography with §§4.12.17.25.30.37.45 carrying sectional bibliographies. The first two paragraphs are introductory though they should be seen as essential for a proper understanding of the author's perspectives and methodological options. §§4-48 are mostly taken by the commentary proper. However, even when the text of the commentary comes to an end, Brown's *opus* continues for another three hundred pages or so with a number of appendixes wherein he discusses very specific issues related to the com-

mentary: 'the Gospel of Peter' (II:1317-1349); the date of the crucifixion (II:1350-1378); some texts considered to be 'difficult to translate' (II:1379-1393); 'Judas Iscariot' (II:1394-1418); 'Jewish groups and authorities mentioned in the Passion Narratives' (II:1419-1434); 'The sacrifice of Isaac and the passion' (II:1435-1444); 'the OT background of the Passion Narratives' (II:1445-1467); 'Jesus' predictions of his Passion and Death' (II:1468-1491); and the 'question of a PreMarcian Passion Narrative' (II:1492-1524). Other services that are offered include a number of indexes covering names of authors consulted, subjects treated (II:1525-1581) and 'Gospel Passage Index consisting of translations of the four passion narratives' and a list of pages where each text is principally commented upon (II:1584-1608). One may say that Brown makes sure that no aspect of the Passion Narratives remains without some explanation.

In order to show how the commentary functions, we shall detail Brown's treatment of 'Act I, Scene I (which comprises Mk 14,26-42; Matt 26,30-46; Lk 22,39-46; John 18,1). First comes a table of the contents on I:108-109; the sectional bibliography follows, §4, on I:110-116 with items for each sub-heading: 'Jesus goes across the Kedron to the Mount of Olives'; 'the prayer and agony of Jesus in Gethsemane'; 'the strengthening Angel in Luke 22,43-44'.

The sectional bibliography is followed by a literal translation of the text to be commented upon ["May I emphasize my awareness of how painfully literal is this translation-at times to the point of awkwardness..." (I:ix). This occasioned the translation of the text at the end of the second volume]. Then come the main sections of each paragraph of the commentary, one entitled 'Comment', the other 'Analysis'. In the first Brown tries to show and explain 'what the evangelist wanted to convey by the passage' (I:ix); in the latter he 'studies possible dependence of one Gospel on another, proposed preGospel traditions, and factors pertinent to historicity unavoidable questions, answered of necessity by theorizing, but scarcely the heart of the commentary' (I:x).

One cannot hope to do full justice to Brown's contribution to scholarship in this important heritage. The present reviewer found his discussion of the texts and the particular issues involved quite comprehensive, thorough, balanced, 'user-friendly', and sensitive to both the ecclesial dimension and to the human and pastoral aspects of the passages studied [His discussion of the 'responsibility and/or guilt for the death of Jesus' and of the question of the 'antijudaism in the passion narratives of the four gospel' (I:383-397) merits a mention in this regard]. Having stated that much, there remains room for

discussion over some of the methodological options made by the author of the commentary; and this is what the present reviewer has thought of offering in his evaluation of this work. Our discussion will touch upon three options:

1. *The 'horizontal' reading of the pericopae.* From the synoptical perspective Brown's approach carries no few advantages. The reader learns 'instantly' how each edition of the Passion Narrative treats the detail, personage, or episode. Brown is of course aware both of the 'vertical' dimension of each Passion Narrative as well as of the danger of harmonization tendencies (cfr I: viii). However, what his 'horizontal' reading misses is the role each Passion Narrative presumably plays within its context, that is, each gospel as whole read as a literary unity even if the Passion Narrative could have antedated the gospel proper or could have enjoyed time of independent existence before it became part and parcel of the gospel. Just to take one example: the Passion Narrative is considered by some as the climax of the gospel as a whole with Jesus' cry on the cross reported in Mk 15,34-36 as the interpretative key of Jesus as he is represented in Mark. But all this is lost in Brown's work.

