

symbolism, and not only to understand it intellectually, but to appreciate it affectively. The Psalms are poetry and we have to approach them as we approach poetry: the liturgy as a whole is more like a play of Shakespeare than a treatise by Aristotle. We have to learn to appreciate the symbolism of the liturgy as we appreciate the symbolism of Hamlet and Macbeth: to share the affections of the Psalmist as we share the passions of Lear and Othello. But for this we need not merely the natural gift of poetic understanding but the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, by which the mysteries of faith, which the liturgy represents, are communicated to us. If this seems beyond our capacity, let us remember that we all received these gifts, together with the virtues of faith, hope and charity, at our baptism: and that the effect of confirmation is precisely to make these gifts stronger within us and so lead us on the path of Christian perfection.



'BACK TO THE FATHERS'¹

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THE last part of a book that an author writes is the Introduction, and usually it is read to the best advantage at the end of the text. A well-known Professor of Scripture in Rome used to advise his audience to study Biblical Introduction after one had acquired a working knowledge of the Biblical text itself.

Not by their own choosing but by force of circumstances over the last fifty years Professors of Scripture have had to concentrate on Biblical Introduction. Rationalists and Modernists were attacking the very nature of the Bible as the Word of God, and the Higher Critics were elaborating theories about the origins of movements among the Israelites and about the origin of the particular Books of the Bible, and the Church had to give guidance. This has not always had its desired affect; for good people went away with the impression that the less they had to do with the Bible the safer they would be, and those whose calling de-

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mand study of the Bible used to remark that they learned a great deal about Wellhausen and the Documentary Theory but knew very little about the text of the Pentateuch, and apparently were not eager to make up the deficiency.

In recent years there has set in a reaction towards the religious and theological value of Holy Writ, both among non-Catholics (e.g. in Germany Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum N.T.*, in England the works of A. G. Hebert) and among Catholics. The present Holy Father's encyclical on the Scriptures of 30th September, 1943, enjoins that 'the Exegesis will be above all of a theological character'. There are, however, several Catholic writers, especially in France, who in their eagerness to pursue the religious lessons of the Bible have tended to by-pass the literal sense learned in the lecture halls and to make the Bible respond to their subjective desires. They look wistfully to the Fathers of the Church, thinking that the spiritual senses of the Bible separated from the literal nourished their hearts, if not their heads. But Leo XIII, Pius X, Benedict XV rejected all undue separation of history and theology, all separation of the Christ of history from the Christ of Faith, and the encyclical *Humani Generis* of the present Holy Father reproves those interpreters who take no account of the analogy of faith and tradition. The Bible should be expounded according to the mind of the Church, which our Lord has established as guardian and interpreter of the whole body of truth divinely revealed.

Among the Fathers it is St Augustine who since the time of St Paul has had the greatest influence on Christian thought. His love for the Bible is apparent from his personal history and from his sermons and works. Early in life he found the Bible dry. He basked in self-complacency, in enjoying the reputation of being a wise man, whilst in his head and heart he had only the works of the Neo-platonists. He still kept the woman who had taken the place of the mother of Adeodatus.

For I was not yet lowly enough to hold the lowly Jesus as my God, nor did I know what lesson his embracing of our weakness was to teach. For your Word, the eternal Truth, towering above the highest parts of your creation, lifts up to himself those that were cast down. He built for himself here below a lowly house of our clay, that by it he might bring down from themselves and bring up to himself those who were to be made

subject, healing the swollenness of their pride and fostering their love . . . to the end that weary at last they might cast themselves down upon his humanity and rise again in its rising. (*Confessions* VII, 18: Trans. F. J. Sheed.)

The truths that the Neo-platonists had taught he now discovered in the Bible, but the setting was different: that of the God-man raising weak human nature to himself.

So now I seized greedily upon the adorable writings of your Spirit, and especially upon the Apostle Paul. And I found that those difficulties, in which it had once seemed to me that he contradicted himself and that the text of his discourse did not agree with the testimonies of the law and the prophets, vanished away. In that pure eloquence I saw One Face, and I learned to 'rejoice with trembling'. (*Ibid.* VII, 21.)

Henceforward the Scriptures were an instrument in converting his heart to God.

