

BLACKFRIARS

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PÈRE LAGRANGE (II)¹

PÈRE LAGRANGE was inspired by a theological principle the rational consequences of which are from now on clearly in evidence. Inasmuch as the Bible is an inspired book it is wholly and essentially divine, therefore absolutely true and infallible as representing, with the necessary guarantee of authenticity, the very word of God Himself. At the same time, however, and precisely in virtue of the divine inspiration communicated to the human writers, it is no less integrally human by reason of its production by a human instrument who is both intelligent and free under the movement of God, the primary cause. Profound consideration of this co-ordination of the two causes had led Père Lagrange to a principle finely balanced, it is true, but as inevitable as it was freedom-giving: the distinction between what is characteristically divine—where there is no room for any defective element—and what is characteristically human—where there is room for limitations and imperfections. Whilst reserving always and most explicitly to the Church, the only living authority qualified by God for this purpose, the determination of the characteristically divine teaching or statement contained in a biblical passage, it then became possible to envisage the Bible in the human perspective of its inspired authors, to study it, that is to say, according to the rules of the most positive historic method.

Although the fundamental principles here involved were discussed to some extent in the application of them made in a number of articles of the *Revue biblique*, and notably in the important address delivered to the Catholic Congress at Fribourg in August, 1897, on "The Sources of the Pentateuch," they were under the control of the Dominican censorship and had not been repudiated by any theologian

¹ Continued from the June BLACKFRIARS.

of note. It was the corollaries of these principles that were especially valuable because, without detriment to the requirements of inspiration, they were able to reveal a human element from which formal affirmation was absent, but which left room for material inaccuracy, at least as long as the magisterium of the Church had defined nothing explicitly on the point. By that very fact was eliminated the difficulty of reconciling with the most definite observations and findings of modern science those data in the Bible which concern cosmogony, the absolute universality of the Deluge, let us say, or astronomy. This method of exegesis which, as Père Lagrange put it, jealously safeguarded the inerrancy of the Bible and looked for the solution of the difficulties in an interpretation at once traditional and progressive, seemed to be entirely in conformity with the solemn and helpful directions given by His Holiness Pope Leo XIII in the memorable encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, November 1893. Whatever subsequent issues which lead one to suppose, this same method appeared still to be in conformity with the spirit of the Apostolic Letter *Vigilantiae*, of October 30th, 1902, instituting a new method of scriptural studies which were to be graded and co-ordinated under the direct supervision of the Holy See. It is now possible to provide a definitive testimony of this supreme doctrinal guarantee accorded to Père Lagrange's exegetical method, although he himself refrained from making use of it in the harsh controversies which cropped up later; indeed he referred to it for the first time only in his little work, *M. Loisy et le modernisme* published in 1932. Yet the fact is that when, in conformity with the programme outlined in his Letter *Vigilantiae* and shortly after its promulgation, Pope Leo XIII determined to put the new method into execution by creating at Rome itself the *Biblical Commission*, with a centre efficiently adapted to its work and an official organ for the publication of the latter, not content with naming Père Lagrange as one of the first Consultors of the Commission, His Holiness summoned him to Rome, in February 1903, to discuss the transfer of

the *Revue biblique* to that city as the official organ of the Commission; and he further proposed to leave Père Lagrange the direction of that review and to make him part of the personnel of the Biblical Institute he had in mind to found. This is not the place to give any more detailed account of these negotiations; suffice to say that they ended in Père Lagrange returning to his school at Jerusalem to await the founding of the Biblical Institute, postponed for the time being, and the *Revue biblique*, retaining its autonomy, published only the "official communications" of the Biblical Commission, inaugurating its new dignity in no other way than by the beginning of a "New Series." This situation continued from January 1904 until the creation of the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* in 1909, when naturally the *Revue biblique* lost its official character in favour of the new organ.

One cannot but be amazed at the intense activity displayed by Père Lagrange from the very first years of the School at Jerusalem. Nothing was too much for him; and whilst he had to give to his first generation of disciples, by means of teaching in the most varied subjects, the whole of that fundamental formation which was the necessary preamble to any specialist work, at the same time he was himself breaking ground in all the domains included in his vast programme. Simply by turning over the pages of the *Revue biblique* from 1892 to 1900 it is easy to get some idea, from the astonishing variety of his monographs which appear there, with what power of assimilation, what critical acumen, what appreciation of records and facts, he was able to treat of history, topography, archeology, and that no less effectively than he dealt with exegesis itself. It may suffice to give here one particular and typical example. The site of the primitive Jerusalem, "the City of David," a real key to the correct understanding of the whole of its history and consequently to the interpretation of innumerable biblical texts, fluctuated, in a confusion of discordant theories, amongst the hills now covered by the modern town. Père Lagrange's article entitled *La topographie de Jérusalem*, with which

