

A Catholic Approach to the Bible

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If a reasonably well-instructed Catholic were asked to say what the New Testament meant to him, his answer might be somewhat as follows: The New Testament is a highly interpretative but historically true account first of what Jesus Christ was and said and did, secondly of the effect which this had and continues to have on his believers, on mankind in general and on the powers of heaven and earth, thirdly of the final consummation of Christ's work and Christ's words, in which this present age will one day be terminated. The divine meaning of what Jesus was and said and did explicitates itself through the human faculties of his own chosen teachers by the power of the Holy Spirit. The divine truth that *is* Jesus Christ projects itself beyond the space-time dimension of his earthly life into the transcendent dimension of written words on a page. In the New Testament the meaning of Jesus Christ as Saviour sharpens into a spearhead and thrusts as a present reality into the lives of all generations until the end of the world, challenging them, summoning them with the timeless and transcendent truth of his own Person offered eternally as their life and their light.

Moreover the New Testament is the Church's book. For already by the time the earliest of its writings was composed, numerous communities had emerged of those who believed the Gospel and were striving to live their new faith. The New Testament enshrines the traditions by which they lived. It was written in response to their needs, among them and for them. It was written by believers and worshippers, by men who felt themselves deeply and personally involved in their own message, who believed that they themselves had been saved from eternal hell and destined to eternal heaven by the historical events which they recorded. In that important sense the New Testament is their book, the 'prayer-book of the primitive Church'. The early Christian communities springing up first at Jerusalem, then at Antioch, and then throughout the Roman Empire, were striving to respond to a single historical event. What Jesus was, what he did and what he taught, these first

Christians had received from 'eye-witnesses and ministers of the word' (Lk. i. 2). And we receive it from them under God. We depend upon them utterly for our knowledge of our Saviour. What the New Testament faces and challenges our world with is a body of believers swiftly spreading throughout the Roman Empire, each individual member of which has his gaze steadfastly fixed upon a human figure at a point slightly further back in history—a point not directly visible to us.

Turning now to the broader context of the Old Testament, the same essential structure can be seen. One of the first things one is compelled to recognize about it is that it is only in the most superficial sense a book or collection of books. If one may generalize at all, it would be more accurate to describe it as an intensely complex amalgam of traditions which have grown up layer upon layer over a period of about two thousand troubled years. Within this amalgam a relatively small number of 'tradition-nuclei' can be discerned, round which the rest of the tradition-material has accumulated in more or less meaningful patterns. In the more developed stages of this process one has of course to allow for autonomous productions of a more truly literary type. But the amalgam as a whole is *immediate* to history, possessed with its mysterious untidiness and strength, in a sense in which no purely literary production, no mere book, could ever be. When we turn to the idea of author we are compelled to make similar reservations. The term 'author' as applied to the earlier traditions of the Bible will be almost meaningless unless we allow it to include in some sense the collective entity, the group, which has lived through events conceived to be divine and which has, by a process as complicated and indefinable as history itself, articulated its experience in the words of one or more of its members. The biblical author then is not *over against* history, not autonomous, withdrawn, independently creative. On the contrary he is himself a part of the history; history articulates itself in and through him. The act of God, intrinsically meaningful as it is of the saving purpose of God, thrusts into the dimension of his own existence and through and beyond his human faculties into the further dimension, boundless and timeless, of written words on a page. The Bible is not an abstract record of saving history, *Heilsgeschichte*. The writing of the Bible is itself an integral part of the *Heilsgeschichte*, the point at which the divine purpose latent in the events themselves sharpens into a spear-head of explicit meaning and so pierces into the lives of all subsequent generations.

Now evidently this view of the Bible as a final thrust of divine

meaning and divine purpose into a dimension in which it reaches into the lives of all generations throughout the world, presupposes a long and complex process of evolution. The relatively small part of tradition which is finally crystallized in writing necessarily implies an earlier and far broader complex of oral tradition, itself moulded and remoulded in response to changing historical circumstances. The development of oral tradition in turn presupposes a living community deeply and abidingly aware of being the subject of God's choice and purpose. The community as a whole looks backwards to an historical event, the creative impact of an intervention of God in the past, impelling the community itself towards a predestined consummation in the future, a consummation which is to involve (if we follow the eschatological and apocalyptic developments of the Old Testament message) not only the chosen community itself, but mankind in general, and ultimately the powers of heaven and earth. The continuity between the two Testaments is therefore assured not merely by the fact that Christ comes as the consummation of the Old Testament *Heilsgeschichte*, but also by the fact that both Testaments display the same basic structure: an act of God in the past creates a living community which accumulates a complex of oral tradition to express the continuing impact of that act upon its own life; finally part of that complex of oral tradition is crystallized in writings conceived to be sacred, thereby extending the message to all subsequent generations.

