INTRODUCTION

On the first page of the text of Thomas Merton's set of conferences entitled "A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture," typed in the upper right-hand corner on the same line as the title, is the date "Spring 1951." At the end of the final page of this text, typed flush right below the table of contents (called here the Index) and the centered notice "The End." are the two lines "Feast of the Ascension / May 10, 1956." This is certainly not an indication that these lectures continued over the course of some five years, but that the dates refer to two distinct periods at which this material was presented. Apparently for the only time during his decade as master of novices at the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani (1955–1965), Merton reused material that he had previously prepared and presented during his tenure as master of students (1951–1955), in charge of the training of newly professed monks in simple vows. In fact these Scripture conferences were evidently part of the earliest instruction given to each group. He was formally appointed the first master of students at the monastery on Trinity Sunday, May 20, 1951,[1] but he had already begun "[p]reparing the Scripture course" a few weeks earlier, as his April 11 journal entry notes,[2] before the new position had even been established. He had been giving classes in Scripture and mystical theology to the scholastics since November 1949,[3] and the reference to "looking forward to the feast of the Ascension" (1) in the opening lines of his text indicates that the conferences must have started shortly before May 3, the date on which the feast was celebrated that year—possibly the day immediately preceding, since the Scripture passage discussed here, Ephesians 4:7–16, is a slightly extended version of the epistle for the Vigil of the Ascension, Ephesians 4:7–13. Likewise, the date found at the end of the text (once again the Ascension), which presumably refers to the completion of the course, suggests that this presentation of the material began at the time he became novice master in October 1955 or shortly afterward, since the various series of conferences, presented weekly, generally took at least some months to

1. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 459.
2. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 454.
3. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 372, 375.

complete. This timing suggests Merton's reason for this unique repetition of material originally put together five years earlier for the scholastics: having to prepare in short order new sets of conferences[4] on early Cistercian documents and history[5] and on the life and writings of John Cassian,[6] he evidently decided that for the initial Scripture component[7] of his teaching he could use already available material "off the shelf" at least this once, though whether it was as appropriate for this new audience as it had been for those for whom it was originally intended remains to be considered.

Merton's own typescript of the "Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture" conferences, which he presumably would have had in front of him as he taught, is no longer extant. The only surviving textual witness is the ninety-one-page "Spirit Master" ditto that would have been typed on stencils, probably by one of Merton's students, following Merton's original copy, and then reproduced and distributed to the class. It is highly unlikely that new stencils of the entire text were made at the time the conferences were given to the novices. The final dating would of course have been newly added, and perhaps the entire table of contents was an addition, as the text proper concludes on page 88 of the ditto[8] with the notation "The End." which is then repeated on page 91[9] preceding the reference to the Ascension and the new date. The unnumbered cover page headed with the hand-drawn title "A MONASTIC / INTRODUCTION / TO / S. SCRIPTURE." followed by the typed byline "by / Father M. Louis, O.C.S.O." and at the foot of the page the notation "Our Lady of Gethsemani / Trappist–1956–Kentucky" would also have been added to the 1951 stencils. The only other clear indication

4. In an undated letter to Jean Leclercq, OSB, from the fall of 1956, Merton writes of his early teaching as master of novices: "I have spent the year teaching a course on Cassian, on the Cistercian Consuetudines, and now on St. Bernard" (Merton and Leclercq, *Survival or Prophecy?* 75). It is likely that during this initial period Merton also gave conferences that were later published in a pamphlet as *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality*, reprinted in Merton, *Monastic Journey*, 11–38; see Merton, *Life of the Vows*, xliii–xliv.

5. See Merton, *Charter, Customs, and Constitutions*.

6. See Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*.

7. The official directives for instruction of novices in conferences, or "repetitions," given by the novice master, refer to "the Holy Rule, the Constitutions, the Regulations, the Ceremonies, the signs, and everything related to monastic education," as well as "the history of our Order," but make no explicit mention of holy Scripture, which presumably would fall under the general heading of "everything related to monastic education" (see *Regulations*, 257–58 [#545]).

8. Page 138 of this edition.

9. Page 142 of this edition.

of any alteration of the text comes on page 67,[10] where Merton makes reference to the ongoing official revision of the Latin Vulgate Bible under the auspices of the Benedictines. After noting that the editors "have finished and published up to Ruth (1951)" the text now has the added phrase "up to Psalms" on the same line, with "(1955)" alone on the following line. This in turn is followed by the line "Pont[ifical] Bibl[ical] Inst[itute] (Jesuits) rushes ahead with Psalms," which might also seem to have been added as a gloss on the preceding reference, except that since by 1955 the revised text now included all the rest of the historical books as well as Job, the first of the Wisdom books, directly preceding Psalms in the Old Testament sequence, the comment about the Jesuits—given here in present tense—seems inconsistent with the fact that all the intervening material between Ruth and Psalms has now also appeared, so that the latter book no longer appears to be completed ahead of schedule. Moreover, there would have been sufficient space to include these words following "(1955)" on the previous line if it was also added at this time. So it seems probable that this brief addition updating the information on this ongoing project was inserted on the ditto when the course was repeated in 1955–1956. No copies of the text survive without these added words (and without the title page and the note of the date on the final page) so it is impossible to be certain whether there were any other variations between the 1951 and 1955 versions of the text, but it seems unlikely—there is certainly nothing else in the text that could not have been written in 1951. Thus the text of "A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture" dating from the period of Merton's tenure as novice master can be regarded as substantially identical to the course originally presented to the student monks at the outset of his earlier term as master of students.

There is no documentary evidence available concerning the Scripture conferences given by Merton in the year and a half preceding his appointment as master of students, but it is doubtful that they were similar to the material in this set of conferences. In his April 11, 1951 journal entry he writes: "Finished Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* this morning,"[11] the earliest of the papal encyclicals on Scripture to which he would refer extensively in these notes—presumably he was reading these documents, at least for teaching purposes, for the first time, with the concurrence of the Passionist Scripture scholar Barnabas

10. Page 109 of this edition.

11. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 454.