2. *The division into 'scenes' and 'acts'.* Brown has been correct in underlining the 'narrative' character of the four Passion Narratives and their 'dramatic nature'. "The division of the commentary into acts and scenes", he reiterates on p. 11 of volume One, "is meant to underline my view that the passion accounts are truly dramatic narratives". It would appear that the evangelists did have some auracular representation in mind. Unfortunately, however, i) in order to understand how one should approach these 'stories' as narrative Brown turns to scholarly work the terminology and conceptual apparatus of which are in dire need of meta-linguistical exercises (I: 12 note 11); ii) he should have taken the path of biblical narratology rather than that of drama. And in biblical narratology 'scene' means something different than it does in drama [The reviewer would refer the reader to Jean Louis Ska, "*Our Fathers Have Told Us*". Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative, (Subsidia Biblica, 13; Rome 1990)33-35; in this way he would be situating NT narrative art within the OT narrative tradition where it belongs].

3. *Is the Last Supper part of the*

*Passion Narrative?* The sheer mole of narrative material constituting the four passion accounts led Brown to operate an artificial delimitation within each Gospel. "I have chosen to write this commentary on that section of the Gospels that begins with the Gethsemane (the place of the arrest of Jesus) and ends with the grave (the burial of Jesus' body), thus Mark 14,26-15,47; Matt 26,30-27,66; Luke 22,39-23,56; John 18,1-19,42" (I: 36-37). According to Brown this delimitation of what is the Passion Narrative in each gospel is defensible on two grounds: "Those who wish to reflect, study, or preach about the passion generally do not think of the Last Supper or the resurrection as part of the subject matter" (I: 37). A second argument is that while through his ministry and the Last Supper "Jesus has held the initiative and proclaimed God's kingdom as he deemed best; but now, at least on the visible level, others take the initiative, for the Son of Man is given over into their hands" (Ibid). One may understand Brown and accept that some artificial delimitation of th text understand cannot be avoided so that parts of the text have to be left out from the commentary given the limits

imposed by editorial considerations. But Brown's procedure is neither licit nor valid. His word of caution is in order: 'Despite the defensibility of delimiting the area on which this book comments, I would caution the readers that the evangelists themselves may have had a different understanding of what constituted Jesus' passion' (I:37). As if determining the internal segmentation of the text to be exegeted is not basic to any exegesis activity [Cfr Ernst R.Wendland, "The Discourse Analysis of Hebrew Poetry: A Procedural Outline" in Id (ed), *Discourse Perspectives on Hebrew Poetry in the Scriptures*, (United Bible Societies; Reading/New York 1994) 1-28]. If the goal of the present commentary was set as "to explain in detail what the evangelists intended and conveyed to their audiences by their narratives of the passion and death" (1:4) how can we choose to run the risk of leaving out whole parts of what the evangelists may have considered as part and parcel of their Passion Narrative? This becomes clear in the case of Mark where 14,1-25 narrates a number of incidents which not only led directly to the passion story but anticipated a number of narrative elements.

Just to mention one detail: Jesus' description of Judas, at the close of what Brown terms as the First Scene in Act One as *ho paradidous* (14,42) remains vague unless one has read also 14,10-11 where the verb *paradidomai* features twice with Judas appearing as the subject and Jesus as the object.

These strictures on global methodology adopted by Brown made, the present reviewer would recommend this commentary to be on the shelves not only of public libraries, but on that of individuals. The strength of this

commentary lies in the author's discussion of the individual pericopes where his treatment is masterful, balanced, thorough, respectful of different opinions, and conscious that these narratives were originally meant to address the Christian commitment of individuals and communities which were undergoing persecution. Brown's commentary is also addressed to a wide spectrum of readership; but whoever reads this work, whatever his/her religious or cultural background, cannot but profit from the insights he offers into the narrative of the passion and death of the One whom Brown too considered his Messiah.

**Anthony Abela**  
**Department of Holy Scripture**  
**University of Malta**  
**Msida, Malta**