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The Scripture Game II

W. H. MARSHNER

The first part of this commentary on modern biblical scholarship argued that the Catholic biblical revival is producing suspicious fruits because the philological-critical method of exegesis has been misapplied to the task of Christian exegesis. It remains to show what Christian exegesis is, why it is theologically inevitable and how it can be defended against the charge of obscurantism.

The Bible is not a voice from Heaven but a document. No matter what its content, a document can be interpreted properly only when certain things are known about it. Let the reader suppose that a document not previously known to him has come into his hands. In almost every case, he will be able to assign it at once to its appropriate genre. He will see that it is a business letter, an epic, a biography, a shopping list, a doctoral dissertation, a novel, whatever. As soon as he recognizes the genre, he will know the document's *raison d'être*, and therefore the sort of norms that are applicable to it. To take an obvious case, suppose he has before him a biography: he already knows why people write biographies and what sort of content such things have; he is therefore able to evaluate it according to generally recognized criteria. He is

in considerably greater difficulty, on the other hand, if he does not know whether he has before him a biography or a *Bildungsroman*. Similarly, a military censor in the midst of a war, happening upon a poem in the style of E. E. Cummings in the outbound mail, might suspect that it is a dangerous coded message. Lyric or spy note? Whether the unfortunate author is courtmartialed or not will depend upon his superiors' ability to recognize the genre.

Now, does the Bible itself, taken as a whole, belong to a genre? What is its *raison d'être*? By what norms is it to be interpreted?

The question can be answered, at one level, theologically. The Catholic Church teaches that canonical Scripture is a *unified* revelation, whose ultimate author is God disclosing His nature and will to His Church, and that therefore the entire content of Scripture must conform to the work of the Holy Spirit within the Church. Moreover, Scripture is in part identical with the "deposit of faith" given to the apostles and to their successors, a deposit that has been identified and protected by an infallible magisterium, which is itself the fulfillment of biblical promise.

The principle of *sola scriptura*, on the other hand, affirms that the text it-

self, empirically examined, reveals what it is and what authority it possesses. The Bible's divine inspiration is thus proved from the Bible. The flaw in the principle is obvious. Divine authorship cannot be demonstrated simply by pointing to a verse asserting it since there is nothing to prevent any book from claiming to be of divine origin; consider the Koran and the book of Mormon. Nor can the "signs" of divine inspiration usually proposed as evidence (nobility of content, prophetic accuracy, an otherwise unaccountable coherence) provide any assurance—not only because critical researchers have invalidated them (the researches can be questioned only by assuming the very inspiration one is seeking to prove); but also because in the last analysis such evidence is intrinsically unpersuasive: philological investigation cannot order effects to divine causality. The fact, then, is that *sola scriptura* is pure assumption; it *presupposes* divine inspiration.

(It may be asserted that the Holy Spirit communicates directly to each believer what the Bible teaches concerning the way of salvation. But after we have given up wondering how we came to know that there is a Holy Spirit, we still want to know, to paraphrase Chesterton, when Mr. Jones is telling us what the Holy Spirit placed in his innermost thoughts and when he is telling us what he put there all by himself. Surely Jones would like to know too.)

The conclusion is unavoidable. Apart from some independent source of information whose content is itself objectively knowable and theologically authoritative, there is no possible way of knowing what one *has* to know about the Bible if that book is to have theological significance. But no such independent source is at hand besides the apostolic tradition. That is, there is no theological alternative to the Catholic position.

The question can also be answered, however, at a natural level. One may define the Bible, phenomenologically, as a sacred book (*genus*), used by Catholics and in part by Protestants and Jews (*differentiae*). Now of course any sacred book becomes sacred only when sanctioned as such—i.e., "canonized"—by the appropriate authorities of the believing community. The selection of matter included in the sacred book has thus been made on the basis of a pre-existing body of doctrine. The essential

force of the canonization is to declare that the text shall serve as a religious guide for the whole community in perpetuity, and therefore that the text must be understood in a sense transcending the accidental limitations of its historical origin. This canonized sense comes into play most properly in liturgy and homiletics, that is, in the on-going, solemn proclamation of the text to all men. Thus the doctrine of the community precedes and conditions the existence of the sacred book, not vice-versa. Moreover the canonized sense can never be allowed to contradict itself; all perceptible differences must be read as ultimately concordant. Indeed, the maximum convergence of all passages is itself a norm of interpretation. In addition, the canonized sense cannot contain anything at variance with the teachings of the authority that canonized the text. Therefore disputes about the canonized sense can be settled only by appeal to the criteria which originally determined the canonization—that is, to orthodoxy.

The reader scarcely can have missed the remarkable convergence between these phenomenological observations and the theological tenets of the Church. The convergence is not contrived; rather, it is simply the case that the Church, in teaching as she always has, confirms and obeys an objective law of canonized texts and of what we might call the sociology of faith. (It is no mystery why this law is repugnant to some, its implications being a veritable blueprint for hierarchical power; nor why innovators are desperate to make sure that their exegetical procedure shall be the sort that puts authority in the hands of "scholars" rather than bishops.)