Ahern, CP, whom Merton consulted as he was preparing this course.[12] A number of his secondary sources, including the specific edition of the main Latin textbook he would cite repeatedly,[13] date from 1950[14] to early 1952,[15] which strongly suggests his research was taking place immediately before and during the presentation of the conferences, not drawing on material previously assembled. All the other Scripture courses known to have been given by Merton, whether as master of students or as novice master, focus on particular biblical texts rather than the more technical background material found in this set of conferences, so it is plausible to suppose that may have been the case with whatever earlier material he had presented. References in the weeks when his teaching first began to Ezechiel (Ezekiel),[16] to Osee (Hosea),[17] and to Isaias (Isaiah)[18] indicate that he might have been discussing the prophets with his students;[19] while no explicit connections are made, the second mention of Ezechiel is a comparison with his own new responsibilities ("Teaching wears me out. Like Ezechiel I am in a big hurry to show all my treasures to the Babylonians"); the quotation from and brief reflection on Osee follow immediately after comments on organizing his courses; and he prays, "I'll get busy on Isaias which is Your word, O my God," which suggests at least the possibility that this reading involves something more than personal meditation. After the new year he writes: "Reading *Genesis* again,"[20] and some weeks later there is a lengthy reflection on Josue (Joshua),[21] and shortly afterward on Gideon

12. Unpublished Mar. 26, 1951 letter of Barnabas Ahern to Thomas Merton, archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC], Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY; twenty-one letters from Ahern to Merton between Apr. 10, 1950 and Apr. 8, 1956 are housed in the archives; only two letters from Merton to Ahern (Jan. 22, 1953; Feb. 16, 1953) survive; the latter is unpublished but the former is included in Merton, *School of Charity*, 50–52. For an overview of their relationship, see Collins, "Passionist Friendship."

13. Simon and Prado, *Propaedeutica Biblica*.

14. See also Daniélou, *Sacramentum Futuri*.

15. See Ahern, "Use of Scripture."

16. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 373 [11/24/1949], 381 [12/20/1949] (the versions of the names Merton uses are those found in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible).

17. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 373 [11/25/1949].

18. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 376 [12/7/1949].

19. Merton almost always follows the spelling of proper names as found in the Douay–Rheims translation of the Bible, based on the Latin Vulgate, rather than the more familiar versions universally used today.

20. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 407 [2/7/1950].

21. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 413 [3/1/1950].

and Samuel,[22] so it is possible that these are also connected with his Scripture classes, but this remains speculation.

What can be definitely known about this period preceding his appointment as master of students is that it was marked by a shift in his mode of response to the Scriptures. While he was still a student himself, he was rather resistant to a focus on the literal sense of biblical texts, preferring the figurative readings of the patristic and monastic tradition. In November 1947 he observes, "Fr. Anthony [Chassagne] got to talking with impassioned emphasis in Theology class about the great importance of the literal sense of Scripture, and I dare say he is right except that his stress seemed to throw the Fathers, and the *interesting* senses of Scripture, out the window. So it depressed me." He adds that if this approach requires that one pay attention to the minutiae of Hebrew and Greek grammar he wanted no part of it, and concludes, "Do you mean to say that the *literal* sense is what we have to look for in the Old Testament? It would make strange food for spiritual reading."[23] But on the Feast of St. Dominic in early August 1949, some ten weeks after his ordination to the priesthood, he writes:

> I admire St. Dominic above all for his respect for Scripture, and for his respect for the *study* of Scripture. Scripture was the heart of his contemplation and his preaching. I have often meditated on Scripture, but I have never in my life seriously studied it and this is a lack that I ought to weep for and beat my breast. Now that I am finished with the theology class and have four months or so to go on by myself in Scripture, to fill out the time required by Canon Law, I pray St. Dominic to guide my study of Scripture in these months and for the rest of my life.[24]

The reference to canon law may indicate that he has already been told that he will soon be teaching Scripture after completing the required preparation through a final period of independent study.

In any case his growing sense of the importance of study as well as *lectio divina*[25] as a response to the word of God is clearly evident here, and is continued in his journal entry for the following day, when he quotes the advice of the Jesuit theologian Maldonatus to make Scripture (read in the

22. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 420 [3/17/1950].

23. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 138–39.

24. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 343 [8/4/49].

25. For Merton's instruction on *lectio divina*, or meditative reading, see Merton, "*Lectio Divina*"; see also Merton's reflections on *lectio* in his novitiate conferences from mid-1958 in Merton, *Monastic Observances*, 149–55, 166–83, and more briefly in conferences from 1957 in Merton, *Rule of Saint Benedict*, 223–25.

original languages) the primary focus of theological study and reflects on his resistance to giving up time devoted to favorite spiritual authors ("Tauler or Rolle or John of the Cross") but then adds, "Of course, I have the morning study period and that is a wholesome chunk of the day, but it has been *assigned* to me, not chosen. Then, at any rate, I can get my hour or more of New Testament for the time being, but not, I fear, in Greek."[26] Again, the reference to being "*assigned*" to study Scripture seems to point toward his upcoming teaching position as well as to his new commitment to serious Scripture study. A note of rather sardonic skepticism remains in his comments two weeks later about the advice of the French biblical scholar Louis-Claude Fillion,[27] "whom I am appointed to read" (another probable indication of his preparation for teaching), to study Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Itala, Arabic, Syriac, Assyrian, Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian, Persian, Slavonic, Gothic, and the three principal Egyptian dialects, noting that after all that "you will come to the conclusion that Jonas in Nineveh sat down under a castor oil plant and became attached to its shade. On the whole, I think St. Theresa's interpretation of Jonas' ivy is more interesting, she didn't know one word of Egyptian either"—yet he goes on to mention his "mild fit of compunction" at the statement of St. Thérèse of Lisieux that if she were a priest she would learn Greek and Hebrew so as to be able to read the Scriptures in their original languages.[28] He is more receptive to the suggestion of "My pious Abbé Fillion" that when one is "stumped" about the meaning of a passage one should pray to the sacred author for enlightenment, remarking that he feels closer to the biblical authors than to virtually any other writers, and that the prophets and evangelists are the "burnt men" referred to at the conclusion of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.[29]