the first number of the *Revue biblique* opens, fixed straight away the true historic site and traced out the main lines of its development which later archeological excavations confirmed on every point. And similarly over the years the completely technical problems of semitic epigraphy, Palestinian topography, oriental ethnography, archeology, and history of the ancient East can be seen to alternate under his pen with studies in biblical theology upon general fundamental problems, such as "Inspiration of the Sacred Books"; upon exegesis, such as "The Virgin and Emmanuel," "The Apocalypse of Isaias," "The Prophecy of Jacob," "The Hexameron"; upon historical criticism and of controversy, such as "The New History of Israel and the Prophet Osee," "Pantheism in Sacred History," "Nehemias and Esdras," and many others of the same sort, not to speak of innumerable book-reviews wherein he expressed views as clear as they were fruitful for the interpretation of the sacred text and for the defence of the Catholic faith.

From 1900 onwards, less sensitive to the attacks induced by the first concrete applications of his method—particularly in his study on the Pentateuch and in his conception of sacred history—than he was to the urgent need of blocking the way to the invasions of rationalism and of re-establishing the scientific prestige of Catholic exegesis, Père Lagrange had elaborated his "Project for a complete Commentary on Holy Scripture" in strict conformity with the principles of the Historic Method. This project, which received the approval of the most watchful and most qualified theological censorship, naturally could be appreciated accurately only in some initial concrete application. What he would have done most spontaneously would have been the commentary on Genesis; but in order not to foment unseasonably the already lively discussions on the subject of his study on the sources of the Pentateuch, it was better to reserve the whole of the Pentateuch for the time being and to demonstrate on less disputed ground the results to which historic criticism led. In 1903 appeared his volume *The Book of Judges* with which he inaugurated the collection of *Biblical Studies*;

it was approved from the doctrinal point of view in an explicit way by proved theologians of renown in the Order. Almost at the same time was published the big volume of *Studies on Semitic Religions* the theses and authority of which are still highly considered in specialist circles after thirty-five years of abundant discoveries in all branches of oriental studies. To these technical publications of such wide scope was now added a quite small book against which the most formidable tempest was to be loosed; it was *The Historical Method*—"especially in the exegesis of the Old Testament" as the Preface explained.

Only those who lived side by side with Père Lagrange throughout all the phases of this storm, which was to last for years, can know what it cost him in mental anguish and exhausting labour, without however causing him to yield for a single hour either in his trustful faith or in his humble and filial submission to his Mother, the Church, or yet in his absolute scientific honesty. I would that I could pass over in silence these sorrowful years. But that would be, alas, to allow to hover over the memory of Père Lagrange suspicions as to his orthodoxy, suspicions which certain insinuations, better intentioned without doubt than correctly informed, sometimes still tend to arise. In the brief survey which I am about to offer, with the details demanded by equity and clarity, I trust that no touch of bitterness will be suspected nor the least thought of anything polemical, which would, in truth, make me very unworthy of my master's teaching and still more of his example.

It would be impossible to understand anything of the sudden and fiery outburst against the Historic Method unless one kept in mind the gravity of the "modernist crisis" which had at that time just declared itself and was causing widespread devastation, bringing down in tragic and notorious apostasy the faith of many people hitherto regarded as most solid and most enlightened pillars of the Faith. As always happens in every troublous period, danger was seen everywhere and, through difficulty in seizing upon its true cause, everything in the

doctrinal order was readily held to be responsible which left the beaten tracks of a placid, not to say lazy, routine. By the same token Père Lagrange and his scriptural method could not escape being taken violently to task by amateur apologists who had made little or no effort to study and understand either him or his work, but were carried away by their burning ardour of the hunt in the cause of orthodoxy. There was a general campaign, conducted by means of fiery articles which appeared even in the daily papers, where they were as little authoritative as they were congruous, and by heavy tomes directed against the Historic Method. The major Superiors of the Order at the time were the Most Reverend Father Frühwirth and his Vicar, Père Cormier. Both of them had known the theological and religious temper of Père Lagrange long enough and sufficiently well to be entirely confident both of his Catholic orthodoxy and of his obedience. They enjoined upon him not to pay any attention to these attacks.

As soon as the Sovereign Pontiff Pius X, in his Decree *Lamentabili sane exitu* (July 3rd, 1907) and his Encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (Sept. 7th, 1907), had formulated the modernist errors and prescribed the conditions of a sincere submission to the teachings of the Church, Père Lagrange hastened to give his adherence thereto, without any ostentatious emphasis but with the profoundest and most religious loyalty, by making the required profession of faith. The heresy-hunters above referred to, notwithstanding that they held no commission of any sort, feigned to detect, under this loyal and humble profession of faith, the insidious dissimulation of a heretic of the most dangerous kind. There was even found a fanatical champion of sound doctrine to denounce him with vehement zeal, in a review with the impressive title of *O salutaris hostia*, if I mistake not, calling upon him to cease from laying waste the fold of Christ while still wearing the white livery of St. Dominic and celebrating Mass with a spurious show of piety . . . !

