

## THE SPIRITUAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

THE current teaching in the Church concerning the relationship of the Spiritual or Mystical to the Literal Sense of the Scriptures is based on a synthesis arrived at by the Scholastics, and in particular on St Thomas's formulations, which all our text-books merely set out to expound. It would seem a great advantage to possess a satisfactory technical solution of this age-long biblical issue. One might have hoped that it would have led to a general understanding and utilisation of the two Senses as being not only not in rivalry, but as being related together in the way that spiritual and literal are related together in the Scriptures; that is to say, in a union as harmonious and essential as that of the soul to the body. But no such general benefit has in fact resulted. These Senses have continued to be treated as rival claimants for consideration; with favour accorded sometimes to the Spiritual, sometimes to the Literal—but mostly, in these last centuries, to the Literal. At the present time there is a strong general tendency to depreciate the Spiritual Sense; to treat it as an extraneous addition to the Literal Sense, of definitely inferior quality. Frequently in practice it is identified with what is known as the Accommodated Sense, and accordingly denied any strict biblical validity. Or at least it is generally regarded as being of secondary importance; the Literal Sense being taken as capable of supplying all the meaning that is required for the purposes of theology and of sound edification, while the Spiritual is regarded as a luxury at the disposal of those who have a taste for deciphering pious symbols.

If this is what the Spiritual Sense of Scripture should come to mean for us, if anything like this is to be called, without more ado, the Spiritual Sense of Scripture, we shall be in danger of missing that deepest sense, that Mystery sense which the Scriptures for their part call the Spiritual Sense; without some grasp of which we cannot appreciate the Bible as an inspired whole, as an inspired Book, but only as a collection of inspired data. There *is* a Spiritual Sense which if it is dependent on the Literal sense is dependent upon it as the soul is dependent upon the body. There is mutual dependence, such that Literal Sense apart from Spiritual remains a dead letter.

But at this point it can only be protested that such a tremendous meaning as this cannot be fairly discovered in the Spiritual Sense that St Thomas expounds. Certainly he makes of it something important and dignified, but he does not represent it as being like the very soul of the Literal Sense; on the contrary, he limits its range,

he allows it to appear in certain parts of the Scripture only. There can be no denying this. And it might seem that one ought to have been bold enough at the start to complain of the inadequacy of the Thomistic synthesis to meet the full requirements of the subject. Only one does not rush to complain against St Thomas! One readily complains against the tendency to make the least, and worse than the least, of what he says. But as for what he himself has to say, one would urge that the terms and phrases he uses are of such a kind that beyond the narrower, lesser Sense that he expressly offers, the way is positively laid open to a recognition of the existence of the Spiritual Sense in its most comprehensive and glorious meaning. In other words, one considers what might be called *his* spiritual, and not just *his* literal sense; knowing for the rest how it could sometimes happen with him that the letter could be constrained by pious courtesy or the demands of a wise expediency.

The following texts may be taken to summarize St Thomas's teaching on the subject. First, in the *Summa*<sup>(1)</sup> there is such a pronouncement as this: 'God who is the author of Holy Scripture has the power to adapt to his meaning, not only words—as man can likewise do—but also realities (*res ipsas*). So, whereas in all other "sciences" meaning is expressed by words, it is the peculiarity of this "science" of the Scriptures that those very realities which the words express are themselves expressive of some further reality. The first of these two modes of expression gives us the Literal Sense . . . and the second the Spiritual, which is based on and presupposes the Literal.' Or again,<sup>(2)</sup> 'The expression of things by means of words constitutes the . . . Literal Sense. Accordingly, the whole meaning to be gathered by a proper understanding of the words belongs to the Literal Sense'—The words may be figurative or in our ordinary sense of the term 'literal,' that does not matter; all that a sound exegesis can discover their author, their inspired *human* author, to have meant by them, forms their Literal Sense. To look for the Literal Sense of Isaiah is quite simply to try to discover what it was that Isaiah himself meant, fully meant, by what he said.—And again St Thomas writes as follows<sup>(3)</sup>: 'As to whether these two Senses can be discovered in other writings than the Holy Scriptures . . . On the contrary, as St Gregory says in his *Morals* (XX, Cap. I), "Holy Scripture surpasses all other sciences even in its mode of expression; for with the same words it can both state a fact and set forth a mystery (*uno eodemque sermone, dum narrat gestum, prodit mys-*

(1) Ia Pars, Qu. I, art. 10.

