

LAGRANGE ON ORPHISM¹

ON reading the quiet, always scholarly and often humorous pages of a veteran's book on a difficult subject, it is hard to know whether it is the book or the writer that holds us most. The bibliography given in Père Lagrange's study of Orphism suggests the obvious remark that the lyre of the Thracian god—if he be a god and if he be a Thracian—still renders spell-bound but not dumb-founded a throng of living beings.

Needless to say this latest writer on the Thracian god has not given his time and scholarship to one of those pagan myths that were hardly more than premonitory symptoms of the present world-wide outbreak of fiction. Père Lagrange has been by nature and choice so authentic a defender of the Ark that even in his lightest words he has been at least brushing off annoying and persistent flies.

In this remote matter of Orpheus and Orphism the assailants of the Ark are not a company of irregulars. Loisy, Reinach, Boulanger and others are worthy of Père Lagrange's best defence, and *le beau sabreur*, even in his old age, does not disappoint us. If we were allowed to summarize Père Lagrange's summary of his own view we would say: In Thrace, in Greece, in Crete, the (orphic) religion of Zagreus was mingled with the Egyptian cult of Osiris. About the seventh century before Christ this fusion of Zagreus and Osiris was further mixed with the cult of Dionysos which had come from Phrygia and Lydia to Greece through Thrace. If Dionysos (or Bacchus) was an element of joy and even intoxication, the Zagreus-Osiris blend was an element of fear and even of pessimism. Indeed the original Orphism, as distinct from its Dionysian element, was not the wine but the vinegar of life.

If ever Orphism had been a cult or religion it had never been a popular religion. Pessimism and bacchanalianism,

¹ *L'Orphisme* par le P. M.-J. Lagrange, O.P. (Paris. Gabalda & Cie.)

BLACKFRIARS

historically speaking, have usually been beyond the means of the poor, and when all is said and done "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom." Only the poor authenticate true religion. Failing to find its way into the minds of the poor, Orphism become a cult or culture of those little groups of intellectuals to whom Our Lord one day uttered the words: "Woe to you, for you have taken away the kingdom of knowledge. You yourselves have not entered in; and those that were entering in you have hindered." If the Kingdom of God is for the elect it is not for the self-elect.

Meanwhile, in the little land of Palestine, He Who was the reality of all man's dreams and the heart of all man's desires came unto His own, and by a love, stronger than death and hate, gave to man more than he had dared to desire.

If ever Orpheus-Osiris-Dionysos lived, he died when Jesus with head still uplifted cried out on His cross: *Consummatum est.*

Some five or six centuries after that cry and that death a little group of Neo-platonist intellectuals tried to rival Christianity by reviving Orpheus and his lyre and Dionysos with his wine-bowl and his revels. But so undeniably was the lyre silent and the wine-bowl empty that our "beau sabreur" asks himself whether it was worth his while writing his book; then adds laconically: "*C'est encore le lecteur qui jugera.*"

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With this last characteristic saying of the writer of the book we pass with joy from the book to the writer. He has left it to his readers to judge whether the book was worth their reading and therefore worth his writing. To his implicit question there will be put one answer from the many who, like the present writer, look upon him as our Master whose writings, however slender and casual, would always be worth reading.

We can never forget what he was to timid hearts some

fifty years ago. He was almost more a pillar of fire than a pillar of cloud, for it was night rather than day around those who coveted to say all that they saw in the inspired word of God. Renan had passed over to the enemy with the welcome treasury of his literary style. Loisy was brooding over the need to follow him. Tyrrell was beginning to deceive even the elect by the acuteness of his intelligence and the finish of his literary craftsmanship. The greatest and humblest of the intellects within the Catholic Church, seeing the very pillars rocking and falling, were crying hiddenly to themselves: "*Hodie tibi; mihi cras!*"

It was in those days of well-nigh accepted defeat that we were given Père Lagrange, who in his own quiet, masterly way led us to victory, or at least to hope. Indeed in an almost motherly way he took the frightened exegetes and gave them back their trust.

If there was anything of retreat or falling-back in the master-moves of Père Lagrange it was but a falling-back on principles God had given him intelligence to see, what false science had never hindered him from seeing, that only by a falling-back on the principles of a science can there be any advance in a science. This was but to see that all arrested growth is not by falling back on principles, but by falling away from principles.

