

## INTRODUCTION

WHEN HE BEGAN HIS decade-long term as master of novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani in October 1955, Thomas Merton included weekly conferences on Scripture, along with classes on monastic history, practices, and spirituality,<sup>1</sup> as part of the regular instruction given to the prospective monks entrusted to his charge.<sup>2</sup> Initially, he recycled a set of lectures entitled *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture*, originally composed for the newly professed monks whom Merton taught during his tenure as master of scholastics between 1951 and 1955, which focused mainly on standard theoretical topics in Scripture studies, including inspiration; the biblical canon; textual matters; and hermeneutics, principles of interpretation. After completing this introductory overview on May 10, 1956, the Feast of the Ascension,<sup>3</sup> he turned his attention and that of his audience to the opening books of the entire Bible, which presented what he called “the first act in the great drama of salvation” (1). The two sets of conferences included in the present volume, a thorough, comprehensive course on the book of Genesis that began sometime in the summer of 1956 and concluded on June 9, 1957, the Feast of Pentecost (134),<sup>4</sup> and

1. See Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*; Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*; Merton, *Rule of Saint Benedict*; Merton, *Monastic Observances*; Merton, *Life of the Vows*; Merton, *Charter, Customs, and Constitutions*; Merton, *Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology*; Merton, *Medieval Cistercian History*. Though presented during the period of his mastership, the conferences in Merton, *Introduction to Christian Mysticism* were not given to the novices but to recently ordained professed members of the Gethsemani community.

2. See also Merton's undated 1956 letter to Jean Leclercq, OSB in which he refers to his early sets of conferences on monastic material but does not mention the scripture courses that he was also giving at the time (Merton and Leclercq, *Survival or Prophecy?*, 75–76).

3. See Merton, *Monastic Introduction*, 142.

4. It is uncertain how soon after completing the introductory Scripture course

a considerably less detailed, more diffusely organized series of classes on the book of Exodus that probably ran from midsummer 1957 through the early spring of 1958,<sup>5</sup> make up the only major surviving teaching notes on Scripture dating from the years when Merton was in charge of the novitiate.

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Merton began the conferences on Genesis, but a reference to “mosquitoes” on the verso of page 9 of Merton’s own typescript of his Genesis notes (page 20 of the present edition) suggests that he had reached that point sometime during the summer, so any delay between the conclusion of the former set and the beginning of the latter could not have been very long. By the First Sunday of Advent, the epistle and gospel of which are mentioned on page 35v of the typescript (page 71 of the present edition), Merton had reached about the halfway point in his text, his discussion of Genesis 22, the sacrifice of Isaac. A reference to “Lenten reading” on page 52v (page 105 of the present edition) indicates that at this time he has just begun discussion of the material on Joseph, the last major section of the book of Genesis (cc. 37–50). His concluding discussion (133) of the appropriateness of considering the final chapters of Genesis on the Feast of Pentecost not only provides the *terminus ad quem* for this particular series of conferences but indicates that they had evidently been delivered on Sundays.

5. It is not clear whether the conferences on Exodus began immediately after the Genesis series had concluded, though there is one possible indication that there may have been a pause of a few weeks between them. On the verso of the fourth page of his Exodus notes (page 146 of the present edition), Merton had written a note, somewhat obscured by its subsequent cancellation, that looks like it may read: “Mass 18th Sun—Peace”; the gospel for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, celebrated in 1957 on August 18, is Luke 19:41–47, the passage in which Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and addresses the city with the words: “If you had known . . . the things that make for your peace!” It seems somewhat unlikely (though not impossible, given his customary procedure of using his written notes only as a general guide for his oral presentations) that it would have taken Merton more than two months to proceed through the first three chapters of the book of Exodus, so he may have begun this second series after a brief hiatus. More certain, though still somewhat approximate, is the chronological information provided by Merton’s brief note “Hospital? Return?” written on the verso of a page completing his outline of the stages of the Israelites’ passing through the desert as found in Exodus and Numbers (page 165 of the present edition). This was probably a note for his conference on or about Sunday November 17, since in his journal entry for that day he wrote: “Tomorrow to Doctor in Bardstown to get my guts looked at. Perhaps an operation” (Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 139). He was in fact hospitalized for surgery from November 18 through November 26 (Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 141–43). There are no further indications of dating, other than the fact that the article by Louis Bouyer that Merton summarizes at length in subsequent pages (169–74), about two-thirds of the way through his written notes, appeared in the December 1957–February 1958 issue of *Bible et Vie Chrétienne*. Thus it seems plausible that Merton may have begun the conferences on Exodus sometime in late June or July 1957, and ended them, even though he had not completed a discussion of the entire book, in the late winter or early spring of 1958.

