

## Martin McNamara: Biblical Scholar

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This is the text of the official citation delivered by Professor Séamus O'Connell at the ceremony on 17 November 2011, when the pontifical faculty of theology at St Patrick's College, Maynooth, conferred a doctorate in theology, *honoris causa*, on Martin McNamara, biblical scholar and one of the founders of *Scripture in Church*.

A Uachtaráin 's a Dhaimh!

Mar a deirtear sa Litir chuig na hEbhraigh, *Briathar Dé, Briathar beoúil, briomhar* – the word of God is *living* and active, it is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit ... (Heb 4:12).

This wisdom from the Letter to the Hebrews, puts before us a reality that is alive. If the word of God is truly what it says it is, then it must be first and foremost a word that is creative, that is new, that holds in itself an inherent newness and freshness; it must be a word which while embodying a continuity with the One from whom it comes, must also reach out into the world into which it is spoke. The word which is creative, must arrive somewhere, thus the creative word demands context. To have effect – to have a *Wirkung*, it must reach its audiences and that necessarily demands continuity with them. Here we gain an insight into the tensions – and the concomitant potential and richness – which exist within God's word. This tension between continuity and discontinuity is part of what permits the word to vivify, what makes the word make alive. Of course, if there is only continuity, then there is no reaching of its goal. If there is only discontinuity, it has lost its source – its very life.

Martin McNamara, whom we honour this day, is a scholar whose life work has borne witness to that tension. His first area of specialization and world renown has been the *Targum* – the Aramaic translation of the Bible. For those familiar with the New Testament, even a cursory reading of the *Targumim* reveals a striking continuity – in language and content – with the language and content of the New Testament. For hundreds of years, this continuity has caused scholars to wonder about the mutual relationship of Targum and Testament.<sup>1</sup> The discovery of the pre-Christian Aramaic texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls (in the late 1940s) and of the identification of the complete text of the Palestinian Targum (The Codex Neofiti) by Spanish

1. This is the title of McNamara's volume of 1972, *Targum and Testament: Aramaic Paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible: A Light on the New Testament* (Shannon: Irish University Press) and now in its second edition *Targum and Testament Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

Scholar Alejandro Diez Macho in the Vatican Library in 1956 brought new life to this debate. Within months of this discovery, in 1957 Martin McNamara who was a young biblical scholar in the Pontifical Biblical Institute, began to investigate the relationship of Codex Neofiti to the New Testament. That work which led to his doctorate at the Biblicum was published as *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* was published in 1966.<sup>2</sup> The years since 1957 have seen a sustained series of researches into the linguistic situation – both Aramaic and Greek – of Palestine at the time of the New Testament, and sustained research into the interpretation of Sacred Scripture in the Targums. McNamara, and those who have worked with him, have forged new ways of understanding the relationship of the New Testament and the Targums – in particular when their narrative character is taken into account, along with their multilayered-ness and the continuities which endure beneath and through evident discontinuities.<sup>3</sup>

It is one thing for a scholar to be able to work on his own. It is another for a scholar to be able to work well with others. McNamara conceived the monumental *Aramaic Bible*, and along with the contribution of his confrere Michael Maher, M.S.C., – whom we miss so much – and 17 other scholars published its 22 volumes between 1978 and 2007. Scholars of both Jewish and Christian communities of the English-speaking world have given a warm welcome to the series, which filled a significant lacuna in the body of Targums available in English, thus providing accesses to the Aramaic Bible for scholars of many disciplines.

This gift of bringing scholars to work together had already borne much fruit in the Irish Biblical Association (IBA) of which he was a founding member and whose publication, the Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association (PIBA), he brought to light of day – along with Wilfrid Harrington, O.P., and Professor Andrew Mayes – in 1975.<sup>4</sup>

The first volume of PIBA bore the sub-title *The Medieval Irish Contribution* which brings to light another key dimension of Martin McNamara's scholarly contribution – his phenomenal work with Irish biblical apocrypha which have seen the light of day in the publication of the volumes of the *Apocryphae Hiberniae* with John Carey (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies), Máire Herbert (formerly Maynooth and now University College, Cork), Pádraig Ó Fiannachta (Maynooth) and Jean-Daniel Kaestli (Lausanne). This series, in tandem with the growing number of volumes in the *Scriptores Celtigenae* provide a window on Medieval Irish Christianity and its striking actualization of the figure of Christ.

This world-class research did remain turned in on itself. In its closing

2. *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum of the Pentateuch* (AnBib 27 and 27A; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1966; 2d printing with supplement, 1978).

3. McNamara's collected essays have just been published by Mohr Siebeck: Martin McNamara *Targum and New Testament. Collected Essays*. WUNT I: 279. Tübingen, 2011.

4. Martin McNamara (ed.), *Biblical Studies: The Medieval Irish Contribution*. PIBA 1. Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975.

session, the Second Vatican Council asked that 'Catholic exegetes and other students of sacred theology, working diligently together and using appropriate means, should devote their energies, under the watchful care of the sacred teaching office of the Church, to an exploration and exposition of the divine writings. (*Dei Verbum*, n. 23) Significant is the next sentence: 'This should be so done that as many ministers of the divine word as possible will be able effectively to provide the nourishment of the Scriptures for the people of God, to enlighten their minds, strengthen their wills, and set people's hearts on fire with the love of God.' Martin McNamara, along with Wilfrid Harrington, O.P., approached Austin Flannery, O.P., at Dominican Publications and thus brought about the publication of *Scripture in Church* which since 1970 has sought to bring that nourishing word of the Scriptures to the minds and hearts of all God's people.

At the depth of this endeavour – be it in the Targums, the broader dissemination of learning and the work on the Irish Biblical Apocrypha – it is the work that lies itself at the core of the Bible and the way that God chose to write it. The Bible and its ongoing reception is a constant re-reading, a constant *relecture*. It is a word that is read and re-read; it is re-read as it is re-signified. In this way the whole community of the faithful continues the work of the Jewish scribes – as they read and re-read, interpreted and re-signified, and thus handed on *alive* what they had received. A living tradition proves itself adaptable, capable of having new significance in new and very different situations. The word, heard in earlier times with significance in one situation, is now heard with revived significance in this new situation.

Our sentiments to Professor McNamara's contribution are wonderfully captured by the words of the Blessed John Paul II, in his address to the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on April 23 1993, during an audience which commemorated the centenary of the encyclical, *Providentissimus Deus*, the fiftieth anniversary of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, and marked the publishing of the Commission's significant document on the *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, when he said,

I cordially thank you for the excellent work you have accomplished in service to the word of God and the people of God: a work of research, teaching and publication; an aid to theology, to the liturgy of the word and to the ministry of preaching; initiatives fostering ecumenism and good relations between Christians and Jews ...

These sentiments express the values that characterize an interpreter of the word in the Tradition of our Church. These are the values which Professor McNamara has embodied all his life and whom today, I ask you to honour, and in honoring him we also honour his congregation – the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart – who supported their confrere in his sustained work of as an eyewitness and servant of the word (see Luke 1:2).

*Ergo, prae-honorabilis Rector, totaque Universitas,  
presento vobis hunc meum fratrem  
quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse*

*qui admittatur, honoris causa,  
ad gradum Doctoratus in Theologia,  
idque tibi  
fide mea testor ac spondeo,  
totique Academiae.*

## Contributors

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**Carol Dorgan** is retired and lives in Cork. She is involved in the RCIA ministry in the diocese and also in spiritual direction, and does some writing.

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**William L. Haslett** ministered for many years in the Church of Scotland, and has recently retired from full-time ministry in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

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