It will be noticed that so far I have laid every possible emphasis on the *immediacy* of the Bible to history. Although this is very different from asserting that the Bible is an accurate literal record of history, a sort of inspired *Oesterly and Robinson*, it does raise the problem of historicity as a whole, and serves to point what I feel to be the first and fundamental difference between the Catholic and the Protestant approach. For the extreme Protestant, if I understand him rightly, history is in an important sense, irrelevant. What did the primitive Christian community really see of the Man on the other side of Easter Sunday morning? What residue of hard historical fact really has survived the successive levels of interpretation in the Old Testament? We cannot know, and in any case it does not matter, says the sort of Protestant I have in mind. What does matter is the message God addresses to me in the here and now, in the oblique form of a largely mythological story of what happened then and there. The value of the Bible as *kerygma* is not diminished by its failure to be history.

Now a Catholic obviously cannot accept this. For him the *kerygma*

is the eloquence of the divine event itself, uttered from within history. As Aquinas puts it, where men speak by words, God speaks by events. What matters is what God said and did in history, not merely what the believing community thought he said and did. God as creator is not only transcendent but also, by his creative power, immanent and interior to his own creatures, interior then to nature and to history itself. To say that he redeems the world by an historical act is to say that he uses his interiority to act upon history, destroys it and re-creates it from within itself. Christ saves men not merely by becoming, in some spiritual and transcendent sense, the message of God to them, but by a divine intervention which is also a physical and historical fact. He becomes man, immerses himself in the history to which all men belong, dies and rises in the midst of history, and extends the divine and physical fact of his death and resurrection through history into the personal life of each individual, by 'divinizing' the physical gestures of the sacraments to raise the whole man to newness of life, body as well as soul, the physical as well as the spiritual, still within history itself.

For Catholics, then, the element of history in the Bible, and the element of the supernatural in history, have an immediate and vital relevance which can neither be denied nor by-passed. A substantial part of the Bible purports to be a statement of what happened in history under the guidance and power of God. And, due allowance being made for the considerable differences in thought, language and expression between the Semitic world and our own, the Catholic biblicist is committed to taking the Bible substantially at its word. This explains, I think, why so much of the best Catholic scholarship over the past fifty years or so has been marked by an insistence on the more positive aspects of biblical study, geography, history and especially archeology, taken in the widest sense, and including the wealth of extra-biblical documents which has come to light within the last century. Examples of the sort of approach I have in mind would be R. de Vaux's *Institutions de l'Ancien Testament I-II*, Abel's *Géographie de la Terre Sainte*, Vincent's *Jérusalem* and, at a more popular level, Grollenberg's *Atlas of the Bible*.

But though the basic historicity of the Bible can be tested, verified and elucidated by historical and archeological investigation, its truth-value is not, in the last analysis, guaranteed by this scientific method or by that. For the Catholic the Bible is true because it is inspired. What, then, does inspiration mean? Let us return for a moment to two ideas which we have previously touched upon, namely that God is interior

to his own *Heilsgeschichte*, and that the writing of the Bible is itself a *Heilsgeschichtliche* event. It is possible, I think, to explain the meaning of inspiration in terms of these two principles. Biblical authorship is a fully human and historical act. The biblical author's human powers, his mind, will and executive faculties, are as fully and creatively engaged as those of any other man with a message to convey in the fixed and permanent form of writing. Behind him lies a vast and complex accumulation of oral tradition to which his own message comes as the last word. Before him lies the concrete situation in history which claims his attention and determines his immediate interests. He writes as a man of his time and as a man of his people. His ideas, language, idiom and thought-forms are conditioned by his situation in history and also, of course, by his individual personality and preoccupations. But the history in which he is involved is not merely history but *Heilsgeschichte*. As creator, God is 'interior' to it, and is actively using his own 'interiority' to produce a supernatural effect, to direct it towards a supernatural end, namely Redemption. To say that the act of biblical authorship is inspired, is to say that it involves the same process in microcosm. Here too as creator God is 'interior' to the act of authorship in its total extent, and actively uses his 'interiority' to produce a supernatural effect, namely divine truth. Moreover, what he bestows in and through the act of his creature is not merely truth but *saving* truth, truth that enters as an integral element into the total effect of the Redemption towards which, as we saw, the *Heilsgeschichte* as a whole is directed. That is what it means to say that the writing of the Bible is itself a part of the *Heilsgeschichte*. It emerges from a community living under the power of God's act of choice and purpose. It extends the meaning of that act into the lives of all believers, so that they too know what it is to live under the abiding impact of God's choice and power and purpose.