Merton's intention, as indicated in a one-page typed outline headed "SCRIPTURE SEMINAR—Program" (135), had been to consider in sequence each of the five books of the Pentateuch, to be followed by Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, the first of the Old Testament historical books, but it is unclear to what extent he pursued this ambitious plan beyond the materials included in the present edition. Though there is no extant documentary evidence from this period that indicates Merton undertook any extensive systematic explication of other scriptural material, either from the Old Testament or the New,<sup>6</sup> in his recent memoir *Br. Paul Quenon*, who entered Gethsemani in 1958 and spent the following two years as a novice under Merton, writes of Scripture conferences he particularly remembers: "Fr. Louis taught scripture with the kind of literary-analytic skill he most likely learned while studying at Columbia University. His commentaries on the book of Job and the two books of Samuel are most vivid in my mind because he simply traced out the narrative line and drew our interest to what many of us had never paid much attention to."<sup>7</sup> In the absence of actual texts, it is uncertain whether conferences on Samuel followed sets on the intervening books mentioned in Merton's outline, or were stand-alone presentations as, presumably, were those on Job. In any case, Merton's teaching notes on Genesis and Exodus provide the only extended purview of how he introduced his novices to the contents of specific biblical books and to the intellectual, and particularly the spiritual, contexts in which they should be read, understood, and appreciated.



Merton begins his "Notes on Genesis" with an introduction to the Pentateuch as a whole, providing a brief description of each of the five books (as well as of the book of Josue [Joshua]<sup>8</sup> that completes the story of the

6. The only other surviving conference material on Scripture from the novitiate period is a three-page handwritten text entitled "The First Epistle of St. John" that was apparently presented in early 1958, since in his journal entry for December 29, 1957, Merton wrote: "Preparing notes on first epistle of St. John for the novices' conference" (Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 150); these notes were preserved with the typescript of Merton's conferences on "The Life, Works and Doctrine of Saint Bernard" and are transcribed in Appendix A of Merton, *Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology* (414–18).

7. Quenon, *Useless Life*, 24.

8. 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

entrance of the chosen people into the promised land). He refers to Moses as the author, the standard Catholic position in the mid-1950s, but immediately nuances this statement as not to be taken as meaning simply that Moses sat down and wrote out the Torah as it exists today, and he goes on to give a tentative but positive evaluation of the Documentary Hypothesis, which assigns various passages in these books to Yahwist, Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomic authors, and as the conferences progress he will occasionally mention with no apparent reservations that a particular pericope belongs to one or another of these sources. Thus the text exemplifies the transitional state of Catholic biblical studies at the time of its writing, making clear both Merton's awareness of current positions and his openness to new developments that will largely transform the framework of biblical exegesis in the Catholic community in the decade to follow.

Merton then turns to the "prehistory" presented in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, leading up to the call of Abraham that initiates the story of the patriarchs, the forebears of Israel, that will be the focus of the rest of the book. In his discussion of the two opening chapters, there is an unquestioning acceptance of the presence of two distinct creation stories, and of the first (1:1—2:4a) as the product of the Priestly source. Rather surprisingly, Merton gives little explicit attention to the sequence of God's creative acts over the course of the six days, pointing out only the common pattern found at each stage. His focus is rather on the liturgical aspects of the account, the element of "worship, praise, adoration" that is the proper response to the divine gift of life and order, and its contemporary implications, especially for monastic life: "Our liturgical life should be impregnated with this spirit—kinship with creatures and with God. We are the natural mediators between God and the rest of His creation. {This is} our key position—our dignity. Love is the answer" (3). These verses are seen as providing a pattern of life for the child of God, in which the mysterious presence of the Holy Spirit hovers not only over the abyss of the waters but over the abyss of the soul as well, a source of continuing vitality and creativity in both the outer and inner world. He goes on to touch upon the patristic teaching of the divine image, always present in the very structure of the human person, and the divine likeness, capable of being lost through sin and recovered through redemption;<sup>9</sup> on the

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more familiar versions universally used today.

