

ON READING THE SCRIPTURES

BY REGINALD GINNS, O.P.

All scripture inspired by God is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice, that the man of God may be perfect, furnished to every good work. (II Tim. 3, 16-17.)

Those whom divine grace has called to holy orders should day by day, as their state demands, display greater diligence and industry in reading, meditating, and explaining Holy Scripture. (Leo XIII in Providentissimus Deus.)

IT is two years since the attention of readers of the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT was first drawn to the Jerusalem Bible—the new French translation of the scriptures, with an introduction and notes to each book, brought out in a series of beautifully printed fascicules by *Les Editions du Cerf*. Seven of these fascicules appeared in 1949 containing various books of the Old and New Testaments, five more in 1950, and a further eight in 1951 giving us Leviticus, Tobias, Proverbs, Wisdom, Isaias, Jonas, Matthew, I and II Timothy, and Titus. At this rate the series will soon be complete.

The more I see of this splendid and monumental work the more I hope to see it one day available in English for those who have no facility for French. Monumental seems to be the right word here. Not only is the work under the able direction of the *École Biblique* of Jerusalem (and the learned Dominicans there have allowed fifty years of preparatory research to precede the venturing on such a task as this), but those responsible for the undertaking have shown a fine sense of scholarship by inviting from all sides the collaboration of biblical and literary experts, priests and laymen. It was, of course, the only reasonable method to adopt in view of what was aimed at: a reliable and, as far as present knowledge extends, an exact rendering of the mind and words of the original authors.

We need not be afraid of admitting that under these conditions something will unavoidably be sacrificed of what is called literary excellence. Human genius at its highest has its limitations, and here, as in everything else merely human, it is a question of choice of sacrifice. Let me repeat some wise words quoted in a previous article on this subject: *the problem confronting every translator is the*

choice of sacrifice, because all translation implies some loss. But it seems to me that when we are dealing with the inspired word of God the choice is imposed on us from the start. Nor, as I said before, need we be disturbed about the lack of literary unity that will result from a multiplicity of translators; there is no literary unity in the original scriptures.

It will be objected that the Jerusalem Bible is too learned for ordinary folk, with its notes and introductions. But it is high time to protest against that unreasonable demand often made in the past and now made again (but not by scripture scholars) for a translation of the Bible not only put into modern literary style, but also put into words which shall make it easy for any casual and uninstructed reader to understand what the original writers wished to convey. Perhaps one might recall here the impression left on the mind of St Peter himself by the epistles of his 'most dear brother Paul... in which are certain things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, to their own destruction' (2 Peter 3, 16). I hope I shall not be misunderstood and thought to be resuscitating the old clerical prejudice which bade the laity to keep their hands off the Holy Scriptures. On the contrary, I should like to see more of us following the admonitions of recent Popes to all the faithful to read their Bible constantly and to try to fathom its meaning. But there is only one way to that: serious study, adherence to the authentic tradition of the past, and prayer for the grace of God who is the primary author of the scriptures. Indeed, under the heading of serious study is to be included the repeated reading of the Bible—all of it; for every good master of Sacred Scripture will tell you that, better than any commentary, one part of scripture explains another. It is St Augustine who says: *quod in veteri latet in novo testamento patet*; what lies hidden in the Old Testament is made clear in the New. A little familiarity with the various books of the Bible will show how their writers were soaked in the ideas, images and words of the preceding books. And I am reminded here of the comfort St Thomas offers us regarding the difficulties arising from what is called the spiritual meaning of scripture, first recalling what we are to understand by the spiritual sense.

It is distinguished against the literal or historic sense, which is the meaning intended by the actual words of the sacred writer.

To get at that you need a dictionary, a grammar, a knowledge of ancient history and culture; there is no substitute for these requirements. The spiritual sense or meaning is that which God intends to convey by means of the things, persons and places described in the words of the sacred author. The book of Exodus tells of the making of the ark of the covenant in words we can all understand. The literal sense is clear. But when the litany of Loreto salutes our Lady as Ark of the Covenant it is evidently the spiritual meaning that is in question, and it furnishes an excellent opportunity for biblical study and meditation to find for ourselves in what respect the Mother of Christ serves as an ark of the covenant for us. Here that indispensable instrument of biblical study, the Concordance, will serve us well. And if you ask how you can find other spiritual meanings for yourself I might content myself with answering that God, the primary author of scripture, will tell you in his own good time through that organisation called the Church, which he has established in order to teach and faithfully preserve all the truths required for obtaining eternal life. But St Thomas seems to venture a little further. After saying that *sensus spiritualis super litteralem fundatur et eum supponit*, he assures us that 'nothing necessary for faith is contained beneath the spiritual sense which scripture does not somewhere clearly teach by means of the literal sense' (*Summa* I, 1, 10, 1m). This gives further scope for our reading and study of the Bible, and the short explanatory notes at the foot of each page of the Jerusalem Bible will help us here.