Père Lagrange's first masterly strategy was to seek in the vast synthesis of the *Summa* the traditional principles of Biblical exegesis! So distracted had Catholic theologians been by the other apologetic primaries of the nineteenth century that when Lagrange broached the Catholic traditional principles as handed on by St. Thomas not a few of these theologians thought he had betrayed theology and the Bible!

We can best appreciate the doleful intellectual legacy left by the social upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by recalling what Newman found when he visited Rome soon after his conversion. In a letter to Fr. Dalgairns (Nov. 22nd, 1846) he wrote: "Hope told me we should find very little theology here; and a talk we had yesterday with one of the Jesuit fathers here shows we shall

find little philosophy . . . He said: I have read Aristotle and St. Thomas and owe a great deal to them; but they are out of favour here . . .

“St. Thomas is a great saint—people don’t care to speak against him; they profess to reverence him; but put him aside . . . They have no philosophy. Facts are the great thing and nothing else. Exegesis but not doctrine . . .”²

When Lagrange began his attack upon despair much had been done to make the letter of this report only of historical interest. By official words and deeds Pope Leo XIII had almost deserved to be called the Mæcenas of sound sacred letters. But the much that had been done still left so much to do that Père Lagrange’s attempt to revive sound biblical exegesis by the traditional principles, as found in St. Thomas, brought him, as it had brought St. Thomas, no little disapproval and indeed condemnation.

It needed the courage of clear vision or of the living hope that comes from the certitude of living faith, to keep on as Lagrange kept on, in the dark days. Yet he has let nothing woo him from his self-chosen task of finding the foundation principles and of building on the foundations found.

St. Thomas, gathering up the great exegetical principles, especially of St. John Chrysostom and St. Jerome, had laid it down that (1) all spiritual meanings of the Bible are founded on the literal meaning, and (2) nothing is found anywhere in the spiritual meaning that is not found elsewhere in the Bible’s literal meaning.

For Père Lagrange this meant, and has never ceased to mean a conscientious and almost scrupulous dedication to the literal sense. Under the pressure of that dedication he has given a long life, an acute intelligence, a furnished memory, a wealth of languages, to know exactly what the inspired writer meant when he wrote what he wrote. He has gone far afield, even into the hill-country of non-Catholic exegetes, in search of the literal sense of Scripture. He has thought it no robbery “to spoil the Egyptians; but such was

² *John Henry Newman* by Wilfrid Ward, London, 1912. Vol. I, pp. 166, 167.

the courteousness of the despoiler that what he brought back was a gift rather than booty."³

This spirit of humble scholarship has at least once expressed itself in words that should be accounted classical in the schools. On the Eve of the Immaculate Conception, 1929, he concluded his Preface to his great commentary on St. Luke with a self-revelation which we give in our halting translation: "Alas! we are conscious of offering the reader a commentary more literary than theological.

"Though we have not overlooked the sacred character of a book whose 'Auctor' is God, yet we have dedicated ourselves, as much as we could, to the study of the style and the humble grammatical sense of the phrases and even of the words; seeking to understand all that St. Luke took upon himself of human toil.

"Nothing would flatter and please us more than to know that some theologian set store by our work, and should use it for diving still deeper into the meaning of the Word of God. *Non omnia possumus omnes* (We cannot all do all)."

These words of supreme wisdom, dignity, courteousness, impel a comparison. Those who have witnessed the long years Père Lagrange has spent in the Holy City could not fail to see in him a scholar of God's Word to whom God had given the untiring zeal and single-hearted devotion of St. Jerome. But as if to offer an even more winning apologetic to the sensitive convalescent mind of to-day, God had mingled this spirit of Jerome with the urbanity and gentleness of St. Augustine.

And with the entwining of these three names in one wreath of gratitude to God, we have said our say.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.

³ An incident in the literary life of Père Lagrange may here be recalled. When the present writer asked him to write a word of Introduction in the writer's *New Testament Witness to St. Peter*, the request was answered by an Introduction which received special praise from the Roman censors of the book. But a prominent Catholic paper condemned the book because Père Lagrange, grateful for the biblical work of Anglicans, had courteously written "La noble Eglise Episcopaliennne en Angleterre." The condemnation was not without its humour, as the reviewer was, we believe, a convert from Nonconformity!!