9. Merton discusses this image-likeness theology in detail in the third chapter of *New Man*, 49–68; this book, originally titled *Existential Communion*, was written

importance of marriage and fecundity as a participation in God's creative activity; and on the Sabbath as a foreshadowing of the ultimate rest in God in the new creation. He finishes up this discussion with references to relevant psalms that celebrate the creation, to links with baptism as a new creation, and to the prayer for the dying that explicitly refers to God as Creator. These initial reflections exemplify the approach that will characterize Merton's methodology throughout these conferences—making connections with later scriptural passages, as well as ecclesial texts and practices, that will provide commentary on and amplification of the original material in Genesis, and inviting his audience to consider the personal, experiential implications of the word of God. He is interested less in objective exegesis, though he does not neglect this dimension, than in exploring the biblical text as a resource for spiritual formation.

The discussion of the second creation account (2:4b–25), while somewhat more circumstantial, omits completely any account of the creation of Adam—perhaps considered so well-known to his audience that it needs no explicit attention. Instead Merton discusses at some length the setting in paradise, a garden that is the oriental image of perfection, touching on commentators' various suppositions, both literal and figurative, as to its location, and likening the Genesis presentation of paradise as the scene of intimate encounter with God to the traditional perception of the “appropriateness of gardens and woods for contemplation” (5)—again giving a spiritual and monastic nuance (one very meaningful to himself personally<sup>10</sup>) to the scriptural detail. Mention in the text

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substantially during the five weeks of the fall vacation in 1954 (see Merton's journal entry for November 23, 1959 [Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 348]), though not published until more than six years later. It includes Merton's most extensive discussion of the spiritual and theological significance of the early chapters of Genesis. In a journal entry for February 1, 1959, Merton wrote: “After dinner . . . thought of finally writing up some of the material on Genesis. This will have to be done, but when?” (Merton, *Search for Solitude*, 254). It is likely that this is a reference to *The New Man*, which he was revising for publication at the time of his November journal entry, rather than to the novitiate conference notes, for which there is no evidence of any further work.

10. The symbolism of paradise, its loss in the fall and its recovery through the death and resurrection of Christ, is one of the most central and powerful elements in Merton's spiritual teaching; see for example Merton, *New Seeds*, 290–91, where he describes the opening chapters of Genesis as “a poetic and symbolic revelation, a completely *true*, though not literal, revelation of God's view of the universe and of His intentions for man. The point of these beautiful chapters is that God made the world as a garden in which He himself took delight. He made man and gave to man the task of sharing in His own divine care for created things.” For an overview of this theme, see O'Connell, “Paradise,” in Shannon et al., *Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, 349–51, and in

of “every kind of tree” (6) leads to citations of various passages on trees elsewhere in the Bible, the association of trees with the fruit of wisdom, and especially to the trees of life found in the New Jerusalem in the final book of the Bible. More particularly he notes Saint Augustine’s comment that the tree of life (associated with Christ himself) feeds the spirit with the mystery of divine presence as the other trees feed the body with their fruit, and then turns to the meaning of the tree of knowledge, an image of profound significance for Merton’s spiritual teaching on the true and false self.<sup>11</sup> Following Saint Bernard,<sup>12</sup> he sees the fruit of the tree of knowledge as the source of division, destroying the unitive knowledge of the good by providing an experiential knowledge of evil, and so bringing about the loss of an intuitive awareness of reality through love, introducing the illusion of autonomy and the spurious perception of the self as independent arbiter of what is good and evil, and leading human beings to become in effect one’s own (false) god,<sup>13</sup> as the serpent had insidiously promised. Merton will expand on this insight in his discussion of the fall in the following chapter, but first he touches on the four rivers of paradise, two real and two legendary and thus perhaps symbolic, and then on Adam’s naming of the beasts,<sup>14</sup> with its profound implications for “the mystery of language: ‘What man calls each thing, that it is’”; in the face of the “modern devaluation of language,” he proposes that “Trappists above all should have respect for the value of words” (12)—precisely because of their tradition of not using them promiscuously. Finally he considers the creation of Eve from the side of Adam, who is described in the Greek of the Septuagint and in the writings of Saint Bernard as being

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more detail, O’Connell, “Awakening in Eden.”

11. See for example Merton, *Inner Experience*, 112: “we notice a deep symbolic wisdom in Patristic interpretations of the story of the Fall in Genesis. This indeed is the forbidden tree: this tree of self, which grows in the middle of Paradise, but which we ourselves are not supposed to see or notice. All the other trees are there, and they refresh us with their fruits. Of them we can be aware, and they are there to be enjoyed for the love of God. But if we become aware of ourselves, turn back too much upon ourselves, and seek to rest in ourselves, then we take the fruit that was forbidden us: we become ‘as gods, knowing good and evil,’ for we find division within ourselves and are cut off from external reality at the same time.”