His preference for figurative readings of Old Testament texts is still evident in his March 1, 1950 comments on the book of Josue (Joshua), in which the five kings hung by Josue are equated to the disciplining of the five senses during Lent, and the stopping of the sun to the delay of the Final Judgment. The violence of the invasion of the Holy Land (the literal level) causes him no qualms, and he is able to say, "Josue is my favorite epic," preferred to Homer, Vergil, and *The Song of Roland*.[30] But in his comments on chapter 32 of the book of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) the previous August he had written, "Nothing

26. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 345 [8/5/1949].

27. Fillion, *Study of the Bible*.

28. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 357 [8/19/1949].

29. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 362 [8/26/1949]; see Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 423.

30. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 413.

is prosaic in Scripture if you know how to read it. The fact that God is speaking ought to be enough to invest everything with an inestimable value. There are meanings within meanings and depths within depths, and I hasten to say that mere irresponsible allegory does not reveal the real meaning and the real depths."[31] Merton is becoming more discriminating about the so-called "spiritual sense" of Scripture and more receptive to the literal sense, in large part due to the tutelage of Barnabas Ahern.[32]

This transition can be seen as well in his book on the Psalms, *Bread in the Wilderness*, not published until 1953 but written in 1950, shortly before he became master of students. Here he cites approvingly the directive of Pope Pius XII in his ground-breaking 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, considered the charter for modern Catholic biblical studies, to use all available tools to determine what the biblical authors intended to say. "The chief task of the exegete is, of course, to discover the literal sense of the Scriptures," though always directed toward the purpose of leading "to a deeper and more accurate understanding of what God has revealed, for our salvation."[33] Throughout the book Merton distinguishes between the imaginative flights of allegory, which discards the literal sense, and the more sober approach of typology, which respects both the literal sense (of an Old Testament text) and its fulfillment in the new dispensation. Likewise *The Ascent to Truth*, published in 1951, includes a section on "The Battle over the Scriptures" between the conservative "scholastics" and the progressive "scriptural" party in sixteenth-century Salamanca regarding the importance of the literal meaning of the Bible, and notes that John of the Cross, though not taking a direct part in the controversy, clearly sided with the scripturalists. "The most important effect of this," according to Merton, "was that Saint John of the Cross took great pains to respect the literal meaning of Scripture," though he was not technically trained in biblical languages and made mistakes at times, and though he continued to be interested in the "spiritual" sense of biblical passages.[34] It would not be stretching a point too far to see Merton finding in John a model in this regard as in so much else.

Merton's basic perspective on Scripture as 1950 comes to a close centers on the importance of a personal appropriation of the scriptural message.

31. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 348 [8/8/1949].

32. Unpublished letters of Dec. 19, 1950, and Feb. 27, 1951; at this time Ahern sent Merton a very detailed five-page outline entitled "Senses of Scripture in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*" explaining the factual literal sense, the theological literal sense, and the spiritual sense according to the teaching of Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [TMC archives].

33. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, 34.

34. Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, 142–43.

Commenting on a passage from Isaiah 41, he writes: "Everything inside me revolts against an interpretation of the Old Testament that makes it seem as if God never spoke to anyone but the Jews. Are not the words of Isaias for me? Did his prophecies run out, and did their message end when all the Jews came back from Babylon? . . . Who is God talking to? Israel. Who is Israel? Christ. I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me. Who is God talking to? To me, to this monk in Gethsemani."[35] This recognition of Scripture as a principal catalyst for "communion with God"[36] is what characterizes his conferences of 1951–1952 and 1955–1956 as a *monastic* (though by no means an exclusively monastic) introduction to the Bible. Although the largely abstract, technical nature of much of the material he presents there might at times seem irrelevant if not antithetical to his belief in the necessity of personal engagement with scriptural texts, ultimately it is testimony to his recognition of the complementarity of study and meditation for a full appreciation of the word of God, a recognition that will continue to evolve and develop for the rest of his life.

He begins his presentation, then, by prefacing the more academic, systematic main body of the text with a prologue that situates this material within a strongly spiritual framework, focusing on specific passages in Scripture, as well as on papal encyclicals concerned with Scripture, that encourage a commitment of both mind and heart to the word of God. The passage from Ephesians 4 focuses on the personal and communal maturing of faith through the power of the Holy Spirit that is to lead to "the perfecting of saints, the work of the ministry, the *edifying of the Body of Christ*" (2). Such a vocation, the calling of every Christian in some way or other, must include but not be limited to an intellectual component, to be "a matter of *knowledge* and *love of God* and the service of God in love of our neighbor for God's sake" (2). As John 14:21–26 (a reading overlapping the gospel for Pentecost, John 14:23–31) points out, the revelation of divine truth and goodness in and through the person of Christ "is at the same time a matter for the *intellect* to accept and for the *will* to embrace and fulfill, because the Truth revealed by God is not merely speculative. It implies things to be done in order to arrive at union with Him" (3). It is, Merton proposes, by responding to this invitation of the Holy Spirit as found in Scripture (as well as in church tradition) that the sanctification of the person and

35. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 448 [12/15/1950].
36. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 448 [12/15/1950].

the community is effected. He then turns to modern papal encyclicals[37] to reinforce this message—he will return to these documents later when considering doctrinal issues with regard to Scripture, but here he emphasizes the popes' reminder that particularly for those called to "'procure for the faithful the most copious consolations of the Scriptures.' . . . Sanctity and learning go hand in hand" (4), that "these saints and students while sanctifying themselves also procure *joy* for others," and that ultimately, as Pius XII taught, "our study of Scripture must be seen in the light of *world peace*" (6)—a source of true stability in an often disordered society.

