

THE HISTORICITY OF THE GOSPELS

Pontifical Biblical Commission

Holy Mother Church, "the pillar and mainstay of the truth,"¹ has always utilized Sacred Scripture in her task of saving souls, and preserved it from erroneous interpretations. There will never be a lack of problems in explaining, God's word and trying to solve vexing difficulties, so the Catholic exegete should not lose heart. Rather he should strive diligently to clarify the true meaning of Scripture, relying on his own forces and, most of all, on God's help and the Church's guiding light.

Progress in Catholic Exegesis

It is a source of great joy that today many loyal sons of the Church are expert in biblical studies, as the times demand. Complying with the exhortations of the Supreme Pontiffs, they devote themselves unstintingly to this serious and arduous task. "All the children of the Church are reminded to judge the efforts of these industrious workers in the Lord's vineyard with absolute fairness and great charity."² For even such illustrious commentators as St. Jerome sometimes had relatively little success in explaining more difficult questions.³ Care must be taken "that the heated atmosphere of dispute does not overstep the bounds of mutual charity; that such disputes do not give the impression that divine truths and sacred Traditions are being called into question. If the spirit of harmony and full respect for principles does not exist, we cannot expect much progress in this field from the varied studies undertaken by many different people."⁴

Exegesis Important Today

The work of exegetes is all the more necessary today because many writings in circulation question the truth of the events and sayings reported in the Gospels. Hence the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in order to carry out the task entrusted to it by the Supreme Pontiffs, deems it advisable to set forth and to stress the following points.

I. GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE EXEGETE

The Catholic exegete, under the guidance of the Church, should take advantage of all the contributions made by earlier commentators, by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church in particular, and carry on their work. In order to shed full light on the perennial truth and authority of the Gospels, he will adhere to the norms of scholarly, Catholic hermeneutics; and he will make appropriate use of the new exegetical techniques, particularly those advocated by the historical method taken as a whole.

The Historical Method

This method thoroughly investigates the sources, and analyzes their nature and value, relying, on the help of textual criticism, literary criticism, and linguistic knowledge.

The commentator will pay heed to the insistent admonition of Pius XII. "Let him prudently examine what the manner of expression or the literary genre used by the sacred writer contributes to a true and accurate interpretation; and let him rest assured that this aspect of his work cannot be neglected without grave

detriment to Catholic exegesis."5 Pius XII's admonition lays down a general principle of hermeneutics, valid for the interpretation of both the Old and New Testament, because the sacred writers used the patterns of thought and expression native to their contemporaries.

In short the exegete will use any and every means which will enable him to acquire a deeper insight into the nature of the gospel testimony the religious life of the early churches, and the meaning and value of the apostolic tradition.

Form Criticism

If the opportunity presents itself, the exegete may look for the sound elements in the method of "form criticism," and use them to acquire a fuller understanding of the Gospels. However he must move with caution in this area, because the method is often interlaced with inadmissible philosophical and theological principles, which frequently vitiate either the method itself or its judgments on literary questions.

Erroneous Premises

Some proponents of this method, motivated by rationalistic prejudices, refuse to recognize the existence of a supernatural order. They deny the intervention of a personal God in the world by means of Revelation in the strict sense, and reject the possibility or actual occurrence of miracles and prophecies. Some start out with an erroneous concept of faith, regarding faith as indifferent to, or even incompatible with, historical truth. Some deny, a priori as it were, the historical nature and historical value of the documents of Revelation. And finally, some minimize the authority of the Apostles as witnesses to Christ. Belittling their office and their influence in the primitive community, these people exaggerate the creative power of the community itself.

All these opinions are not only contrary to Catholic doctrine, but also devoid of scholarly foundation and inconsistent with the sound principles of the historical method.

II. THE ELABORATION OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

In order to establish the validity of the things contained in the Gospels, the exegete should carefully note the three stages of the tradition, through which the life and teaching of Jesus have come down to us.

1) Our Lords Teaching

Christ the Lord chose a select group of disciples,⁶ who followed Him from the very beginning.⁷ They saw His works and heard His words. Thus they were in a good position to be witnesses to His life and teaching.⁸

When the Lord set forth His teaching orally, He used the forms of thought and expression prevailing at that time. Thus He adapted Himself to the mentality of His audience so that His teaching would be firmly impressed on their minds and easily remembered by His disciples. The latter realized that the miracles and other events of Christ's life, took place so that men might believe in Christ and embrace His message of salvation by faith.

2) The Apostles' Teaching

The Apostles rendered testimony to Jesus,⁹ announcing first and foremost the Lord's death and resurrection. They faithfully set forth His life and His words,¹⁰ adapting the format of their preaching to the condition of their audience.¹¹ When Jesus rose from the dead and His divinity became manifest,¹² faith by no means obliterated the memory of the events which had taken place. On the contrary it reinforced these memories, because it rested on the things which Jesus had taught and done.¹³ Nor did their worship of Jesus as Lord and Son of God transform Him into "mythological" figure, or distort His teaching.