No less foul and insidious were the manifold insinuations made, on the other hand, from the modernist camp, where it

was commonly pretended that Père Lagrange's thought was entirely in line with that of the leaders of this school, but that he had not their own frank courage and knew how to display a machiavellian opportunism. They even went so far as to ascribe to suggestive and artful solicitation on his part whatever homage had been paid to his scientific work by authorities quite independent of all doctrinal controversy, pretending that he had begged for it as a way of protesting against certain misgivings on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities. It is therefore not surprising to find that, under the converging pressure of all these unceasing attacks, Père Lagrange's orthodoxy was questioned in all good faith by men who were less clear as to the real basis of extremely delicate and complex scriptural problems than moved by the danger and the ravages of modernism.

It was in the midst of such anguish and such cruel difficulties that Père Lagrange was pursuing his work without faltering, preserving a completely supernatural spirit of submission to the Church, to his Order, entirely abandoned to divine Providence, when it was suggested to him that he should leave, at least for the time being, the domain of the Old Testament. With unquestioning and complete docility he immediately consecrated his energies, with the same method and the same devotion, to a study of the Gospels, and in 1910 there appeared his *Gospel according to St. Mark*, the first part of the monumental tetralogy which was to be crowned, eighteen years later, by the synthesis to be so favourably received in after years under the title of *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*.

But at that time the valiant teacher and his teaching were far from receiving such credit. A zealous impetuosity, arising no doubt from honest conviction which Père Lagrange respected even while he suffered cruelly from its thoughtless excesses, had assumed the task of utterly destroying his main work, namely the *Ecole pratique d'Etudes bibliques* at Jerusalem, in order to monopolize the advantages it offered. Nothing would have been more intelligible in principle, notwithstanding some obvious inconveniences,

than a fraternal juxtaposition of other schools calculated to increase results in a spirit of loyal and friendly rivalry. But on the other hand everyone will be ready to agree that there was something essentially unkind in pretending to safeguard the interests of the Catholic Faith by monopolizing a work which was declared to be a necessary one and yet one which had to be cleansed first of all of heretical tendencies. The urgent necessity of such a cleansing was insisted on many times in proposals as lacking in balance as they were in kindliness. Undoubtedly the best way of making these proposals really efficacious would have been to obtain from the Church an official condemnation of Père Lagrange's Historical Method itself, a condemnation which would have reached, by a single stroke, all its applications. To this end attacks were redoubled against his works, and especially against definite propositions in which the best theologians had hitherto been able to find no doctrinal errors which in fact, although subjected, over a period of ten years, to the most rigid criticism had yielded no matter calling for theological condemnation.

As against all the multiplicity of imprudent assertions and unjust insinuations, there has never been, right up to the present time, any official pronouncement of the Church condemning any of the works or even any of the explicit propositions of Père Lagrange. What some have been too hasty in bringing forward as a condemnation of this sort consists precisely in the following: by a decree of the Sacred Consistorial Congregation, dated June 29th, 1912, the *Introduction to the Old Testament* from the pen of a German, Dr. Ch. Holzhey, was declared to be tainted with hypercritical theories and rationalist modernism. As a consequence the Sacred Congregation forbade the introduction of this work into Seminaries even under the heading of a reference book. The Decree added thereto different Commentaries "of a like mentality" such as "certain works of Père Lagrange," the use of which had thus also to be prohibited in Seminaries.¹ The measure was undoubtedly

¹ cf. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, IV, 1912. p. 530.

benevolent in intention, for seminarians ought not to have at their disposition any but thoroughly innocent books. Nevertheless the grounds of its enactment were certainly grave ones, and the very indetermination of the *scripta plura P. Lagrange* gave his adversaries an excuse for unlimited exploitation. He himself did not care in the least about this exploitation, however; but on the morrow of the promulgation of the Decree he drew up in all sincerity a declaration of his submission "of mind and heart, without reserve, to the commands of the Vicar of Christ." This is not the place to transcribe in full that declaration; suffice it to say that the Sovereign Pontiff deigned to express his "great and entire satisfaction" in respect of it, and that it was then given very wide publicity.

