FOREWORD

Patrick O'Connell's judicious editing of Thomas Merton's monastic introduction to Scripture opens the way for exploration of a heretofore largely neglected aspect of Merton's work: his scholarly acquaintance with and use of Sacred Scripture. If readers of Merton know his work on Scripture, they are probably aware of *Bread in the Wilderness* or, if they are "of a certain age," the pamphlet *Praying the Psalms*. A *Time–Life* edition of the Bible that was never published was to have been introduced by Merton's essay "Opening the Bible," a rich exploration for the general reader which subsequently appeared posthumously as a small book of the same title. But little sustained work has been done on Merton's scholarly knowledge of Scripture and the scriptural basis of much of Merton's thought. An example of it can easily be discerned in the widespread use of Pauline material in *The New Man*. Now we have available Merton's detailed and systematic notes on what he discerned to be necessary background for biblical study in the monastic context.

O'Connell's extensive introduction provides the reader or scholar undertaking a study of Merton on Scripture with the history of Merton's presentation of this material to monastic students at Gethsemani in the 1950s and a broader summary of his engagement with developing biblical scholarship during the final two decades of his life. I am, as always, in awe of Professor O'Connell's editorial exactitude, his breadth of scholarship, and the acuity of his judgments on Merton's strengths and weaknesses. His introduction is a seminal work, and his notes and translations accompanying the text are invaluable. He reminds the reader that "All the other Scripture courses known to have been given by Merton . . . focus on particular biblical texts rather than the more technical background material found in this set of conferences" (xiv). This *is* technical material, which may make it rather hard going for the general reader, as I imagine it must have been for some of Merton's original listeners.

In his Prologue, Merton addresses the importance of studying Scripture and the dispositions with which one should approach it, realizing "that we are approaching the true source of life" (18). Merton uses the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4 as a positive example of the approach he

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favors. Part I is an extended discussion of biblical inspiration, covering the existence of inspiration (28–37), its nature (37–50), extent (50–53), and effects (53–58). It includes an interesting discussion of the thorny matter of inerrancy, which Merton asserts "is not questioned by any Catholic scholar" (54), to which I respond: "Perhaps not then." O'Connell's accurate assessment is that "some of the positions taken have a problematic ring to them for a post-conciliar audience" (xxiv). This longest section of Merton's notes is densely and not always pellucidly argued, making O'Connell's introduction to it particularly helpful. Happily, Merton concludes this technically complex, difficult, and now dated discussion with the observation: "Our obligation {is} to read Scripture with wonder and praise and gladness. That is the proof of our understanding; it is the proof that God has spoken to *us* and is speaking to *us*" (59).

The following two sections of Merton's notes are more historical than dogmatic or theological, and more explicitly exemplify the "monastic" application of the material. In Part II, Merton defines the canon and explains its formation in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, then in the New Testament, which he describes as "much simpler" and to which he devotes less than a page of text. Of particular interest in view of Merton's growing engagement with social justice and peace is the material on the prophets and on the analogies between the monastic and the prophetic vocation (80–90). Merton believed that "the monk is the living embodiment of God's plan for the new Israel" (84) and "*the successor of the prophets*" (87).

Part III introduces texts and versions of Scripture by means of a quick sketch of the textual traditions and Latin versions—pre-Jerome through Trent and beyond. I found the brief treatment of the contribution of the Eastern churches (Syrian, Aramaic, Coptic—both Sahidic and Bohairic—Armenian, Georgian, and Slavonic manuscripts) to New Testament preservation somewhat lamentable. We might care more about what is happening to the descendants of those Christians today if we understood more of what the Western church owes them for preservation of biblical texts.

Part IV of Merton's notes returns to more theoretical material and treats hermeneutics: "a 'discipline' of the rules for finding the real meaning of Scripture—the meaning intended by the sacred author. It is a *theory* of Scripture interpretation. Exegesis is the *practice*" (111). This section focuses on documents from the Holy See, the teachings of Saints Jerome and Thomas, Scripture's traditional "senses," and an important discussion of the difference between the explicit and implicit meanings of Scripture. Perhaps in view of his literary training it is not surprising that Merton exemplifies various hermeneutical approaches by means of literary forms.

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As someone who for many years taught introduction to the Bible to university and seminary students, I am impressed by the technical sophistication of which Merton felt his monastic students to be capable.[1] As a Protestant, I am sometimes uncomfortable with Merton's occasional negative comments on Protestant positions (which aren't always accurately presented), but remind myself this material is some sixty years old, pre-Vatican II, and before the much happier current ecumenical state of scholarly biblical studies.[2]

In view of the importance of the New American Bible translation (highly regarded in the scholarly community), O'Connell's introduction raises the fascinating possibility that Merton was involved in its early stages. In the mid-1950s Merton corresponded with Fr. Barnabas Ahern, one of the main editors of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine New Testament from which the NAB project arose. Ahern asked Merton to help polish the English style of the new translation, and a May 12, 1954 letter commended Merton's work, work that continued into the following year when Merton was giving conferences on Paul and helping to edit the English translations of Ephesians and Colossians (xxxvii). O'Connell writes that it is "not known what if any of the final wording of any of the NAB text may have come from Merton, but he was apparently involved in a significant way in the editorial process" (xxxvii–xxxviii). Herein is another pie into which Merton put a finger, as well as a dissertation topic or important piece of research for someone whose interest and expertise includes biblical studies and Merton.

The publication of this material on Merton's knowledge of technical, scriptural subjects is more than a historical curiosity, a "fly in amber" of pre-Vatican-II Roman Catholic biblical studies. It offers significant insights about Scripture study within and for the household of faith, the church (by which I mean all the baptized). Merton frames it as "a monastic introduction," but its implications apply generally and widely to biblical scholarship and biblical reflection by Christian believers of all stripes. For us, as Merton wrote, "Scripture is . . . a *medium* through which God communicates His sanctity to us" (63). Already in the 1950s Merton saw clearly that the "providential function of the Church in our own time {is to} bring stability to {the} world by {the} Word of God; our study of Scripture must be seen in the light of *world peace*" (6). May it be so in our day.

1. O'Connell suggests that in "a special effort to keep his lectures accessible to his audience," in presenting this material to his novices it is likely that "Merton would have deemphasized some of the more technical material" (xxxviii). One might hope so.

2. A more recent work that treats similar material is Bergant, *Introduction to the Bible*.

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