

“sound,” like that of the apostles, “has truly gone forth to the ends of the earth” (Ps. xviii, 5):—

Rappelle-toi cette très douce flamme  
 Que tu voulais allumer dans les coeurs :  
 Ce feu du ciel, tu l'as mis en mon ame,  
 Je veux aussi répandre ses ardeurs.  
 Une faible étincelle, O mystère de vie !  
 Suffit pour allumer un immense incendie.  
 Que je veux, O mon Dieu,  
 Porter au loin ton feu,  
 Rappelle-toi !

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## THE TOTAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

**P**IUS XII has recently reminded us that the interpreter of Scripture must discover and set forth the literal sense of the words, which the sacred writer intended to convey and did in fact express, as well as the spiritual sense, provided that it is certainly intended by God. The recent revival of Biblical studies is characterized by this search for the total sense of the sacred text.

Paul Claudel protests, with justice, against an exposition of Scripture which deals inadequately with its spiritual meaning<sup>1</sup>; and without embarking on scientific argument, he defends his thesis in the name of his faith and with all his deep sense of Catholic tradition: “There is,” he says, “another text of the New Testament . . . of even wider scope (or, as one would say in English, ‘more sweeping’). It is the well-known verse of I Corinthians x, 11: ‘Now all these things happened to them in figure.’ Rightly has he written ‘all’ and likewise ‘figure.’”

It is, in fact, impossible to read the Old Testament without seeing that its whole orientation is towards Christ. God, who inspires it, has Christ and his Church always in mind: all the great Biblical facts (persons, events, institutions) are referred to them. If the literal explanation of the text failed to take account of this, and confined itself to philology, or archæology, it would be deceiving us. “One must explain the ‘realities’ after explaining the texts. Holy Scripture is not merely a book, but a witness to a history.”<sup>2</sup>

But how is one to discover this total sense, or *sensus plenior*, as it is officially known? In a series of articles, recently published in book

<sup>1</sup> Two letters of Paul Claudel, in *Dieu Vivant*. No. 14 (1949), pp. 76–81.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Daniélou, S.J.; *Exégèse et Dogme*, in *Dieu Vivant*, No. 14, pp. 90–4.

form, Professor Coppens, of Louvain University, studies the question.<sup>1</sup> Besides the strictly literal and the spiritual senses, he defines the *sensus plenior* as follows: The totality of the relations which connect a text of the Old Testament with the Christian faith, and which may be discerned, both from its connections with Christian doctrine and from its share in the doctrinal and historical development which leads from the Old Testament to the New.<sup>2</sup>

It is necessary therefore to put the inspired texts back into their contexts, into the broad stream of the religious tradition in which they had their origin, into the whole framework of divine revelation. But was the sacred writer in any way conscious of this total meaning? Canon Coppens reminds us very opportunely of a text of the Angelic Doctor: "Since the mind of the prophet is a defective instrument, even true prophets did not know all that the Holy Spirit intended in their visions and deeds," *Sum. Theol.* 2<sup>a</sup>-2<sup>ae</sup>, 173, 4. And the Canon adds: "The Sacred writer . . . may also at times become a prophet; and in such conditions this important text of St. Thomas applies entirely to him. It is not required, indeed it is often out of the question, that he should understand everything."<sup>3</sup> It suffices that he have a direct, even if imperfect, contact with the future reality.

Now, "Semitic languages possess the unique privilege of having been chosen by God to receive the revelation of the transcendent God of Abraham, not the philosophy of some deity. The meaning of the phrases . . . and even of individual words . . . is not a single but a complex sense. In argument, the Semite uses, not the Aryan syllogism but the dialectic of authority, by introducing miracle or doctrine, not as a perfect explanation but as a striking argument."<sup>4</sup> "Semitic languages are based on that . . . It is that which gives them their theological value . . . They are made for interior contemplation . . . They are suited to the argument from miracle, which prescind from whatever is merely contingent and passing."<sup>5</sup>

It follows then that far from being opposed to the literal sense, the *sensus plenior* must be understood as the literal sense in the fullest degree. In so taking it we shall moreover be more in accord—by a providential coincidence—with the Hebrew-prophetic mentality which always tends to go beyond clearly expressed concepts and images.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Coppens: *Les Harmonies des Deux Testaments: Essais sur les divers sens des Ecritures et sur l'unité de la Révélation*, Tournai-Paris, 1949. Cf. *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 1948 and 1949.

<sup>2</sup> N.R.T. 1949, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> N.R.T. 1949, p. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Massignon, *Soyons des Sémites spirituels*, in *Dieu Vivant*, 14, pp. 82-9.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Massignon: *La syntaxe intérieure des langues sémitiques et le mode de recueillelement qu'elles inspirent*, in *Etudes carmélitaines*, 1949, pp. 37-47.

<sup>6</sup> Coppens, op. cit. p. 25.

We may be allowed to quote two examples of this "total exegesis." Père Guillet, S.J., has made a study of the "Wanderings in the Wilderness" as related in the Old Testament and in the New.<sup>1</sup> This event occupies a place in the religion of the Chosen People that the life of Jesus holds in the Christian. It is the period of miracles, during which God provides for his people's needs and makes himself their Guide and Defender. The agricultural Feasts become historic anniversaries. These forty years, lived under the direct guidance of God, form the picture which fascinates the prophets. This Past will be repeated; there will be a new Paschal Night which will inaugurate the Messianic times. Once again, Yahweh, like a Shepherd, will take up in person the guidance of his flock. Everyone will then follow the Ways of the Lord and the Lord will load his faithful ones with fresh abundance of miraculous food. Then shall one taste the sweetness of God for his children, *Wisdom* xvi, 21. Such aspirations find their full satisfaction in Jesus and their meaning expounded by St. Paul.

The person of the Messiah according to Isaiah has recently been studied by A. Feuillet, P.S.S.<sup>2</sup> He examines the Emmanuel and Servant prophecies in their relations with the present, the past and the most ancient traditions of Israel; namely those concerning their origin and the Exodus, summed up in the message of hope recorded in Genesis iii, 15. Through all variations which are due to different epochs and historical circumstances "one can detect a constant and ancient tradition which remains unchanged and is at least implied, if not explicitly stated. If God is to manifest himself this cannot be in order to encourage the selfish ambitions of any people, even of the Chosen People. God is always concerned with the ultimate fulfilment of his plans of justice and love . . . which since the beginning of the world, men's malice seems to have been obstructing." Basing his argument on numerous texts, the author concludes that these prophecies must be explained as messianic in the literal sense. Isaiah has foretold the virginal birth of Emmanuel ("The virgin" suggests a messianic expectation already widespread). The Messianic Child will be a new Adam, who will inaugurate the kingdom of perfect Truth, Peace and harmony in the universal knowledge of the one true God. The Servant poems display a profound understanding of sin and the divine requirements. They foretell the Suffering Messiah, who will take the place of the guilty and undergo the penalties of the divine judgement, but will thereby obtain a crown of imperishable glory. In those prophecies the picture of the Messiah is, as it were, the full flower of the growth of Old Testament prophecy: a new Moses, a Davidic prince, prophet and wise man, a priest sacrificing his own life. Truly the Book of Isaiah envisages the mystery of the Man-God.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Recherches de science religieuse*, 1949, pp. 161-181.

<sup>2</sup> A. Feuillet, p.s.s.: *Le messianisme du livre d'Isaïe*; ses rapports avec l'histoire et les traditions d'Israël, in R.S.R., 1949, pp. 182-228.