(2) Quodl. VII, art. 15.

(3) *ibid.*, art. 16.

terium)''.' And St Thomas continues: 'The Spiritual Sense of Holy Scripture implies that historical events (*res cursum suum peragentes*) should be capable of representing some further reality beyond themselves—that reality namely which it is the function of the Spiritual Sense to reveal. And so it is in fact. History is so ordered as to make this Sense possible. But it will be a Sense available only to him who rules all things by his Providence. In order to express a thing man employs words or figures of speech; but God can express things by adapting to his purpose the very course of history, overruled as it is by his Providence (*ipsum cursum rerum suae providentie subjectarum*).'—It is obvious that man can seize upon a historical reality as being significant, and set it forth as such, so making it expressive for his own purposes. He can use the meaning that he detects in history. But he cannot *make* history to have meaning. He can use history, he can write in and about it, but he cannot write with it, as God can.—And, finally, in a previous passage<sup>(4)</sup> St Thomas had just said that: 'In the Sacred Scriptures Christ is represented by means of historical realities (*illa quæ in rei veritate contigerunt*), adumbrations of the truth that is realised in him.' And no other person than Christ, he says, can be so represented. For what the Spiritual Sense designates is not *any* further stage in the development of history, but only that perfect fulfilment of history that lies in Christ. Instead of Spiritual it might be called Christian Sense.

But elsewhere St Thomas frequently calls this Sense the *Typical* Sense of Scripture; and so it is perhaps most commonly termed. Moreover, one would suggest that it was precisely in being equated in practice with the Typical Sense that the Spiritual Sense became restricted in its meaning, failed to be exploited in its full significance. For surely the equation is one-sided. The Typical Sense may be an instance of Spiritual Sense, and may in fact be its most striking and characteristic expression for certain practical and as it were liturgical purposes; but it does not exhaust that Sense, and that it does not do so one can immediately gather if one ponders the force and scope of the principles on which it is based by St Thomas.

If the restrictive interpretation of St Thomas and of the meaning of the Spiritual Sense is kept to, it will be held that, in the first place, the Spiritual Sense dwells, not in any words of Scripture, but exclusively in certain historical realities set forth by means of the words. If that contrast is understood quite materially, quite crudely—if the words of Scripture are not allowed to become part of the material in which the Spiritual Sense is contained—then at one

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(4) *ibid.*, art. 15.

stroke the Spiritual Sense will have been vastly narrowed down in its extent. If this Sense never attaches to words, there will be great stretches of the Bible in which it will never appear: for example, in all those parts that are purely didactic. But then, further, it will be held that the historical realities themselves only possess such a Spiritual significance when they are capable of being seen as Types or Allegories of Christ. And great restraint must be practised in positing such Types. One may hardly venture to posit them except in reliance on Scripture itself or Catholic Tradition. Undeniable Types are to be found, for example, in the figures of Melchisedech or of Joshua, in the Temple and certain parts of its ritual, in the Holy Land, etc. And indeed we are rightly cautioned against the Alexandrian abuse of finding such Types anywhere and everywhere. It would be fantastic too to insist on finding a Typical meaning in the sling with which David hurled the stone at the giant; and pernicious to represent this as being part of the authoritative sense of the Scriptures, if one had nothing but one's own fantasy to rely on. Yet all this does not rule out the existence of a Spiritual Sense running through the whole history. What it does exclude is that it should be seen everywhere as embodied in veritable Types.

If the Spiritual Sense is quite simply to be identified with the Typical Sense, it is wholly comprised in certain brilliant moments of biblical history; it is limited to these particular effects, however numerous they may be, of certain things standing out from the surface of the Literal meaning like isolated monuments, or studding the pages of Scripture like precious stones. Whereas it is rather as focal points in the history that they should be seen, for they gather up, bring to a sort of liturgical expression, a meaning that is at work in the whole movement of the Scriptures; and it is only in the strength of that whole movement that they themselves are significant. The figure of Melchisedech does not rise out of the Pentateuchal story like a ready-made token of Christ. The significance of the bread and the wine and the priest-kingship and of Salem and of the encounter with Abraham at such a moment rely upon a great network of biblical data for their real significance, rely in fact upon the context of the whole bible. Yet that Figure does serve as a most valuable focus. It is not as wholly comprising, but as being clues to the Spiritual Sense, that one should interpret these Types.