Observe now how the modern biblical exegete goes about interpreting a biblical book. According to differences of style and other internal evidences, he decomposes the book into its component parts, strands, layers, and so forth; and to each he assigns a distinct identity—Yahwist Narrative, Second Isaiah, Q Document. For each of these parts, he attempts to discover the original historical setting, what the author intended, what the author's audience could have understood by the language employed. Armed with the results of these researches, the exegete then attempts to reconstruct the "theology" of the author, favoring us with a stack of monographs examining each theme of his thought and contrasting it with the

ideas of earlier and later writers. At some point, he will survey the indications of how the book as a whole got into its present form, and conclude that the various components were elaborated and handed down separately by various schools or circles of tradition; whereupon they were finally put together and re-edited into a semblance of unity. The possessor of this formidable erudition is now able to service the Christian community. He will happily disclose how far-fetched are the interpretations made by the various New Testament writers when they deal with the Old, how much farther-fetched are the homilies in our breviary, how grotesque are the applications made of many biblical passages in our liturgy, how elaborately our theology has transmogrified the notions of the biblical writers—for all which contributions large segments of the Church profusely will thank him, remunerate him and abjectly reverence him as the greatest boon since St. Jerome.

Relevant to What?

Upon reflection one begins to see why this procedure makes a shambles of the whole postulate that the biblical text constitutes a unified book, having a single purpose. According to that postulate, what a given passage might have meant to its human author or to its original audience is, perhaps, interesting; but what it *means* is determined by its role in the totality of which it is a part. To say the same thing a bit differently: the applications, interpretations, changes, corruptions, and other vicissitudes undergone by all the various parts, strands, layers, and what have you, *before* they were incorporated into the unity called Scripture, are *irrelevant* to their meanings as parts of Scripture. (I do not speak, of course, of absolute irrelevance, since the parts in question must have borne within themselves marks which led to their inscription and the earlier meaning usually will have influenced the later, though often rather deviously. But I do insist that the two meanings are essentially distinct, that the interpretive processes by which they are discovered are different, and that one never *needs* to know the earlier in order adequately to know the later.)

A celebrated example is the Song of Songs. The modern exegete will tell us, on the basis of very good evidence, that when the various poems in

this book were composed, they were intended and received as erotic verse—plain and simple. (Some interpreters refer to this understanding of the text as the "historical sense.") On the other hand, it is well known that when the book was being considered by the rabbis for inclusion in the canon, it was being read as an allegory of God's love for His people. In fact, the reason it is in the canon is precisely because it was interpreted in this way. The allegory, then, constitutes the "scriptural sense" of the Song of Songs, the only sense with which the Church, as the canonizing authority, is directly concerned. (Another familiar term is "literal sense"; the reader will be saved much dangerous confusion by understanding that when the Fathers of the Church speak of the literal sense, they always mean some form of the scriptural sense—never what a modern critic means by the literal sense. It was just on that ambiguity of the term "literal" that the Reformation founded.) In short, the philological-critical procedure is a satisfactory exegesis only so long as one denies the paramount fact that there is a unity called Scripture—a unity which is here to be studied not because of the accidents of the archeologist's spade but because a living community collected, defined, and preserved it.

This brings us to the heart of the matter. The modern exegete is fond of asking, Is not the whole idea of a sacred book, interpreted in accordance with a "scriptural sense," a piece of sheer mystification? The Catholic answers, Certainly not! To discover a biblical text's historical origin, to learn what its author intended, and to understand its vocabulary cannot be the end of it. Every piece of writing is a linguistic structure, means what its words collectively denote and connote within the total context of the language *as it is employed at a given time*. If we have enough information (a condition which is hard to judge) we can form a pretty good idea of what such a text could or could not have meant in the period when it was written. If the text was used only in that period or is of interest to us only in that period, then one may regard its meaning as relatively fixed. But in the case of the Bible, we are dealing with texts which were used and heeded sometimes for centuries after their composition. Therefore, it is not mystifying but obvious and inevitable that the significance of the text for its readers

should have undergone development both before and after its canonization, especially as the ideas which conditioned the canonization continued to be clarified. This is by no means to say that a text really comes to mean anything that anyone wants it to mean; there are criteria for distinguishing valid from invalid developments, as Newman spelled out in his great *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. These criteria guide the Church in discovering the "scriptural sense."