12. See Merton, *New Man*, 104–12; and Merton, *Spirit of Simplicity*, 92–93, 106–7.

13. Merton repeatedly returns to this central insight throughout his writings. See for example Merton, *Disputed Questions*, 100: “the fundamental temptation, the one to which Adam owes his fall, is the temptation to be ‘like unto God.’”

14. See Merton, *New Man*, 81–86.

in ecstasy; the story reflects the equality of man and woman, the foundations of the family, and above all the mystery of love, a reflection of the mystery of divine, Trinitarian love and the foundation of all the nuptial imagery for the mutual love of God and humanity throughout the rest of the Bible, climaxing in the image of the New Jerusalem “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2) in the final chapters of the book of Revelation.

The discussion of the fall<sup>15</sup> that follows is probably the most powerful section in this entire set of notes, expanding upon what had already been said of the tree of knowledge. Prompted by the serpent, the diabolic agent of division, the fall is described by Merton as entailing a loss of authentic relationship with God, with creation, and with one’s own genuine self. It is the reduction of illumination to the light of one’s own mind, the pursuit of superficial desires as illusory sources of meaning and fulfillment, a substitution of self for God as the center of life. The inevitable result is self-deception and frustration, as the world refuses to conform to one’s own demands and fantasies. Merton sees in “the nakedness . . . of which they are afraid” an awareness of “their own nothingness, their helplessness, their frailty, their propensity to fall into folly and death,” and that “the knowledge of their nakedness is the knowledge of their conflict, of the division that is in them between a flesh that can overwhelm the spirit and a spirit which struggles vainly to control the flesh”; this results in a profound ambivalence toward their own bodies, an alienation between spirit and flesh that “keeps them convinced of their ‘nothingness’” (15). God is considered as a rival, the destroyer of (false) projections. Creation is no longer a place to encounter God but somewhere to hide from God, no longer a sign of divine love and care but something to be controlled, exploited, and feared as a threat. Likewise the inner self is no longer perceived as a manifestation of the divine image and likeness but as an abyss of uncontrollable and unrealizable desires and passions. Yet, Merton emphasizes, “Nothing has changed but man, who now sees only creatures, mirrors of his own desires and interior states, instead of going through their transparency to see the infinite reality of God” (16). But set in the larger context of the biblical revelation as a whole, Merton maintains that the story of the fall is ultimately one of hope in the divine

15. Merton repeatedly discusses the fall and its consequences throughout his writings; see in particular the chapter titled “Spirit in Bondage,” in Merton, *New Man* (99–128); for an overview, see O’Connell, “Fall,” in *Merton Encyclopedia*, 153–54.

mercy,<sup>16</sup> the intimation of a deeper truth than sin and punishment, a promise to fallen humanity that wisdom ultimately overcomes malice. He finds in God's words to Adam and Eve an anticipation of the good news of redemption, the traditional "protoevangelium" that interprets the "seed" of the woman in conflict with the serpent as ultimately to be recognized as Christ himself.

The immediate consequence, however, is the further extension of the power of evil as presented in the Cain and Abel story. But Merton first calls attention to the haiku-like gnomic pronouncement of Eve that it is "through God" that she has borne a son, an expression of her "humility and wisdom" (18) that certainly suggests a process of maturing that she has undergone since the expulsion from paradise. The contrast between Cain and Abel is presented by Merton as the first instance of the divine favor falling on the younger, the weaker, the less significant in worldly terms. In sacrificing the fruit of his own toil, Merton suggests, Cain may be asserting his sense of his own self-sufficiency; in his anger at being rejected he reflects a magical rather than a truly religious attitude, an expectation that the correct performance of certain ritual actions "should have *obliged* God to be favorable" (19)—an expectation that God can be controlled. Abel's sacrifice on the other hand is the gift of a life that is first God's gift to him, a free act of love, a disinterested expression of his purity of heart. Yet the Lord has not abandoned Cain but still "speaks in the intimacy of his heart" (19), reminding him that he is free not to give in to selfish impulses. Merton suggests that the situation poses a test as to whether actual sin will be added to original sin—a test which of course Cain fails spectacularly, in his murder of his brother and in his arrogant and contemptuous response to God's question "where is thy brother?" (in which Merton hears an echo of the earlier question "Adam, where art thou?"): Cain's response implies a conscious attempt to usurp the divine prerogative over life and death and over one's own destiny. But even here, Merton finds evidence of divine condescension: as Cain's attitude turns from pride to despair, an existential awareness of his own estrangement from others and alienation from himself, the Lord's protection is given to him.