From the time of his conversion almost each year saw him produce some work on the Bible, whether in the form of a letter, or commentary, or treatise, or sermon. The late Father Hugh Pope, O.P., remarks: "There is not a book of the Bible that he has not commented on in his sermons in some form or other". (*St Augustine*, p. 154.)

He was always on the look-out for opportunities to study and meditate on the Bible. In the year 614 Councils held in Numidia and Carthage granted him five days of absolute retirement for this purpose.

It was solemnly entered in the *Acts*: you all agreed to it, in fact you all applauded. And you kept to it for a short space; but your compact was broken, and now I am allowed no leisure for the work I want to do; morning and evening, morning and evening I am eaten up with other men's affairs. (*Ep.* 213, 5; H. Pope, p. 154.)

In his sermons he sought to make his audience ponder the mysteries of faith, to let the Holy Spirit inflame their hearts and minds as they listened to Holy Writ being read aloud either by the Lector or by himself. The Bible held treasures for the man who would seek.

May thy Scriptures be for my chaste delight; let me not deceive others about them and not be deceived myself. O Lord, hearken and have mercy, O Lord my God, Light of the blind and

Strength of the weak, but Light too of the clear of sight and Strength of the Strong. Grant me, then, space for my meditation upon *the hidden things of Thy law*, nor close thy law against me as I knock. Not for nothing hast thou willed that the deep secrets of all those pages should be written, not for nothing have those woods their stags, which retire to them and are restored, walk in them and are fed, lie down in them and ruminate. Complete thy work in me, O Lord, and open those pages to me. (*Confess.* XI, 2.)

Mysterious in the sense of holding hidden secrets, and they are not always revealed.

There is so much to understand in the Christian writings that I could go on learning and learning from them every day, from earliest childhood to feeble old age, even presuming I had all possible leisure, intense attention and a better head. I do not mean to suggest that the truths necessary for salvation can be grasped only with great difficulty. What I mean is that when the man of faith approaches the Scriptures (and faith, may I say, is necessary for an upright, rightly-ordered life) he will soon have to try to understand many things hidden beneath several clouds of mysteries. And these things hidden are not only in the words used, but also in the objects denoted. There lies hidden such heights of wisdom that to describe the achievement of men old in years, keen of mind, full of energy, impelled by the desire to learn, we may use the words of Holy Writ itself, 'when a man has finished, he then begins'. (*Ep.* 137, 3.)

In the year 389, whilst still a layman living in solitude at Tagaste, he wrote his first attempt to interpret *Genesis*, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*. His method was allegorical. Four years later he commented again on the same book, laying aside the then popular allegorical method. His book was *De Genesi ad literam*. Yet the literal sense of the Scriptures does not imply that everything mysterious is removed.

All our holy books have to be examined with a view to discovering the truths of eternity that they intimate: the historical facts related, the future events foretold, the commands or warnings conveyed. (*De Gen. ad lit.* I. I.)

The Saint looked beyond the letter; for the Holy Scriptures held for him a spiritual sense, in which the 'eyes and ears of the spirit' (to use his frequent phrase in the *Confessions*) find their goal. 'For

there are in Holy Scriptures deep mysteries, which are for this cause hidden, lest they should be held cheap; for this cause sought, that they may employ us; for this cause opened, that they may feed us.' (*Enaar. in Ps. 140, 1.*)

Most readers are aware of St Augustine's search for spiritual senses; less widely known is his insistence on first ascertaining the literal sense. On the occasion of the fifteenth centenary of the death of St Augustine (1931) the Vatican Press published two large volumes of studies, *Miscellanea Augustiniana*. There is a very long essay by the late Dom de Bruyne, O.S.B., *St Augustin reviseur de la Bible*. The learned Benedictine showed that the Saint had corrected most, if not all, of the Latin Bible by the Greek text, and that his work was critically and scientifically sound. He concludes: 'Augustine is a great model for textual criticism'. The Saint put into practice the principle he propounded in the *De Doctrina Christiana* II, 21: 'The man who would know the Sacred Scriptures should make it his first care to correct the texts'.