However there is no reason to deny the fact that the apostles, in telling their listeners about our Lord's deeds and words, utilized the fuller understanding which they had acquired from the glorious events of Christ's life¹⁴ and the guidance of, the Spirit of truth.¹⁵ After His resurrection Jesus Himself "interpreted to them"¹⁶ His own words and those of the Old Testament.¹⁷ In a similar manner they explained His deeds and words according to the needs of their audience.

Devoting themselves, "to the ministry of the word,"¹⁸ they set about preaching, and utilized the type of presentation appropriate to their purpose and the mentality of their listeners. They were debtors¹⁹ to Greeks and to foreigners, to learned and unlearned."²⁰ Indeed we can single out the following categories in the preaching of Christ's heralds: catechetical formulas, narrative reports, eyewitness accounts, hymns, doxologies, prayers, and similar literary genres commonly found in Sacred Scripture and the speech of that period.

3) The Four Evangelists

This primitive instruction was passed on orally at first, and later written down. Indeed it was not long before many attempted "to draw up a narrative"²¹ of the events connected with the Lord Jesus. The sacred authors, each using all approach suited to his specific purpose, recorded this primitive teaching in the four Gospels for the benefit of the churches.

Of the many elements at hand they reported some, summarized others, and developed still others in accordance with the needs of the various churches. They used every possible means to ensure that their readers would come to know the validity of the things they had been taught.²²

From the material available to them the Evangelists selected those items most suited to their specific purpose and to the condition of a particular audience. And they narrated these events in the manner most suited to satisfy their purpose and their audience's condition.

Context

Since the meaning of a statement depends, among other things, upon the context in which it is found, the Evangelists reported Christ's deeds and words in varying Contexts, choosing whichever one would be of greatest help to the reader in trying to understand a particular utterance. Hence the exegete must try to ascertain what the Evangelist intended by reporting a certain saying or event in a particular manner or a particular context.

Order of Treatment

The truth of the Gospel account is not compromised because the Evangelists report the Lord's words and deeds in different order.²³ Nor is it hurt because they report His words, not literally but in a variety of ways, while retaining the same meaning.²⁴ As St. Augustine says: "It is quite probable that each

Evangelist felt duty-bound to narrate his particular account in the order which God suggested to his memory. At least this would seem to hold true for those items in which order of treatment would not affect the authority or truth of the Gospel. After all, the Holy Spirit distributes His gifts to each as He chooses.²⁵ Since these books were to be so authoritative, He undoubtedly guided and directed the sacred writers as they thought about the things which they were going to write down; but He probably allowed each writer to arrange his narrative as he saw fit. Hence anyone who uses enough diligence, will be able to discover this order with the help of God."²⁶

Consequences for the Exegete

The exegete will not fulfill his task - finding out what the sacred writers really said and really intended - unless he considers all the factors involved in the origin and composition of the Gospels, and makes proper use of the sound findings of recent investigations.

Recent studies indicate that the life and teaching of Jesus were not simply related so as to be remembered; they were "preached" to provide the basis of faith and morals for the Church. Thus the exegete, by scrutinizing the testimony of the Evangelists over and over again will be able to illustrate more clearly the perennial theological value of the Gospels as well as the importance and necessity of the Church's interpretation.

There are many other matters of grave importance to be discussed and explained. In so doing, the Catholic exegete can and should be free to exercise his own perspicacity and intelligence. Only in this way will each person render service to all, contribute to the continuing progress of sacred doctrine, help to form or reinforce the judgment of the Church's Magisterium, and defend and honor the Church.²⁷

However, he should always be prepared to obey the Magisterium of the Church. And he should never forget that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit when they preached the good news; that the Gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who preserved their authors from every error. "We have come to know the economy of salvation only through those who have transmitted the Gospel to us. First they preached this Gospel. Then later, following the will of God they transmitted it to us in the Scriptures so that it would be the pillar and mainstay of our faith. It cannot be said that they preached before they had acquired perfect knowledge. Some dare to make this statement, boasting that they can improve on the apostles. But in reality, after our Lord had risen from the dead and they had received the power of the Spirit from above, they were filled with all gifts and had perfect knowledge. So they set out for the ends of the earth preaching about God's goodness to us and announcing heavenly peace to men. Each and every one of them possessed God's Gospel."²⁸

III. SEMINARY TEACHERS

For those who teach in seminaries and similar institutions "the prime concern should be...to teach Sacred Scripture in accordance with the seriousness of the subject and the needs of the day."²⁹ Teachers should give prime consideration to the presentation of theological doctrine, so that Sacred Scripture "may become the pure and perpetual fountainhead for the spiritual life of every future priest, and the source of nourishment for the preaching office he is about to assume."³⁰