The Melchizedek Story

The whole argument here can be summed up in a single example. During the Mass, at a point after the Consecration, the Roman Canon makes reference to the sacrifice of the priest Melchizedek. It is just the sort of thing to infuriate the modern "scripture expert"—which may have something to do with the fact that Melchizedek is not mentioned in any of the new canons. Today's layman is advised (cf. *The Anchor Bible*, Chapter 1-4) that Melchizedek is thought to have been both a King of Jerusalem in the Middle Bronze Age and a priest of the pagan god El Elyon. He brings out offerings and invokes his god, while Abraham, no doubt in a spirit of ecumenical dialogue, gives him a tithe of everything. So the layman finds the Church praying in her most solemn rite that God would accept the sacrifice of Christ 'as he accepted the ministrations of a pagan hierodule, as if it were not enough to discover the Hebrew patriarch apparently recognizing the spiritual authority of such a person. Matters get worse still in the New Testament, where our layman reads in the Epistle to the Hebrews (especially chapter 7) that Christ our Lord is a *high priest after the order of Melchizedek*, the self-same Canaanite pagan. The mind boggles.

I have no quarrel, please note, with the distinguished editor of the *Anchor Bible's* volume on Genesis, the late Dr. E. A. Speiser. He employs his critical method with great care, and I no more blame him for the questions and answers which that exegetical procedure imposes on him than I should blame a noted biologist who assures me that, according to the laws of nature, the dead do not rise. I merely note with some dismay that whereas no one imagines that biological scientists deal with the resurrection, there

seem to be millions who imagine that critical scholars determine the canon of Scripture.

The reconstruction of the "historical Melchizedek" (a reconstruction whose probabilist and naturalist guiding principles the reader should bear in mind) has no direct bearing, of course, on the figure of Melchizedek presented by Holy Scripture, which figure in turn is the only Melchizedek named in our liturgy. If we wish to understand the Melchizedek of the Bible, we must begin with Psalm 109 (in some versions, 110). When this Psalm was composed, perhaps as far back as the United Monarchy, it was a solemn address to the Davidic king. (Today, to be sure, it is properly read as Messianic.) It was this king who was addressed as "a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." It is not entirely clear why the heirs of David came to bear this title; possibly, it had something to do with their residence in Jerusalem. Some sort of hoary tradition seems to have linked Abraham with Jerusalem and its ruler in his day; but it is difficult to get a clear idea of what that tradition was all about, since we possess only a small fragment of it in rather worked-over form (Genesis 14: 18-21), tucked into what was once probably another story altogether.

Why, then, did this fragment get preserved while numerous other remembrances of Abraham and the other patriarchs must have been lost? The answer lies (humanly speaking) in the importance of that royal title. It was long after the reign of David that the traditions now forming Genesis were edited into something like their present shape; therefore the royal title was already in use and required explanation. And what better explanation could there be than a tradition showing Abraham, ancestor of all Israelites, yielding the tithe to him after whom the royal line took its title of priest? Of course, when the line of David ceased to occupy the throne, all of its titles were automatically transferred to the awaited Messiah, who would not only deserve them as a son of David but also fulfill them in an exemplary way. Thus, well before our Lord was born, Psalm 109 was already being read as a Messianic prophecy; and the understanding of Genesis 14 cannot have remained uninfluenced. From there, it is a small step to the Christian exegesis.

Once Jesus is recognized as the Messiah, the title of priest after the

order of Melchizedek is automatically His. That is not wonderful. What is wonderful is the sudden illumination which breaks up odd phrases of the old texts in the light of the identity of Christ. The sacrifice of Calvary makes it clear at last why the definitive "son of David" should be called a priest, just as Christ's divinity imparts a new weight to the claim of being a priest "forever." The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (7:3) noticed something curious about the old fragment in Genesis. The way it has been spliced into the text leaves Melchizedek in lonely splendor, unattended by the geneological pedigree, the small army of descendants and the figures on longevity which are part of the standard equipment of figures of comparable importance in the patriarchal narratives. In this state of affairs, the New Testament writer (as well as the Holy Spirit) sees an apt prefigure of the Eternal Christ, Who is not of this order. And of course, as soon as Melchizedek is seen as a type of Christ, the words of Genesis assume a startling significance when they tell us that the king-priest brought gifts of bread and wine.

It is difficult to imagine a clearer illustration of how Christian exegesis posits a *scriptural sense* based upon the present state of the text as a part of the entire Bible—not some "historical sense" based on reconstruction of what the text might have been taken to mean if it had been discovered yesterday engraved on a potsherd. The Church must not fail in her duty to insist upon the knowledge of this scriptural sense. For without the meaning yielded thereby, the apostolic exegesis becomes incomprehensible, and our liturgy a shambles. I speak not of a far-off danger but of something presently upon us. Every Catholic who reads the vernacular breviary or goes to vernacular Masses has been exposed already to the senseless archaizing of the Psalter (reconstruction of the historical sense), to take just one example. Introits and Graduals are replete with Yahweh this and Yahweh that. In your personal prayer, do you call God "Yahweh?" Neither has anyone else among the people of God for two and a half millennia. Today, however, you must split schizophrenically between your identity as a Christian, when you pray privately, and your brand new identity as a pre-exilic Hebrew, when you assist at Mass. Thus do our biblical *periti* bring us up to date.