From single words the Saint turned to phrases and idioms. He was aware that word-by-word translation would often give a crude, barbarous or misleading sense. In his seven books, called *Locutiones*, on the first seven books of the Bible (Heptateuch) he reviews verse by verse the Latin version and notes the expressions that are not really part of Latin idiom. His purpose is simply to guide readers to understand the sacred text. In the relative chapter of the *Retractationes* he says: 'Many sayings in the Sacred Scriptures, which seem to be obscure, become clear as soon as the manner of speech in Hebrew is ascertained'. He had a further purpose—to prevent people finding some hidden significance where all that they were considering was some idiom of language. 'The man who is unaware of the use of the language in which the Bible was written looks for I know not what mystical sense in the words of Holy Writ, while it is only a manner of utterance. In this way he carves out some idea which, though not far from the truth, is not precisely the idea intended by the Sacred writer, who generally uses a phrase from contemporary language.' (*Retract. II, 54.*) Similarly in his book on Christian Doctrine we read:

The man who possesses the fear of the Lord looks carefully for God's will in the Holy Scriptures. The piety by which he is nurtured keeps far removed the spirit of contention. He has

been prepared by a knowledge of languages and can understand expressions and idioms; he possesses the requisite knowledge of the nature and properties of the objects used in comparisons; he has at hand texts edited critically. He is then in a position to discuss and elucidate obscure passages of the inspired text. (3, 1.)

When writing in this way, St Augustine had in mind the doctrinal use of the Bible, i.e., the Bible as a divine source of teaching.

The interpreter giving to Holy Writ a sense other than that intended by the sacred writer deceives himself... like a man on a journey turning aside from the right road... He has to be shown where he went wrong; he has to be persuaded of the advantage of not turning aside, lest he find himself heading for danger. (*De Doctr. Christ.* I, 35. 41.)

Besides using the Bible as a divine source for doctrine, St Augustine in his sermons and writings often used this Biblical text merely to clothe his own thoughts. This is an accommodated use of Scripture; it is not a Scripture sense at all. It is an ornament, but it is psychologically justifiable for the lover to use the language of the beloved even for his own expressions.

Leaving aside the accommodated use, what are we to understand by the spiritual sense of the Scripture? St Augustine never meant the term to imply something merely subjectively pious or affective. With him the word spiritual meant divine, transcendent. It stands in contrast with the 'carnal' sense denoting the world of phenomena. Nevertheless, we have first to grasp the carnal sense if we want to arrive at the spiritual. The latter is the deep *objective* meaning of a text in the light of the whole plan of salvation. It is not based on a subjective whim of the reader, it is not merely an exhortation, but it is a doctrinal, a teaching sense. The difference, then, between the literal and spiritual sense does not rest on a scientific as contrasted with a devout sense, it is based rather on the objective viewpoint of the contents, on the one hand the precise sense intended by the sacred writer, on the other that sense illuminated by the view of its setting in the whole realm of faith and revelation. St Thomas (who was greatly influenced by St Augustine) wrote 'that meaning whereby the things signified by the words do themselves signify other things, is called the spiritual sense, and is based upon the literal sense which it presupposes' (*Summa* I, I, 10).

The literal sense can be moral, metaphorical, allegorical or even mystical. The literal sense of *Ecclesiasticus* is moral; that of the Gospel according to St John is historical and typical. But though there be but one sense its perspective can be twofold. The spiritual sense is contained objectively in the literal sense, like fruit, says St Jerome, inside the shell.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission issued an Instruction on 20th August, 1941. There was disapproval for the grave excesses of the Alexandrian school which sought symbols everywhere, even to the extent of damaging the literal sense. The spiritual sense must be founded on the literal and deduced from the use of our Lord (e.g. *Jn.* 3, 14; *Mt.* 12, 40), or of the Apostles (e.g. *1 Pet.* 3, 21), or of the inspired writer, or from the use of the Fathers, or the Liturgy.

St Augustine in reaching for spiritual senses often invokes numbers. His idea was that the truths of mathematics are above our minds, because they are eternal. By these eternal facts God gives to created beings their form, beauty and order. They are a means whereby created things are linked with the eternal wisdom of God.

The Secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission wrote an Instruction on 13th May, 1950, intended for Professors of Scripture in Seminaries:

He must take care to explain the spiritual sense of the words, provided it is intended by God. He will understand more readily that spiritual sense which the Fathers and great Interpreters have expounded, and will himself set it forth in a more religious manner, if his heart is enshrined in purity, if his mind is keen, his spirit humble, if he looks to God revealing with reverence and love.