



Reviews

DARK PASSAGES OF THE BIBLE: ENGAGING SCRIPTURE WITH BENEDICT XVI AND THOMAS AQUINAS by Matthew J. Ramage, *Catholic University of America Press*, Washington, DC, 2013, pp. viii + 303, \$ 39.95, pbk

The excellent document *Verbum Domini* (2010) issued by Benedict XVI is the inspiration for the title of this book. The document speaks at # 42 of the 'dark passages' of the bible where God appears to be condoning or even commanding immoral acts. *Verbum Domini* states that such passages are problematic for believers, but should not be avoided or glossed over. They require expertise and a certain reverent approach to the bible to understand them. This sentiment itself echoes Vatican II's *Dei verbum* of 1965 which, while reaffirming the inerrancy of scripture, also says that there is much in the Old Testament which is 'imperfect and provisional'. Both documents assert that historical-critical tools can be used to help analyse and make sense of such imperfect and provisional matters, remembering that, as Pope Benedict points out, God's revelation of himself was progressive and carried out over successive epochs.

The main purpose of this book is to carry forward the suggestions of *Dei verbum* and *Verbum Domini* in a more systematic way. This is to help believers appreciate the bible and to be less alarmed by the 'dark passages', and to provide a firm basis for apologetic presentations of the sacred scriptures; or at least a sound defence when the 'dark passages' are used to discredit christianity. Dr. Ramage (who hosts the blog truthincharity.com) presents three methods of doing this, and three key areas where these methods can be applied. The three approaches he describes are designated respectively as 'Method A, B and C'. He characterizes Method A as the classical, patristic/medieval approach which either cheerfully accepts some of the dark passages at face value or spiritualises them. An example of cheerful acceptance would be the fact that some ancient writers argued that, strictly speaking, God could command the death of idolaters, not only because they had sinned, but also because the whole of creation belongs to God anyway, and is his to dispose of as he wills. Thus God could also ask for the death of the innocent Isaac with no injustice on God's part. The second strategy was that if a passage is morally repugnant, it could be given a spiritual gloss. Thus taking the children of the Babylonians and dashing their heads on the rocks should really be taken as an exhortation to take the beginnings of our sinful desires and firmly extinguish them. Dr. Ramage insists that there is much of great value in the patristic/medieval approach, especially the multi-dimensional view of scripture that the fourfold approach affords. However, in terms of the dark passages, he finds some Method A attempts at exegesis unconvincing or unacceptable.

Method B, the modern historical-critical approach also has strengths and weaknesses. It has been used in a destructive way which ends up undermining the faith of the Church. Ramage is absolutely correct here. Properly used however, as a tool, rather than an end in itself, it can help illuminate the way in which some of the material itself is 'imperfect and provisional' in the light of the fullness of revelation.

Method C is a combination of the two previous methods, urged by Benedict XVI. Such a method would therefore be profoundly ecclesial and integrated with

the rule of faith, while at the same time prudently using the fruits of modern critical scholarship. The result should be something that is both theologically authentic, intellectually rigorous and able to give a good account of itself in the face of modern scepticism.

The three main areas where Ramage thinks that the Method C approach could be most pertinent are the development of doctrine throughout the scriptures (was it the same faith being revealed all the time?), and the nature of God linked with the nature of good and evil, and the biblical teaching on the afterlife. For example, the sacred scriptures while stressing the uniqueness and unity of God, also appear to refer to God as one being among other 'gods'. Again, God is said to create and cherish life, but is seen to be demanding the death of various people or peoples. Modern research can help us see that it is possible that the early Israelite people did believe in a range of divine beings, but gradually come to realise that there is only one transcendent God.

One definite strength of the book is the attention it gives to a somewhat neglected work by the Dominican scholars Paul Synave and Pierre Benoit, *Prophecy and Inspiration* (ET *Desclée*, 1961, trans. Avery Dulles SJ and Thomas Sheridan SJ). This is a commentary and exploration of *Summa Theologiae* II-II questions 171–178. St Thomas's subtle analysis of the different formalities of prophetic and scriptural inspiration helps not only to rescue the prophets from being mere social reformers, but also helps us see that the supernatural impulse which stimulates the will of the sacred writers operates primarily in the field of practical judgement. This second fact greatly influences the presentation of the sacred books themselves. Ramage is certainly to be thanked for bringing Synave and Benoit's work back into focus.

Dr. Ramage's work is written in a very lively and accessible style, and shows obvious enthusiasm for the work of Benedict XVI and St Thomas, and how their insights and exhortations can help us move beyond any perceived impasse between Method A and Method B approaches to sacred scripture. Certainly, from the earliest times the Church has always used Method A tools to appreciate better the depths of Sacred Scripture, but both the perceived and actual rifts between the biblical theology academy and the living interpretation of the scriptures is certainly a pressing issue within the Catholic Church. This is particularly the case when irresponsible and misunderstood use of Method B is popularised through sermons and talks. The book would be an excellent introduction to the whole subject for, for example, seminarians, and would also help those critical of the sacred scriptures to appreciate that the church's tradition has always recognised the obscure and sometimes alarming nature of the sacred texts.

Ramage's work also leads us to probe the dark passages further. If God really is utterly transcendent it would surely be surprising, and indeed disappointing, if there were no 'dark passages' in sacred scripture. If God, as utterly transcendent, attempts to communicate himself to us, without overriding or short circuiting our own capacities, then we are going to be confronted with our own inability to apprehend that transcendence. Also, St Thomas's expression of the traditional teaching that, after the Fall, certain people had *explicit* faith in the coming redemption by Christ, is another dimension that could be studied with great profit.

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