

# Book Reviews

## **A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 1**

Thomas Merton, ed. Patrick F O'Connell, foreword by Bonnie Thurston  
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## **Notes on Genesis and Exodus: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 2**

Thomas Merton, ed. Patrick F O'Connell, foreword by Pauline A Viviano  
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"Ama Scripturas sanctas et amabit te sapientia"  
Love the Bible and Wisdom will love you (Vol. I: 20).

Thomas Merton, citing preparatory source material used in the 'Prologus' to Volume I (1-26), exhorts us to 'read the Bible'. In so doing, we'll learn to love true wisdom. Following the endorsements of impressive forebears in scriptural study, not least Jerome, so Merton invites his students, with 'proper preparation, humility, faith, [and] purity of heart ... to give ourselves to the daily study of the Bible' (Vol. I: 23). In the 'Prologus' one feels and hears something of Merton's own enthusiasm, but it's one that is qualified and measured by his own hard work, compellingly and skilfully illuminated by Patrick O'Connell's editorial notations. Let the reader new to these volumes beware *and* enjoy! These are 'notes' made good by O'Connell, written against the backdrop of Merton's own faith, and in the belief that his monastic brethren should, with their brother-

teacher, be inspired to read and live in ways faithful to biblical truths.

For Merton, that is the really vital point: the Bible is first and foremost the source of truth for living more than it is simply an object of critical scrutiny. He's not preparing notes for an academic session or crash-course summer school, despite the copious amount of material on which he draws. Rather he's writing notes which, later animated in dialogic and conversational manner, will inspire and enthuse novices and juniors. That said, it's hard to imagine, in a Biblical studies lecture today, that so much detail and material would be covered. Credit to Merton, and all without the aid of PPT slides, animation or evaluation forms. And to O'Connell, whose editing lets today's readers see just how much work went into these notes.

Surrounding these two volumes are the historical parameters of the conferences, covering the period 1951-65, though O'Connell usefully references material predating 1951. The dates are worth some mention in that they also set the scene for Merton's monastic duties. Between 1951 and 1955 he is master of 'scholastics' (student-monks on track for solemn profession/ordination). From 1955, he begins a decade-long term as novice master. So the two volumes reflect a period of about 15 years. However, as O'Connell points out, the notes prepared for the earlier period are partly recycled and inform the work for his term as novice master.

The topics itemised for the first volume include the study of key topics: revelation, biblical canonicity, specific texts and versions of the scriptures, and hermeneutics. The overarching concern which governs these four parts (and much of Vol. II) relates to how Merton's first audiences go about reading the bible. In Merton's day, a basic division between the text's manifest/literal and its latent/spiritual meanings would have been made (see e.g. Vol. I: 122-124 on implicit/explicit readings of the parables). Today, when we speak of reading and meaning, a whole theoretical apparatus comes into play, one often indebted to literary and cultural theory. This is not Merton's domain, though he's certainly alert to the critical issues of the time.

Alongside coverage of the 'senses of scripture' (both volumes), he also attends to questions of historical source, intentionality and meaning, authorship and language. These are often articulated by reference to existing scholarship as well as key documents of the RC Church, not least the (then) still fairly recent encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Pius XII, 1943). The material covered in Volume I tends to be less applied or

tested than the material covered in Volume II. Here, more time is devoted to quite detailed discussion of Genesis and, to a lesser degree, Exodus. However, he takes a lead from the commendation of the encyclical to use all the critical tools available to interpret sacred scripture. One occasional outcome of this is the Rabbinical edge to some of the commentary, one where there is no 'right' answer so much as a desire to pursue scripture's truths. Despite allusions now and again to Biblical inerrancy, Merton remains inquisitive yet systematic.

How, then, might we read Merton's own readings on scripture? How does he understand the usefulness of 'critical tools' in relation to the text, and how does he apply them? Perhaps the answer to these questions lies initially and conclusively in Merton's identity as a monk. Although never stated explicitly by O'Connell, one sees in Merton's notes the workings of a three-fold dynamic which, reflecting as it does his biography, is also a key way of exploring Merton on scripture. One axis is via his monastic life, and another is via his American, Roman Catholic identity, including his time at Columbia. The third way is by looking at the impact of the above on what he actually wrote and said. Whilst pretty straightforward at first sight, these three axes are themselves subject to further subdivisions. (Merton's RC identity, for instance, isn't easily extricated from the social and cultural milieu of his pre-monastic days, his education, his scholarship, and so on).