After a brief look at the requirements of canon law for clerical study of the Bible, Merton notes that all Christians are encouraged to read the Bible, "even daily" (7)—not a point frequently made in the Catholic Church of the early 1950s, but one taken from St. Jerome via Pope Benedict XV—and goes on to consider the particular obligation of priests and monks to do so, again relying on Jerome, but citing as well as reflecting on passages from Paul (particularly the Pastorals, but also the image of the word of God as "the sword of the Spirit" in Ephesians 6 [10]); the Apocalypse, in which the mark of the beast is countered "by the blood of the Lamb and by the WORD OF TESTIMONY" (13); 1 Peter, which opens with an exordium on revelation and the life of faith; and the Johannine literature with its emphasis on the Son as "Life generated by the Father" who "in turn gives life to all by His word" (14), and as "Word Incarnate" who "by His words, brings life to the souls of men" (15). The passage on the conflict between the church and the dragon in chapter 12 of the Apocalypse strikes a characteristically Mertonian note as it situates a response to the word of God in a setting particularly reflective of monastic and contemplative life:

> The *desert* into which the Church flies {is the} traditional desert, {place of} refuge in {the} Bible. Since the desert of Arabia symbolized interior purification in {the} Christian mystical tradition, this desert also seems to suggest {that} the Church is saved from {the} attacks of {the} dragon by retiring into a "desert" of "pure faith," above the level of sense and of worldly wisdom, where the illusions of error cannot reach her. But this desert of pure faith cannot shelter us unless we subsist on the *word of God*. (12)

This introductory section concludes with consideration of the "*dispositions with which we should approach the study of Scripture*" (18), looking first to the Samaritan woman of John 4 as a model of receptivity to "the true

37. Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (encyclical letter of Nov. 18, 1893); Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* (encyclical letter of Sept. 15, 1920); Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (encyclical letter of Sept. 30, 1943).

source of life" (18), the living water offered by Jesus, and then to the figure of St. Jerome as guide to the study of Scripture—a rigorous scholar but also a spiritual pilgrim who "goes into the desert to study the word of God in solitude," and whose "study was not mere speculation; it was the 'putting on of Christ'" (21). He was "steeped in love of Scripture . . . *acquired by sacrifice and hard work*" (20–21) marked by humility and faith, "*manifested by submission to authority*" (22), with the ultimate aim of "*spiritual perfection*" (24). Thus Merton reminds his students as they are about to face the challenges of biblical studies that this is not, particularly for those in monastic life, simply an academic, intellectual pursuit, but an opportunity to develop an "interior taste—faith illuminated by {the} Holy Ghost and guided by love, {a} penetration of divine revelation by contemplative prayer" (25).

At the outset of the text proper, it is clear that Merton feels a responsibility to provide his students with a systematic overview of basic theological information on Scripture as commonly taught by the church at the time. He successively surveys the standard topics, drawn largely from the standard textbooks of the day, though he does not limit himself simply to a paraphrase or précis of this material, integrating relevant information from his own reading of classic sources including Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross in particular, along with contemporary writers such as Louis Bouyer and Jean Daniélou (in works not available at the time in English), and in each of the four main sections of the course there is at some point an explicit effort to draw out the spiritual significance, even the monastic implications, of the material being discussed.

The extensive discussion of biblical inspiration (27–61), the longest and most complex single section of the text,[38] follows closely Merton's major source, John E. Steinmueller's *A Companion to Scripture Studies*,[39] supplemented by the similarly organized Latin-language *Propaedeutica Biblica* of Adrian Simon and Juan Prado and, particularly for historical background, the article on "Inspiration de l'Écriture" from the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* by E. Mangenot. After providing a definition of inspiration as "a kind of supernatural motion by which men are impelled to teach others an infallible doctrine communicated to them directly by God" (27), and a preliminary list of the three elements or dimensions of inspiration—the active role of the Holy Spirit as primary efficient cause, the passive or receptive role of the writer as divine instrument, and the terminus or product, the written work

38. Twenty-four pages in the ditto; the Introduction was seventeen pages, and sections 2, 3 and 4 will be fifteen and a half, ten and a half, and twenty pages respectively.

39. All references are from volume 1: *General Introduction to the Bible*.

itself, Merton follows his sources by looking successively at the existence, the nature, the extent, and the effects of inspiration.

In examining the question of the existence of inspiration he first considers the possibility of revelation as logically flowing from acceptance of belief in a personal God, and the necessity of revelation even for attaining knowledge of moral and religious truths theoretically accessible to reason but in actuality obscured in a fallen world, and as absolutely required in order to perceive and attain the ultimate end of union with God. (It is evident here that the massive shift in emphasis found in *Dei Verbum*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of the Second Vatican Council,[40] from a focus on revelation as mainly propositional, a communication of salvific truths, to the more personal and holistic understanding of revelation as divine self-communication,[41] has not yet occurred in mainstream theological discourse.) While Merton will return later to the issue of the relation between revelation and inspiration, his attention now is focused on the fact that inspiration is not self-authenticating, that it cannot be demonstrated by the "authority" of its writer, or by its effect on the reader, or by the form or content of the text itself. To use the claim of Scripture to inspiration as proof of the inspiration of Scripture is to become caught up in a vicious circle. Hence the need for an authoritative teaching source: "there must be another manner by which supernatural action is made known to us, and this is by the witness of God Himself through revelation. The doctrine of the Fathers both in the East and in the West shows that they recognized divine ecclesiastical tradition as the criterion for inspired books" (30–31), to be utilized for liturgical proclamation and for spiritual instruction. Once this criterion is accepted, the testimony of the Scriptures to inspiration, found in various Gospel passages and particularly in the "Classical texts" (32) of 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20–21, provides clear evidence of belief in inspiration from the earliest days of the church, developed further in the writings of the Patristic era and in the consistent teaching of the Magisterium.