Those who seriously wish to understand the sacred text should not dispense themselves from a careful reading of the introductions provided by the Jerusalem Bible. Without question one of the essential means towards a rational study of the scriptures is some knowledge of these books from the outside, so to speak: who was the human author, when did he write and in what circumstances, for what purpose did he write, and what have been the fortunes of his book during the course of the centuries? I know that this, as many of us sadly remember from the days when we were scripture students, can be a very boring and lifeless business: dull lists of arguments in favour of authenticity, historicity, canonicity, etc., we learned with much labour and forthwith forgot, nor are we conscious of being much the worse for it. But it is not necessary that this introductory study should

be uninteresting and so unhelpful, as those will readily admit who have had the advantage of following the course at the *École Biblique* of Jerusalem, where most of the time was spent in providing us with the apparatus required so that we might read the scriptures intelligently for ourselves.

Indeed it is obvious that some introductory work of this kind is necessary when we consider that the original author of the Pentateuch is separated in time, circumstances and culture from the author of the Apocalypse by as much as we are distant in the same respects from the days of the Venerable Bede. Collect in one volume the religious poems of the Anglo-Saxon Caedmon and Cynewulf, the epic of Beowulf, Bede's ecclesiastical history, the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, the Domesday Book, the Ancren Riwle, the monastic chronicles, the works of Chaucer, the plays of Shakespeare, the poems of Milton and a few modern writings: no one could expect that this would make easy reading—even though all these authors were fellow-countrymen of ours—without a good deal of introductory study.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, I must again disavow any intention of so exaggerating difficulties as to discourage people from reading the Bible; indeed, the whole purpose of these words is to suggest how it may be read with profit and pleasure, and that is certainly not by looking for a modern literary translation which will remove all obscurities at one stroke. No translation, literary or otherwise, can possibly do that. What translation, for instance, can give us at one glance the meaning of the epistle for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, Gal. 3, 16-22; or that for the preceding Sunday, II Cor. 3, 4-9? Take up the letter of any stranger (and these epistles are letters), especially of a stranger who lived a thousand or so years ago, and read a short extract from the middle of it. You will say, and reasonably enough, that you cannot be expected to tell what the writer is talking about until you have studied the whole letter, until you know something of the history of the writer and of the person to whom he is writing, until you understand the common mental background of them both.

Something of the same kind must be said about all the books of the Bible. As an outstanding example take Leviticus, which appears among the fascicules issued last year by *Les Editions du Cerf*; and let us begin by freely admitting that the normal Catholic

reader, with no special scriptural training, finds it difficult to see what spiritual advantage he can gather from a perusal of this book. Indeed, as Lagrange somewhere says, the ordinary Christian would rather be inclined to feel that more spiritual profit could be got from a single chapter of the *Imitation of Christ*. But the Sulpician M. l'abbé Cazelles, who has translated Leviticus for the Jerusalem Bible, refuses to take such a desperate view of the situation. He grants that this book, perhaps more than any other in the Bible, requires an introduction; 'il peut déconcerter le lecteur moderne de la Bible'. It is, as he says, typically Jewish and we have not the Jewish mentality, especially the mentality of those ancestors of the Jews who flourished at the time when Leviticus was composed. Nevertheless, he maintains, the religious basis of the book is of the utmost importance since it provides us with a key to the nature and symbolism of Christian worship, and occupies in the study of the history of religions a position that is central.

Recently the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT published a special number on Worship, and the editor opened the series of articles with the wise remark that 'students of the Christian way of worship have discovered increasingly that it has grown up like a large tree with its roots stretching hidden into distant fields of natural religion. . . . Beneath the surface lies all the intricacy of Jewish worship which our Lord gathered into the simple rites of Baptism or the Last Supper. The Jews themselves had adopted in part the religious customs of the nomads and in part those of the Hebrew agriculturalists. . . .' Very true, indeed, and it recalls to me Père Vincent, the learned professor of Semitic archaeology at the École Biblique, saying to his students: 'Do not think it necessary to claim that everything in the Christian religion has fallen down ready-made from Heaven.' So many scholars in the school of the comparative history of religions have denied the supernatural character of Christianity under this very persuasion that we do think it necessary to make such an evidently false claim.

In his introduction to Leviticus M. Cazelles shows that the book is a kind of *Rituale Judaicum*: an attempt, and a first attempt, at a synthesis of the sacrificial acts of worship practised in Israel. Living as they did in a place that was a regular thoroughfare for the peoples of the ancient east, in religion as in other respects the Israelites came under the influence of their neighbours: Canaanites,

Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians. The sacred authors, often regretfully, draw our attention to this fact, though it must be admitted that by this means the Israelites received and handed on religious rites, not all of them to be condemned, dating from prehistorical times. But it must be remembered that they also received and handed on something more: from their great ancestor Abraham a Faith, from their great legislator Moses a Law. This faith in a transcendent God and this law of moral purity sharply distinguished them from their neighbours and set them in a class all by themselves. Now it is in the spirit of this faith and of adherence to this moral law divinely authenticated that the book of Leviticus was composed, thus reflecting 'l'esprit du Décalogue et l'esprit des Prophètes qui, avec tant d'insistance, ont rappelé aux israélites les exigences morales de Yahvé'.