The absolute loyalty of this submission could not be better emphasized than in the fact that it allowed him to leave his School and Palestine and to forbid himself any continuation of his scriptural work. To his collaborators, who made known their inability to continue without his direction either the work of the School or the publication of the *Revue biblique* (even though the latter had been transformed into a simple "Palestinian and Oriental Review"), the Most Reverend Father General gave orders that they must imitate the religious spirit of Père Lagrange, carry on the work in the same dispositions of scientific honesty and entire submission to the Church, but to change nothing, at any rate until some new command was given, either in the programme of the School or in the Review. Providence could not but bless the good-will with which the Superior's command was put into execution notwithstanding difficulties known only to God, difficulties which seemed so absolutely insuperable to this group of young men, bereft of their leader. At the beginning of the following July, Père Lagrange, at the time engaged in the work of the ministry and in teaching history and archeology at Paris, received an order to return to Jerusalem and resume his course of exegesis. I will not speak of the joy and thanksgiving in the little community there where biblical work now took on a new lease of life.

It seemed inevitable, shortly afterwards, that the work would be destroyed once and for all by the world-wide cataclysm of 1914-1918. It was only the indomitable energy of Père Lagrange that caused the quite regular publication of the *Revue biblique* to continue in spite of everything, a feat almost unique, I imagine, amongst publications of that sort. Even before the end of the War and only shortly after the entry of the English and allied troops into Jerusalem, he had gone back there and was reorganising the devastated School buildings, to such good effect that the School was ready to resume its activities in the early months of 1919, immediately after the demobilisation of its personnel in whose ranks the War had made some gaps. For fifteen years more, and in spite of cruel attacks of sickness, Père Lagrange did not relax either in his teaching or in the publication of important works wherein he gave more and more evidence of his mastery.

When he was now nearly eighty, to complete and crown his studies on the New Testament he conceived the project of a vast "Introduction to the Study of the New Testament" and actually achieved the three essential volumes that he had reserved for himself, namely, *History of the Canon*, *Rational Textual Criticism*, and *Historical Criticism, The Mysteries: Orphism*. Constrained at the age of eighty-one, by the peremptory decision of the doctors and the paternal command of the Most Reverend Master General, to leave the too rigorous climate of Jerusalem, he returned to the beloved Priory of St. Maximin, the nursery of his religious life, after an interval of fifty-six years. But he did not even then consider that he had any right to complete repose, and continued to expend, upon courses given to the Dominican students at St. Maximin or periodic conferences to the young men at the University, the energies not already absorbed by the continuation of some book or by his constant collaboration in the *Revue biblique*.

After the completion of his New Testament work by the publication of *Orphism* last autumn, he courageously returned to the study of the Old Testament and to the funda-

mental problems that had formed the object of his earliest preoccupations. He was moved more than ever, to the depths of his apostolic soul, by the anxious concern of the present generation about these vital questions as to the authenticity of the word of God, the biblical teaching on the origins of things and the agreement of this teaching with the incontestable findings of science; for he desired neither ignorance nor misconception of any of these latter, but he would not allow them to take presumptuous precedence of the data of Faith. His last letters to the School contained enquiries about the most recent anthropological discoveries in Palestine or asked for precise confirmation of some new and impressive item of oriental archeology. On March 4th his New Testament lecture in the *Studium* of St. Maximin had for its theme: the Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of St. John and the Synoptics. This was to be the apogee and seal of his teaching. Only a few days later the pen was to fall from his valiant fingers upon the proofs of the supreme literary effort which brought his work full circle to the starting point, an essay entitled: *The Mosaic authenticity of Genesis* which appeared in the April number of the *Revue biblique*. A month after Père Lagrange was no more.

Being warned on March 9th that there could be no hope of recovery, he accepted the fact without emotion, simply and piously, being concerned for nothing more except his soul; his last word, clearly articulated, was an act of abandonment of himself to God and of confidence in the maternal help of Our Blessed Lady. One last time his Brethren who surrounded his deathbed, mingling tears with their prayers for the beloved Father, heard him murmur: "Jerusalem . . ." whilst he tried to lift his feeble hands to heaven upon which his gaze was already fixed. Finally there was peace, and silence, and his last sigh on the morning of March 10th . . .

Profoundly moving was it to find, upon opening his Will, in words of poignant humility and simplicity, the expression of his intense faith, of his absolute submission to the judgment of the Church upon all his works, of his attachment to

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his Order and of his thankfulness to all his Brethren, but above all the expression of his burning and trustful filial piety towards the most Blessed Virgin. "I desire to say once more, I am Mary's son, *tuus sum ego, salvum me fac!*"

Forty-seven years of affectionate intimacy with Père Lagrange, to whom my intellectual, moral and religious life owe all, should undoubtedly have prepared me to show how this entirely sincere religious spirit and this tender filial devotion towards Mary were the whole secret of his noble and most fruitful life. But I should be afraid lest this testimony of my friendship might wound, even beyond the tomb, the delicacy of his own friendship for me. Moreover what words could render more expressive the moving simplicity of those in which he himself has made known, in the presence of God, the most intimate secret of his soul.

L. HUGUES VINCENT, O.P.

Jerusalem,
April 1938.