The following section on the nature of inspiration provides another definition that focuses more on the divine source than on the human agent: "inspiration is an action in which God, making use of the sacred writers as His instruments, is constituted as the principal and true author of Sacred Scripture, so that Scripture is, in the strict sense, the word of God" (37). Merton goes on to summarize the various inadequate conceptions of inspiration

40. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei Verbum*), in Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 111–28.

41. See *Dei Verbum*, 1.6: "Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of men" (Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 114).

that have arisen, whether deficient or excessive. The former have a "low" threshold for a text to qualify as inspired—merely "*negative assistance*" (37) to preserve from error, or simply subsequent official approbation, or a general movement of grace, or the "*literary authenticity*" (38) of the author, or even a book's canonical status (not all inspired books were always recognized as such—divine inspiration and ecclesiastical approval are two distinct, though obviously related, actions). The latter have too narrow a conception of human participation in the process, proposing that the writer either transcribes the divine message in some trance state and is not even aware of its content, or receives word-for-word dictation, or is communicating the results of a unique revelatory experience. This last is particularly significant, as it makes clear the distinction between revelation and inspiration, closely related but not identical: "revelation makes truth known {while} inspiration makes {a} writer set down facts and truths, whether previously known or not; {the} Bible is {a} source of revelation, but only one source; Tradition {is} another, {but the} Bible, not tradition, {is} inspired; {revelation} acts only on {the} intelligence, {while inspiration} acts on all the faculties of man" (39). It should be noted here that while Merton has already included all these aberrations under the subheading "What inspiration is not" (39), he now uses exactly the same subheading for his own original comments, based on the teaching of St. John of the Cross, stressing the "distinction between inspiration and various forms of mystical experience" (39), whether visions (imaginary or intellectual) or locutions (successive or formal). "Inspiration may have been accompanied by some form of mystical experience, but mystical experience has nothing essential to do with inspiration . . . Inspiration is distinct from every other form of supernatural and mystical apprehension" (39–40).

Returning to the elements of inspiration listed at the outset of the discussion, Merton now describes first the active inspiration appropriated to the Holy Spirit, the "direct efficient causal action of God upon the faculties, moving them to act and producing their act as principal agent" (42). The divine action is the principal cause of inspiration, the human response the instrumental cause. The description of this latter dimension, of passive inspiration, requires a much more detailed presentation, showing how the various faculties of intellect, imagination, and memory (the so-called executive faculties) and of will are all engaged in the process. Merton elaborates particularly on the Thomistic distinction between the reception of salvific truths ("*acceptatio rerum*") and the judgment of the validity of what has been received ("*judicium de rebus acceptis*"), pointing out that the former does not necessarily involve new revelation, which is therefore "*not essential to inspiration as such*" (45), whereas the capacity to recognize and affirm the truth of what is to be proclaimed, the exercise of theoretical judgment, "is the

essential element in scriptural inspiration as far as the elevation and illumination of the intellect is concerned" (46), and is accompanied by "practical judgements concerning the best way of presenting this truth to others" (43), which draw on the faculties of memory and imagination in the process of composition. The will freely responds to divine inspiration, but for God to be the principal Author of Scripture it must be more than a special instance of God being primary cause of any and every human act: "the sacred writer should be so moved and impelled by the Holy Spirit that he writes what he writes not because he himself has chosen to do so, but because the Holy Spirit wishes it to be written . . . The will thus elevated becomes the instrument of the will of God in a very special sense, and God is entirely responsible for the activity of the will so conjoined to His own" (49).

The extent of inspiration, the third subtopic, has been a matter of some theological controversy since the official declaration of the Council of Trent that all parts of each biblical book are to be regarded as sacred and canonical. Various efforts to distinguish between inspired portions of Scripture concerned with faith and morals and statements concerning natural, scientific, and/or historical data, or between inspired content and freely selected form, language, style, etc. are now generally rejected as artificial and not reflective of the recognition of inspiration as a holistic, dynamic process in which "there is such an intimate connection between ideas and words that one cannot be without the other" (53). An analogy between the complementary dimensions of Scripture and the two natures of the Incarnate Word can be made, as Merton, quoting Steinmueller, implies: "the Bible is never to be regarded as merely human nor as merely divine, nor as partly human or partly divine, but as all human and all divine" (53).

This of course raises a significant issue that is dealt with in the final subsection on the effects of inspiration—the question of inerrancy, which maintains, in the words of Leo XIII, "that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true" (53), a statement difficult to reconcile with the obvious discrepancies arising from a general perspective as well as from particular assertions reflective of a worldview incompatible with contemporary advances in scientific, historical, and even psychological knowledge. Certainly there is a shift of emphasis between the condemnation by Leo XIII of a system of interpretation that maintains "that in judging the truth or falsehood of a passage we need only take into account God's purpose in revealing it, namely {the} salvation of souls; and therefore according to this false system, only what refers to faith and morals in a given passage is necessarily true" (54), and the declaration of the Second Vatican Council that "the books of

Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation,"[42] but it is important to note that *Dei Verbum* does not draw the illegitimate conclusion that what is not pertinent to salvation in the Bible can simply be rejected or ignored; doctrinal truths cannot be artificially abstracted from their original context. The operative principle is that simply to pick and choose what is to be regarded as inspired in the Scriptures and what is not is an inadmissible procedure. Accepting as a first principle that Scripture as a whole, each book as a whole, each part of each book is included in the operations of inspiration, one can then consider the ways in which literary forms, the state of scientific, historical, even ethical knowledge at the time of the composition of particular texts, the situating of a particular book or aspect of a book in the overall development of revelation provided by the Bible as a whole, are to be taken into account in determining how inspiration is operating in a particular passage. Merton points out that the recognition that the "Bible never intended to teach men scientific truths in a scientific way" (56) is as old as Augustine, though he is more uneasy about acceptance of the presence of historical inaccuracies in biblical texts, since "our faith does not rest on scientific truths, but it *is* based on historical facts" (57). The most important principle is to not to consider any particular biblical passage in isolation, for "the mystery of love" that is the heart of the biblical message "is gradually revealed" (60).