Merton does not commend any one way of reading scripture, but his conferences do encourage his listeners to embrace openness and receptivity. He sees the Bible not simply as 'text' but as 'source', an epistemology if you will, something which invites us to ponder human experience in its entirety. Early in his notes, and in order to frame all that is to come in the notes, he affirms the Catholic and ecclesial aspects of Biblical revelation (Vol. I: 17-19). Scripture is where we meet God. But scripture is also the source of life itself. Merton suggests the scriptures are 'letters from God in which He awakens in us love for our homeland' (Vol. II: 35). Contextually and historically, he's indebted to typological readings, seeing in OT stories and people types of Christ (see Vol. II: 73ff). He elaborates how the church conceived moral and theological truths on the basis of such typologies (Vol. I: Part IV). There is, of course, a huge degree of conceit which attends to such singular, retroactive typology. (Jewish, historical-source and redaction criticism necessarily and, in my view rightly, challenge such conceit). However,

Merton tends not to go down that route without some circumspection.

Whilst promoting various critical approaches, he notes the centrality of one's own subjectivity or disposition in relation to scripture, as if critical tools will only take us part of the critical journey. His reading of the Abraham story is worthy of longer citation. Each person's life 'is an apostolic journey. To be called by God is to start on a journey, even though it may not go very far. But we travel through time and space, meeting various people, getting involved in certain situations, all of which may seem unimportant, but they all have a bearing on our salvation' (Vol. II, 41-2). Such language seems deeply prescient in light of the RC Church's current synodal journey. This short snippet doesn't do justice to the longer discussion of Merton's 'Notes on Genesis' (Vol. II). But it does point us in the right direction. It's not what critical tools we use over the Bible as how we allow the text to radically interrogate what passes as the truth of human experience. The journey is without obvious end, and so Merton persuades us of approaches that don't seek scripture's closure but its on-going vitality.

Many of Merton's themes and approaches anticipate discussions that were to take place during the Second Vatican Council, or the wider ecumenical sphere in which Biblical scholarship was to develop. It is to be recalled that Merton was writing at a time when critical scholarship was rarely undertaken in collaborative or ecumenical ways. There was a tendency to hold on to the differences between Reformed and Catholic approaches. History is taking us in richer directions without necessarily losing sight of the importance of such traditional distinctions. Merton's approach seems so vital, reaching as it does beyond the narrow divisions that history might impose on the present. Writes Merton, the 'fundamental disposition with which we must undertake the study of Scripture is the realization that we are approaching the true source of life' (18). And refreshingly, this was not to the detriment of critical or scientific inquiry. Writes Br Paul Quenon: 'Fr Louis taught scripture with the kind of literary-analytic skill he most likely learned whilst studying at Columbia University. His commentaries ... simply traced out the narrative line and drew our interest to what many of us had never paid much attention' (Vol. II: xiii, cited from Br Paul Quenon's *Useless Life*).

So the guiding aims of the conferences to his monastic brethren are, from the start, shaped in and around critical discourses which encourage openness and receptivity, reflection and evaluation. A key aspect of any monastic and/or RC evaluation of scripture, not least the New Testament,

is that the context, content and the text are rooted in the Church and its liturgies. This liturgical dimension of scripture is, today, perhaps not as emphasised or as transparent as in Merton's day. Again, O'Connell reminds us that the Bible is 'sacred scripture'. Merton's notes confront this sacredness in the context of what historically was a central though not uncontested claim of all Christian traditions, namely the Bible's status as 'revelation'. For Merton, the Bible is the revealed Word of God and so there's no space for tinkering with the texts in loose or lazy ways. That said, it doesn't mean that Merton doesn't engage in a well-researched discussion in the precise challenges attached to the meaning of 'revelation' or 'Word of God'.

For Merton, there is no conflict in being faithful to the teachings and producing sound Biblical scholarship. He takes as his cue the story of the Samaritan women in the Fourth Gospel and he uses it to frame his argument in support of a relational mode of inquiry (Vol. I: 18). The dialogic and inquisitive register that marks the account in John's Gospel is in contrast to the restricting and occlusive lens associated with legalistic or overly-doctrinal mandates. Merton relates how, in contrast to legalistic modes of imposition, John's Gospel shows Jesus spending time listening to a woman excluded by the law but not by God. Rather than denying both the Samaritan woman and himself this relational exchange, Jesus learns from the woman as she learns from him. The moment of 'liturgy' (literally, public ministry) is also the moment of revelation: they are both equally God's presence. The potential of this revelatory exchange is huge, pointing as it does to the meaning and function of all human relationships in the production of a shared, revealed truth about life itself.

O'Connell's deft editing shows that Merton never loses sight of the search for the truth of scripture. We have Merton to thank for reminding us that the search for the revealed truth of God comes in the word and in the world. This search is always a collaborative journey. And we have O'Connell to thank for his own labours and time in allowing readers today to have a permanent and timely reminder of why scripture is central to life and relationships.

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