The essential problem, then, is one of deciding where the Realities (*Res*) are to be looked for in which the Spiritual Sense may be said to be contained. Not exclusively in these occasional Typical figures, one would say. But it is necessary to go further than that and to

recognize that the words of Scripture also go to constitute these Realities. For it is only in the form that the biblical word gives to them that they possess any Spiritual significance. (To say otherwise would be to encourage those who proclaim quite simply that Revelation is given to us through Acts, and not through Words.) No one would deny that in Shakespeare's play the only Macbeth that is of dramatic significance is the Macbeth that is given to us through the words, through the poetry.

The meaning, then, of the distinction between the Spiritual and the Literal grounds of significance is that the Literal Sense is based on *words as such*, the Spiritual Sense on *reality as such*. One then sees that the words of Scripture themselves go to form, or even alone provide a *Res Biblica*. When we are told in Jeremias of how the prophet redeemed a field at Anathoth, the telling of what he did belongs still to the Literal Sense; one is concentrating on the telling by the words. But once the incident has been told, one has a whole affair, a whole historical reality, made up of something shaped for us in words, which can be seen as significant in relation to the Mystery of Christ's Passion<sup>(5)</sup>. And, indeed, words alone will be sufficient to provide such a Reality, such a *Res*. Supposing, for example, that the Book of Job is simply a poetic drama, it is nevertheless a historical reality. That the author should have conceived these thoughts and spoken these words at such a moment in the history of Israel is a Reality, and a Reality which in relation to Christ is of quite obvious tremendous significance. If the author makes Job cry out: 'Who will grant that thou shouldst protect me in Sheol, hide me till thy wrath pass, etc.', one can consider what those words mean as he himself uses them—and it belongs to the interpretation of the Literal Sense to expound that terrible meaning. But when one considers them as a fact, as a historical datum, they take on a new significance; they are seen as a desperate reaching out towards the truth that is revealed in Christ.

It is not the author of Job who contrives this Sense or can be said to express it. It accrues to his words, beyond all that he can mean by them, from their relationship to the reality of Christ—their *existential* relationship. He cannot express with words what by definition *uses* his words, taking over, as it were, where he finishes. He is part of the material on which the Spiritual Sense is based. And there is no sacred writer who is not to be seen thus, from the point of view of the Spiritual Sense, as being only a material contributor to the Bible.

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(5) Mt. xxvii, 9.

The Spiritual Sense is the total sense of the Scriptures, the meaning that they have when grasped as a whole inspired work. Though it is only through their partial meanings—their Literal meanings—that this whole grasp of them is attainable; as, for that matter, the final meaning of any work of art is so thoroughly embodied in the matter that it can be only indirectly discovered. Certainly, therefore, the Spiritual Sense can never be arrived at except in and through the Literal.

The Scriptures are the divine Revelation of the work of God which is the making of the world in Christ; giving us insight into that work; showing us, therefore, the Christian significance of history. To catch their Spiritual Sense is, as St Paul tells us<sup>(6)</sup>, to recognize the glory of Christ shining forth from their Letter. And to miss the Spiritual Sense would be, as he also says, to treat the letter as the Jews still do: it would be to veil its true significance, to tie it down to a sub-Christian meaning—which is what so much of our Old Testament exegesis encourages us to do: a thing as foolish as it would be to dismiss the first Act of any and every play of Shakespeare as being necessarily sub-Shakespearean. If we ignore the Spiritual Sense we ignore the Mystery of the Scriptures, and though we may read in the Bible or from the Bible, quite simply we do not read the Bible itself.

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## FIFTY YEARS OF SCRIPTURE STUDIES

### *Providentissimus Deus to Divino afflante Spiritu*

THE present Holy Father wrote his biblical encyclical in 1943 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Leo XIII's great encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, which is such a landmark in modern biblical studies. Pius XII starts with a retrospect, a review of the work done under papal ægis during that half-century, and it is with pride that we Dominicans have noticed that he calls attention to the fact that before ever Leo XIII launched his encyclical he had already in 1892 commended by Brief the Dominican Ecole Biblique at Jerusalem, founded with papal approbation two years before. This foundation was due to the efforts of Père Marie-Joseph Lagrange, O.P. (†10 March, 1938), and here the pioneer work of scientific scholarship had already begun and the famous *Revue Biblique* had already been started. Next year, in 1893, *Providentissimus Deus* appeared.

Pius XII goes on to describe the present state of biblical studies

(6) II Cor. III.