Merton and his sources reflect a state of the question that will be undergoing significant further development and clarification in the decades to come, so that some of the positions taken have a problematic ring to them for a post-conciliar audience, but the personal application that includes this recognition of the dynamic development of revelation in Scripture and its relevance to the lives of believers emphasizes Merton's realization that acceptance of the doctrine of inspiration is by no means simply a matter of intellectual adherence to a required tenet of the faith. He tells his students, "Once we realize the truth of inspiration, and its meaning, our attitude should be this: wonder, admiration, gratitude and a constant return to drink of the fountain of life which is the Gift of God in His revealed word" (59). This gift culminates, of course, in the Word made flesh, the perfect and complete revelation of the source, path, and goal of creation and of human existence:

> {The} whole Bible . . . is {the} history of God's dealings with men, of the effects of His "Voice" in the world, measured by man's reaction, culminating in the Crucifixion of Jesus, the Incarnate

42. *Dei Verbum* 3.11, in Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 119.

> Word, and this Crucifixion is the salvation of man. {Here is the} tremendous mystery of Love, in which God makes use of man's hatred to save man by divine Love, of man's ignorance to enlighten him with divine Truth. (60–61)

Part II, the "tract" on canonicity (62–93), to use the academic terminology adopted by Merton, follows logically that on inspiration, but is considerably less complex. Merton notes at the outset that it is primarily historical in nature and that "[i]n a monastic introduction to Scripture, the history of the Biblical canon need not be treated in an apologetic fashion"—i.e., focusing on the defense of the full complement of books in the Catholic Bible vis-à-vis the narrower canon of the Old Testament accepted by Jews and most Protestants. "The work of the Church and of the Synagogue in forming the Biblical canon may be studied for the nourishment of our interior life" (62), he declares, and in fact this section of his text will provide the most extensive consideration of spiritual and explicitly monastic applications of the material being discussed. After examining the etymology of the term "canon," meaning "ruler or measuring rod" (62), and its application to the liturgy as well as to Scripture, he identifies the Bible as "a *medium* through which God communicates His sanctity to us," and adds: "The monastic study of the scriptural canon is a meditation on the *authority* and sanctifying power of Scripture, and its chief function is to fill us with reverent faith and submission, to open our hearts to receive, through Scripture, the grace of God, the Author of Scripture . . . Strengthening our conviction of the authority and power of Sacred Scripture, this meditation will enable us to reach a closer union with God" (63–64).

Having suggested the primacy of this spiritual approach, he then turns to the major doctrinal question related to canonicity—the distinction between protocanonical books (those never under dispute) and deuterocanonical books and segments of books (whose canonicity was not universally accepted in the early church and remains up to the present day a point of disagreement between the Catholic Church and other religious bodies). (While there are deuterocanonical passages in the New Testament, these are accepted by all Christians; it is the Old Testament material, basically almost all the texts included in the Greek Septuagint translation but not found in the Hebrew Bible, which was the source of contention.) Brief mention is also made of the apocryphal books of both Old and New Testament periods, not accepted into the canon though often quite popular and influential nonetheless (a category open to confusion from the fact that Protestants generally use the term "apocrypha" to describe what Catholics call the deuterocanonical books).

In considering the Old Testament canon, Merton notes the traditional Jewish three-fold division of Torah (Pentateuch), Prophets (which include not only major and minor writing prophets but what are otherwise referred to as the historical books, which feature influential prophetic figures and are sometimes credited to prophets as authors), and the more miscellaneous group of hagiographa or sacred writings that include the Psalms, Proverbs, and other "wisdom" writings, pointing out that this division is explicitly found in the book of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) and in Luke 24:44. He considers texts in the Old Testament itself that point to elements of a canon, in Deuteronomy, Josue (Joshua), 1 Kings (1 Samuel) and 4 Kings (2 Kings), with a particular focus on the assembling and reading of the Law in the paired books of Esdras (Ezra) and Nehemias (Nehemiah), particularly chapter 8 of the latter work, when the Law is read out by Ezra before the assembled people of Israel after their return from Babylon—like some of the earlier texts mentioned, the record of a ceremony of covenant renewal. This text, a liturgical reading used by the church during the September ember days, becomes the focal point of an extensive consideration of the readings and prayers of all three days of this quarterly penitential period, in which Merton makes the rather opaque comment that "{the} place of Nehemias 8 in {the} liturgy is *analogous to* {*the*} *place of* {*the*} *canonical Scriptures in* {*the*} *whole Christian life*" (75), by which he apparently means that just as the Bible serves as a kind of center or focus that should radiate throughout the life of the believer, so this passage on the encounter of the people with the Law of God becomes a kind of pivotal text for the various themes that are incorporated into the liturgy of these three days, which include the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, the religious significance of the harvest, the power and mercy of God, the salvific power of Jesus, the importance of fasting and penance, "*penance overwhelmed by joy at God's mercy*" (77), the law itself as a source of joy. While in his text Merton simply lists the relevant scriptural readings and liturgical prayers that exemplify each of these themes, so that it is up to his audience to pursue their own meditative reflections on the various items in order fully to comprehend and benefit from this detailed inventory, he does go on to summarize the theological message of these days as "centered in this astoundingly *concrete* view of all God's mercy and justice in Jesus: {the} harvest of joy" (77). He then explores in more depth the connection between the Law and the vintage in the Nehemias reading, situated at the time of the "first harvest and vintage from the restored fields and vineyards in the rebuilt Jerusalem" (78), and thus both foreshadowing the final judgment and the New Jerusalem and adumbrating the meaning of the cross (celebrated on September 14, the Feast of the Exaltation of the

