

Noteworthy book fails to carry out promise

Exploring Scripture: How the Bible Came To Be, by Phillip J. Cunningham; Paulist Press, (Mahwah, N.J., 1989); 216 pages; \$10.95.

By Father Sebastian A. Falcone
Guest contributor

Writing an introduction to the Bible is always a hard task. Sometimes it borders on the foolhardy. Never is it foolproof.

The challenges are many: control of the material, careful focus on readership, consistency of approach, good sequence of exposition. And then comes the ultimate test of the writer's tightrope: to avoid saying too much for balance and choosing to say just enough for clarity.

Exploring Scripture: How the Bible Came To Be, by Phillip J. Cunningham, a Paulist Newman chaplain, is on the whole a noteworthy endeavor. The book embodies the author's efforts, over a 20-year experience, to offer college-level students a sophisticated yet non-technical approach to the Bible.

The work, which speaks to three

concerns, assembles useful geographical, archaeological, and sociocultural information about each of the books and several central figures of the Bible. It tailors this information to the adult reader's general knowledge. It debunks the fallacy that the Bible and science must ever be at loggerheads.

This reviewer applauds the author's purpose and premises. One readily acknowledges that the author's biblical study — critical and contemporary as it is — has (as the Preface states) enriched his life.

One further suspects that many a young, inquiring mind and yearning heart has through these materials achieved an enduring appreciation of the Scriptures. For all of these things Cunningham deserves hefty praise.

Praise, too, is owed the suggested readings inserted at key places in the text, as well as the Study Questions (sometimes rather wooden, however) at the close of each section.

Disappointing, however, are the flaws that slipped by the editor's pencil. Misspellings abound: e.g., Tritero-

Isaiah (Isa 56-66) occurs some eight times as Tritero-Isaiah. Dates are inconsistently reported from one page to the next (e.g., p. 25 speaks of the exodus as "a forty year trek," while p. 23 assigns a 70-year or so duration).

Archaeological periods are annoyingly given a single date, while everyone knows that such periods have a beginning and an end.

A critical judgment or two about proportion seems in order. Can the Psalms tease out only two paragraphs of comment? Deutero-Isaiah, one of the core areas of the Hebrew Scriptures, represented by three paragraphs? Romans, the most important letter in the New Testament, eight paragraphs, spread over two separate sections? Why, by comparison, are the Pastorals, Colossians, and Ephesians awarded 14 pages of treatment?

Overall the preoccupation with the sociocultural dimensions reduces the theological facets to little, if any, attention. The significance of the exodus

event, the law, and the temple in the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the Resurrection in the New Testament are largely assumed, rather than explored.

The need for such an adult-level introduction to the Bible is critical, especially at this time. Sadly, this book's promise is not fulfilled.

Might not a reissue, handled with due care, be soon made available to those who earnestly yearn for a guidebook that will break open for them the word of the Lord?

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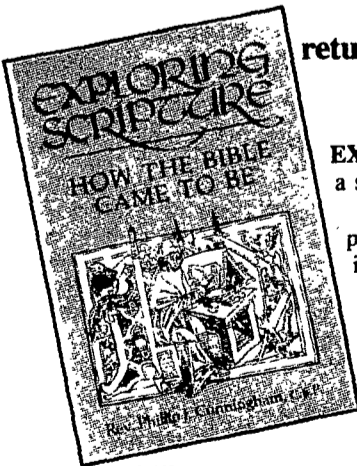
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