The Catholic faith, then, commits one to a doctrine of inspiration which is uncompromising, but not, I think, crude or mechanical. The words of the original authors (not those of copies or versions—not the Vulgate) were composed freely under the infallible influence of the Holy Spirit. Not all of these words have a truth-value that is *independent* of the whole, not all of them have the same *degree* of truth-content, not all of them are 'literally' true. But *all* of them contribute as parts of a greater whole, to a total message of inspired truth.

So far I have been concerned with the divinely ordered formation and final crystallization of the biblical traditions, in short, with *what*

happens on the other side of the Bible page. But what happens, or ought to happen, on our side of the page? How ought the Bible to be received and used and lived by the community to whom it is addressed? As we have seen, the writing of the Bible presupposes the formation of that community by an act of God in the past, its continued preservation through history, and also the gradual accumulation of sacred traditions by which it lives. Now in Catholic eyes all this gives a certain priority to the community itself, that is, to the Church. She is the 'New Israel of God', the continuation and consummation of the Old Israel. The Bible grew out of her community life with God; it was written with her in mind, addressed to her. It is her book. Moreover the Bible is not only a testament, a witness to what God willed and said and did for and to his chosen people, but also a covenant. Here God as truth makes himself present to man as believer in word and promise and command. And it is the Church's sacred duty to ensure that this *presence* of God to his people through these words reaches each of her members undiminished and undistorted. On this showing the task of recognizing where the inspired message lies, of interpreting it and mediating it to the Church's members, is essentially apostolic and ecclesiastical. It is the function of preaching, *praedicatio*, *kerygma*, in its deepest and broadest sense. The Catholic exegete feels himself a preacher in this sense. He is vitally involved in his own message, part of the *Heilsgeschichte* of the Church herself, not merely purveying his own ideas, but speaking, in some sense, with her voice. It is in these terms that I would explain the defensive apparatus which the Church has erected of recent years, notably the Biblical Commission. The function of the Biblical Commission, reduced to its simplest terms, is to ensure that the interpretations of the individual do not distort the *kerygma* of the Church as a whole. It refuses—sometimes only for a time—to allow certain isolated and specific interpretations to be taught to the Church's members, because it considers that these would tend to distort the Church's total message to them. It does not direct exegetes positively to uphold this doctrine or that. Its pronouncements are not *de fide*, and are not irrevocable. They can be, and in some cases have been, modified.

Once the Church has committed the task of *praedicatio* in this special sense, to certain of her members, she will be content with nothing less than their utmost human abilities, and all the resources of scientific research available have to be used to the full. This has been particularly stressed in recent papal encyclicals. Catholic biblical scholars are urged to spare no pains in acquiring the fullest possible knowledge of semitic

languages, thought-forms and *genres*, and of the biblical milieu in all its aspects. The exegete's initial task is to discover what the biblical author intended to say, and through that, what God intended to say.

I ought finally to say something of the use of scripture in the Church's liturgy. When the Catholic altar stands ready for mass, it is dominated by two objects: the sacramental elements and the missal. These are the two media of life and light respectively, through which Christ bestows himself anew on the Church. The mass for Catholics is a sacramental reactualization of the moment of Calvary. Life and light begin for her in that moment. *Praedicatio*, therefore, in the special sense in which I have been using the term, commences at the altar when the gospel is read and the message of Christ goes out anew to the world. This is, so to say, the outward movement of revelation from the altar. But in the Bible God gives us not merely words that reveal himself, but also words by which he wills men to praise him, psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles. Here then the inward movement of response is to be found. In the psalms, solemnly recited or chanted by the Church's ministers, the sorrow, praise and entreaty of all creaturehood becomes articulate before God. This is the divine office recited by all priests and religious. It culminates in the mass, the climactic moment in the Church's life. Here then, in the outward and inward movements of revelation and response, the Church's life with God becomes articulate, eloquent. She not only reads the Bible but prays it and lives it, praising God not merely with the human words of her individual members, but also with divine words, chosen and inspired by the Holy Spirit of God himself.