There was much in the matter of religious worship that the Israelites shared with their neighbours, even in the matter of sacrifice; but here, too, under the influence of God's dealings with their race they introduced an element which again sets them apart from their neighbours. The primitive element of sacrifice is the offering to the divinity of external goods, animals or produce of the earth, in acknowledgement of the divine dominion over all such goods and over men. From ancient times the chief of these sacrifices among the Israelites was the *holocaust* of the victim, in which the entire oblation was consumed by the fire and so in a symbolical manner totally offered to God: this is a further point which distinguishes them from their Semitic brethren. What was more common among the latter was the *sacrifice of communion* which had the character of a sacred banquet where the oblation was physically partaken of by the worshippers and symbolically by the divinity to whom was assigned the better part of the victim. This naturally developed into a social and joyous affair, and it often gave occasion for a good deal of licentiousness from which the Israelites were not always free. Hence Leviticus lays down strict rules for this as for the other species of sacrifice, whether of oblation or of expiation, always with insistence on the fact that sacrifice looks towards God rather than to man's advantage: that is to say, with insistence on renunciation. It does not seek to eliminate the joyful and festival character of sacrificial worship, even when the sacrifice is concerned primarily with expiation for sin or renunciation of some good in

favour of God. But at the same time it leaves no doubt that the levitical sacrifice makes more severe demands than pagan sacrifice asks from its worshippers. Thus Leviticus begins that process of spiritualising the act of sacrificial worship, and indeed of the whole of man's religious attitude towards God, a process carried on by the prophets and brought to its perfection in the teaching of our Lord. Consider the strong expressions of Isaias ch. lxviii, and the somewhat shocking words of the same prophet in lxvi, 3: 'He that killeth a sheep in sacrifice is as if he should brain a dog'. The last of the Old Testament prophets speaks even more unreservedly in this sense when he puts on God's lips the wish: 'Who is there among you that will shut the doors (i.e. of the temple) and will not kindle the fire on my altar in vain?' It was not that God found no pleasure in the temple sacrifices which, after all, he had ordained through his servant Moses. But he found no pleasure in a sacrifice that was not a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ, a sacrifice that fulfilled the purpose so aptly defined by St Thomas: *significat autem sacrificium, quod offertur exterius, interius spirituale sacrificium quo anima seipsam offert Deo, quia exteriores actus religionis ad interiores ordinantur* (IIa, IIae, lxxxv, 2). There lies the true renunciation which is involved in the act of sacrifice, and the Israelites could not complain that Moses had failed to teach them that, when they had his wonderful prayer before their eyes: 'I beseech thee: this people hath sinned a heinous sin. . . . Either forgive them this trespass, or if thou do not, strike me out of the book that thou hast written' (Exod. 32, 32).

It seems to me that St Paul is echoing the same sentiment when he writes to the Gentile Christians of Rome about the sad situation of his fellow Jews: 'For I wished myself to be an anathema from Christ, for my brethren: who are my kinsmen according to the flesh' (Rom. 9, 3). The sentiment sounds shocking to our modern minds, but familiarity with the scriptures ought to teach us that the Hebrew mentality had a preference for strong and even violent expressions of thought. Our Lord himself adapts his words to this mentality when he uses such expressions as: 'If thy right eye scandalise thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee'. And surely it is in this generous identification of himself with his sinful brethren that Moses shows himself to be such a notable prototype of Christ.

Thus, as M. Cazelles indicates, the great Christian sacrifice

brings into a unity all the elements of the Levitical sacrifices, making a new synthesis with the person of Christ as the centre. There is no need to labour the point that the eucharistic sacrifice fulfils all the elements of the *holocaust*, nor that it corresponds to the ancient *sacrifice of communion*. It is the ritual and joyous feast in which the Christian people do more than share a common meal with their God; by partaking of the sacred species of the sacrifice they share in the very life of Christ their God. It sums up all the *expiatory sacrifices* for sin, the victim for sin not now being, as of old, some poor animal which the sinner substitutes for himself by the imposition of hands, but Christ who substitutes himself for the sinner, who is mystically identified with the divine victim through Holy Communion.

How could one understand the epistle to the Hebrews without Leviticus? As was said above, one part of scripture is the explanation of another. *Quod in veteri latet in novo testamento patet.*



THE BIBLE IN RECENT CENTURIES

BY SEBASTIAN BULLOUGH, O.P.

(An adaptation of the first chapter of Dom Celestine Charlier's recent book: *La Lecture Chretienne de la Bible*, Maredsous 1951)

EVERYONE who considers himself a Christian does in some way admit the divine authority of the Bible, and in some way believes in the permanent value of the message it brings to mankind. In view of this, the fact that very many Christians never read the Bible constitutes a peculiar problem. Why do they not read it? For some, the position of the Church as a teaching authority seems to stand between them and the Bible; for others, to read the Bible suggests a host of technical problems, which they feel only scholars can resolve. But these obstacles have their origin in the history of men's attitude to the Bible in recent centuries, and to explain these questions is perhaps a useful way of clearing people's minds of these hesitations.

I. THE 'JANSENISTIC' ATTITUDE

The chief obstacle is ignorance. St John Chrysostom in a well-known homily deplors the fact that many good and pious folk