Holy Cross) as a source not just of sorrow and bitterness but of joy, just as the grief of the chosen people at their failure to observe the Law "is swept away in a tidal wave of divine mercy that makes grief useless, ridiculous, even impossible" (78). This reflection has obviously moved some distance from noting the function of this chapter of Nehemias as providing evidence for the canonicity of Old Testament materials, but at the conclusion of this apparent digression Merton suggests it indicates "the full implication of canonicity" (80): the discovery of the joy of the word of God, the fulfillment of the Law by love, the experience of the "peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding" is protected and guarded by the assurance that one is encountering the authentic revelation of the mystery of salvation. "{The} canon {is} an external guarantee of the truth of the words which plant this joy in our hearts" (80).

Merton then moves on to discuss the second of the three sections of the Old Testament, the prophetic books, which gives him an opportunity not only to consider briefly the scriptural evidence for a canon of prophetic books (referred to particularly in the Books of Maccabees), but to provide a succinct overview of the prophetic tradition generally, of the development of Israelite prophecy and the marks of a true prophet, and also to explore at some length the analogies between the prophetic and the monastic vocations, drawing on the writings of Louis Bouyer[43] and of his own correspondent and friend Barnabas Ahern.[44] The basic point Merton makes is that in significant ways the monk's role in the new dispensation continues and completes that of the prophet in the old: "Just as the Old Testament prophets were, so to speak, incarnations of the will of God for Israel (since everything in their lives and doctrines declared His plans for the chosen people), so the monk is the living embodiment of God's plan for the new Israel: he is the Christian in whom the mystery of Christ is fully and perfectly realized" (84). Like prophets, monks are "seers," not in the sense of foretelling the future but in recognizing the presence and action of God here and now, through the work of the Holy Spirit in their contemplative awareness. Such insight involves in particular a penetration of the meaning of the word of God, and a lived embodiment of that word:

> The Holy Spirit does not procure for the monk a new revelation, but He introduces him into *the full contemplation of the Mystery of God revealed in Christ*. One who is filled with the Spirit understands what the Spirit is saying in Scripture . . . But this mystery is not merely known, in illumination; it is LIVED {through}

43. Bouyer, *Sense de la Vie Monastique*.
44. Ahern, "Use of Scripture."

> the miracle of divine charity—*agape*, through which the divine life is poured out into the world: sacrificial love. (87–88)

The vocation of the monk is to be a witness of the fulfillment of the mystery of salvation in Christ, to be "the 'eschatological man,' the one in whom God's purpose is fully realized, the pledge and presage of eternity" (90). Once again within the context of the topic of canonicity Merton finds an opportunity to develop some of the concrete, experiential implications of the Scriptures for the religious life of his students.

Following this rather extensive excursus, Merton devotes no specific attention to the third and final section of the Old Testament, the writings or hagiographa (which actually underwent the most complicated and least clear process leading to the establishment of canonical status—the majority of the deuterocanonical books would be classified as belonging to this quite heterogeneous group). He moves on directly to a discussion of the process by which the church arrived at its canon of the Old Testament (which does of course concern primarily the deuterocanonical books)—considering in turn New Testament references to Old Testament texts generally and to particular deuterocanonical passages, at least by implication, as being canonical (along with the consistent use of the Septuagint—Alexandrian—translation that incorporated the deuterocanicals); subsequent testimony of the Church Fathers as well as evidence from early Christian art; and finally various local and eventually universal ecclesiastical councils, culminating in the decision at Trent on the full biblical canon. The "much simpler history" (93) of the establishment of the New Testament canon—not quite as simple as Merton suggests with regard to books such as the Apocalypse (Revelation) and certain "deuterocanonical" passages such as John 7:53—8:11 or Mark 16:9–20—is then summarized in a single concluding paragraph, though Merton does note that with regard to the New Testament, "The formation of the canon was slow because of lack of methods of communication and {a} difficulty {due to the} dissemination of heretical writings" (93).

The following section is the briefest of the four main parts of the course: "*TEXTS AND VERSIONS OF THE SCRIPTURES*" (94–110). Though it consists largely, as its title indicates, of factual information on the complicated process of authenticating the original texts of Scripture, on families of manuscripts, on historically significant translations, principally the Septuagint Old Testament and the Latin Vulgate Bible of St. Jerome, Merton prefaces his discussion with a summary of Pius XII's characterization of this textual research, particularly on the Old Testament, as "a work of *reverence* for the Sacred Text" (95), enabling not only a clearer understanding of the biblical message but fostering a deeper spiritual

engagement with the word of God. He challenges any tendency on the part of monks toward a kind of anti-intellectual disregard for what might seem to be a concern for dry, pedantic minutiae, reminding his listeners of the commitment of St. Stephen Harding, third abbot of Cîteaux, to establish an accurate Latin scriptural text for the liturgy, and warning: "Though we do not engage in this kind of work, an attitude of contempt toward its findings or its methods would alienate the contemplative monk from the spirit of the Church. {There should be} reverence and appreciation for this advance in scholarship, regarding it with eyes of faith as providential" (94). He then looks at the history of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament (with its originally purely consonantal alphabet), notes the existence and usefulness of related versions such as the Samaritan Pentateuch, the targums (free translations made principally for liturgical use), and of course the Greek Septuagint for establishing accurate readings and for making clear the complexities of any effort to determine the single authentic reading in any particular instance. Discussion of the New Testament textual tradition begins with a brief consideration of the actual process of transcribing texts and the various styles of writing through the early centuries, noting that writing was regarded by its practitioners both as an art and as a spiritual practice, but also that the early procedure of leaving no space between words could result in variants, such as one found in John of the Cross, which "show that purity of text has a direct influence on the interior life of souls!" (99). There is also particular mention of Cistercian copyists and of items in the extensive collection of early Cistercian manuscripts (non-scriptural for the most part) assembled by Abbot Edmond Obrecht of Gethsemani in the early twentieth century, which Merton himself had examined and catalogued a few years earlier.[45] This is the extent of the "monastic" component of this section of the text. Merton then provides a list of major manuscripts and textual families for the Greek New Testament, information on the transmission of the Septuagint and its relationship to the Hebrew text (with special attention to Origen's pioneering textual scholarship), and then a detailed presentation of St. Jerome's work in providing the authoritative Latin translation for the Western church and the subsequent history of that text, right up to 1955 (as previously noted). Merton concludes this section with a rather dizzying list of translations of the New Testament into Syriac, Aramaic, Coptic (both Sahidic and Bohairic), Ethiopic, Armenian, Gothic, Georgian, Arabic, and Slavonic, some of which are useful as early witnesses to readings based on the original languages, and all of which testify to the extraordinary efforts of saints