Use of Literary Criticism

When these teachers utilize the principles of criticism, of literary criticism in particular, they should not present them for their own sake, but as a means to shed clearer light on the meaning intended by God through the sacred writer. They should not stop half-way, content with pointing out literary devices. They should go on to show how these devices help us to understand revealed doctrine more clearly, or if the occasion arises, to refute errors. Teachers who follow these norms, will enable students to find in Sacred Scripture "that which raises the mind to God, nourishes the spirit, and stimulates the interior life."³¹

IV . PREACHERS

Those who instruct the Christian people by sacred preaching must show the highest degree of prudence. They are to give first place to solid doctrine, keeping in mind the admonition of St. Paul: "Take heed to yourself and to your teaching, be earnest in them. For in so doing you will save both yourself and those who hear you."³²

They should abstain completely from advancing vain new theories or ones which lack sufficient proof. They may present new opinions which have been solidly proven, if the need arises; but they must do so with caution, taking due account of their audience. When they discuss biblical events, they are not to add fictitious details which hardly fit in with the truth.

Writers

The virtue of prudence should be especially cultivated by those whose writings are circulated among the faithful. They should bring out the divine riches contained in God's Word "so that the faithful are aroused and inspired to lead a good life."³³ They should scrupulously avoid departing, at any time or in any way, from the common doctrine and tradition of the Church. They should, however, take advantage of the solid advances made in biblical research and the contributions of modern scholars, while avoiding altogether the rash opinions of innovators.³⁴ They are strictly forbidden to indulge in the pernicious craving for novelty by indiscriminately spreading makeshift solutions to problems, solutions which are not the product of prudent judgment and serious deliberation, and which can, therefore, upset the faith of many.

Books and Articles

The Pontifical Biblical Commission has already seen fit to remind people that books and articles in magazines and newspapers, which deal with biblical topics, are also subject to the authority and jurisdiction of Ordinaries.³⁵ For such works deal with religious subjects and the religious education of the faithful. Ordinaries are asked, therefore, to keep a very diligent watch over such writings.

V. BIBLICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Those who are in charge of Biblical Associations are to comply fully with the norms set up by the Pontifical Biblical Commission.³⁶

If all these norms are observed, the study of Sacred Scripture will be of great benefit to the faithful. No one, even in our day, will be able to deny the words of St. Paul: "... the sacred writings ... are able to instruct you unto salvation by the faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and

useful for teaching, for reproving, for correcting, for instructing in justice; that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good work." 37

At an audience graciously granted to the undersigned Secretary on April 21, 1964, His Holiness Pope Paul II approved this Instruction and ordered its publication.

Benjamin N. Wainbacq, O. Praem.

Secretary.

Rome, April 21, 1964.

Footnotes:

1. 1 Tim. 3:15.
2. Divino afflante Spiritu; Enchiridion Biblicum (EB) 564.
3. Cf. Spiritus Paraclitus, EB 451.
4. Apostolic Letter Vigilantiae EB 143.
5. Divino afflante Spiritu; EB 560.
6. Cf. Mk. 3:14; Lk. 6:13.
7. Cf. Lk. 1:2; Acts 1:21-22.
8. Cf. Lk. 24:48; Jn. 15:27; Acts 1:8; 10:39; 13:31.
9. Cf. Lk. 24:44-48; Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:30-32.
10. Cf. Acts 10:36-41.
11. Cf. Acts 13:16-41 together with Acts 17:22-31.
12. Acts 2:36; Jn. 20:28.
13. Acts 2:22; 10:37-39.
14. Jn. 2:22; 12:16; 11:51-52; cf. 14:26; 16:12-13; 7:39.
15. Cf. Jn. 14:26; 16:13.
16. Lk. 24:27.
17. Cf. Lk. 24:44-45; Acts 1:3.
18. Acts 6:4.
19. 1 Cor. 9:19-23.

20. Rom. 1:14.
21. Cf. Lk. 1:1.
22. Cf. Lk. 1:4.
23. Cf. St. John Chrysostom, in Mat., Hom. 1, 3; PG 57, 16-17.
24. Cf. St. Augustine, De consensu Evang., 2, 12, 28; PL 34, 1090-91
25. 1 Cor, 12:11
26. De consensu Evang., 2, 21, 51ff.; PL 34, 1102.
27. Divino afflante Spiritu, EB 565.
28. St. Irenaeus, Adv. Haer., III 1, 1: PC 7, 844; Harvey II, 2.
29. Apostolic Letter Quonian in re biblica; EB 162.
30. Divino afflante Spiritu; EB 567.
31. Divino afflante Spiritu; EB 552.
32. 1 Tim. 4:16.
33. Divino afflante Spiritu; EB 566.
34. Cf. Apostolic Letter Quonian in re biblica; EB 175.
35. Instruction to the Most Reverend Ordinaries of Dioceses, Dec. 15, 1955; EB 626.
36. EB 622-33
37. 2 Tim. 3:15-17.