45. See Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 106–19 [9/12/1947; 9/14/1947; 9/18/1947].

and scholars (not all of these, it becomes evident, orthodox) to make the word of God accessible to believers everywhere.

The fourth and final section of the text, "THE INTERPRETATION OF SACRED SCRIPTURE: HERMENEUTICS" (111–38), is actually of more limited scope than the title suggests. As Merton immediately points out, hermeneutics refers to the theory of scriptural interpretation and is complemented by its actual practice, exegesis, which is not explicitly dealt with here, though Merton does include a number of specific illustrative examples, some involving fairly detailed interpretation, drawing on particular biblical passages relevant to points being made. Moreover, he mentions the standard three-fold division of hermeneutics: "noematics—the senses of Scripture; heuristics—how to find out the senses of Scripture; prophoristics—{the} explanation of these senses to others" (112) (standard terms from the manuals of the period that have since fallen out of use). However, he will go on to consider only the first of these, in a discussion that is marked by a certain amount of terminological awkwardness and inconsistency that can cause confusion, some of it already present in current academic jargon, some due to varying usages of the same word in different sources and/or time periods, some a consequence of the shifting state of scholarly thinking on the topic at the time of writing, and perhaps some also to a bit of lingering ambivalence about the relative value of the different senses of Scripture that remained from his student days. But careful attention to the context of apparently ambiguous or confused statements generally provides the necessary clarification.

Merton begins his discussion with the distinction between *signification*, the denotative meaning of a word, and *sense*, the contextual meaning. It is the latter that will require the extensive analysis that takes up virtually all the rest of the text. He quickly dismisses the traditional four-fold interpretation—literal, allegorical, moral (tropological), and anagogical (eschatological) as "extremely confusing" (112)—a somewhat surprising claim as the distinctions seem quite clear, at least for three of the four terms, and were used for centuries not only by biblical commentators but by literary figures such as Merton's beloved Dante;[46] when these recur in the work of St. Thomas referred to later,

46. See Dante's famous letter to his patron Can Grande della Scala, in which he identifies the various levels of his poem in terms of the four senses of Scripture: "The meaning of this work is not simple . . . for we obtain one meaning from the letter of it, and another from that which the letter signifies; and the first is called literal, but the other allegorical or mystical. And to make this matter of treatment clearer, it may be studied in the verse: 'When Israel came out of Egypt and the House of Jacob from among a strange people, Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion.' For if we regard the letter alone, what is set before us is the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt in the days of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption wrought by Christ; if the

Merton seems to have no problem with them. The nub of the difficulty, as will become apparent, comes with the second term, which can range from the precise correspondences of typology to wildly imaginative interpretations that may (or may not) have genuine spiritual value but often have only the most tenuous connection to the literal meaning of a text. Merton prefers the simpler division of literal and typical: "{the} literal {is that} expressed immediately and directly by the words—the sense which the words directly convey, whether properly or improperly ({as} metaphor {or} symbol); the typical sense is the meaning of events"—but he immediately has to acknowledge that the matter is not quite so simple as that, as "Other senses {are} admitted: the IMPLICIT sense" and "the accommodated sense—not really a sense of Scripture at all" (112) must also be taken into account, and his modification "whether properly or improperly" had already introduced a complication of the neat binary division. A detailed consideration of the teaching of the three principal scriptural encyclicals stresses their common emphasis of the primacy of the literal sense, but even in these official papal documents there is a certain murkiness, particularly in connection with the term "allegorical," which in Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus*, Merton says, "probably means the typical sense," whereas in Benedict XV's *Spiritus Paraclitus* it "is not the typical sense—it is not a sense intended by the sacred writer, but devised by the fancy of commentators" (113); this document commemorating the work of St. Jerome "tells us of the existence of two great senses of Scripture—{the} literal and {the} mystical" and "of the *proper relations* between them," with "various terms used: allegorical, tropological, mystical, spiritual, 'divine meaning,' etc." (116)—which are not, however, simply interchangeable—except when they are! Piux XII's "magna carta" of biblical studies, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, avoids the term "allegorical," preferring "spiritual sense," but warning that this should not be taken to imply that the literal sense has little or no spiritual value in itself; the pope goes on to distinguish between the typical sense, focused on the correspondence between Old and New Testament events or figures, a spiritual or mystical sense that is discerned to be intended by God even if not by the human author, and an accommodated sense that is the product of a commentator's imagination (which would apply to much of traditional allegorical interpretation), that may be used "with moderation and restraint" but also with a recognition that it is "extrinsic and accidental to Scripture" (117).

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moral sense, we are shown the conversion of the soul from the grief and wretchedness of sin to the state of grace; if the anagogical, we are shown the departure of the holy soul from the thralldom of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they may all be called in general allegorical, since they differ from the literal and historical" (quoted in Dante, *Divine Comedy—I: Hell*, 14–15).