As he does when discussing the first creation account, so here as well Merton cites later scriptural references to Cain and Abel that develop the foundational story further, particularly the "magnificent passage" in

16. See the references to the "happy fault" (*felix culpa*) of Adam in Merton, *New Man*, 95, 245.



Hebrews 12 in which he discovers the “idea of Abel entering by the sacrifice of his life into the eternal and immovable riches of God’s mercy, and Cain by his crime being cast out into the shifting, unstable, unsubstantial desert of time, to end in nothingness” (22). Likewise, after a brief look at some of the descendants of Cain, particularly the “tough-guy” warrior figure Lamech, with his boastful proclamation of seventy-seven-fold vengeance (contrasted by Merton with Christ’s command to forgive a like number of times in Matthew 18), the line of Seth is traced to the mysterious figure of Enoch, whose reappearance elsewhere in the Scriptures and even in the apocryphal books in which he is the central figure is witness to the fascination he continued to exert to the very end of the biblical era.

After briefly considering the various hypotheses as to the identities of the “sons of God” and “daughters of men” whose coupling exemplified the corruption and degeneration of humanity that led up to the deluge, Merton recounts the story of Noe (Noah) in some detail, including explicit references to both the Priestly and Yahwist contributions to the final text; a verse-by-verse exegesis of 7:17–24; the linking of Noe’s climactic sacrifice of thanksgiving with God’s “alliance” (covenant) with all creation, the renewed promise of fertility, and the reiterated command to “increase and multiply”; and once again an extensive examination of the ways later texts of both Old and New Testaments have further elaborated the spiritual significance of the flood story in various ways, whether eschatological (Matt 24), ethical (Heb 11), or sacramental (1 Peter 3). Particularly noteworthy is Merton’s “contemplative” reading of the scene in the ark as a kind of cosmic dark-night experience, in which “*all life is gathered around Noe in the darkness of the ark, where they have gone by the command of God . . . all life, hidden in the ark with Noe, is abandoned to the mercy of God in complete darkness; God Himself has shut the door from the outside, emphasizing the fact that His mercy and Providence have shut them in, and they depend entirely on Him,*” eventually emerging, purified and renewed, from this immersion in chaos into a new creation (29). Merton articulates in this context the important exegetical principle that “the spiritual truth of the narrative is first of all contained in the *literal* meaning” (30), not something extrinsic to it (as was frequently the case in the fanciful allegorical applications devised in much patristic biblical commentary). Thus the personal appropriation of the message of the flood story that Merton proposes to his audience is discovered through prayerful reflection on the text itself, a characteristically monastic way to respond to the word of God:

Abandonment to the mercy and providence of God is an essential part of our penance, our transformation. God is the One Who must transform all. Our function is to let Him do so, and to rest in the night of faith with “all life,” gathered in the mystery of life into which we withdraw, leaving God to work what we do not know. We are content to “be” and God works. {In the} mystery of silence, abandonment, faith, hope, rest, humility, {we are} *waiting* for God. Waiting is of the very essence of penance—patience, remaining enclosed, silent, in hope. (31)

Likewise Noe’s sacrifice, made not on his own initiative but at the time and in the manner designated by the Lord, is a reminder that in order for genuine fruitfulness, true creativity to develop, “we must wait God’s time, the right day, the day appointed by Him. Then, at His command, we come forth and produce—but not before. Our sacrifice is then offered in the days of fertility, not in the days of darkness, as a recognition that God has done the work” (31) and that true creativity depends on and flows from a relationship of intimacy with God and a complete reliance on divine mercy and grace.

This “prehistory” section of Genesis reaches its climax with the story of the tower of Babel,<sup>17</sup> another manifestation of the human “desire to be equal to God” (35) that recurs in different forms following its initial appearance as the cause of the fall, the essence of original sin. The figure of Nemrod (Nimrod), descendant of Cham (Ham), another “tough guy, self-sufficient, strong in human means” (34), founder of Babylon, archetypal City of Man from Genesis to Revelation, prepares the ground for the building of the tower. Merton draws on Augustine’s distinction between the two cities: Babylon and Jerusalem—the City of Man, built on *cupiditas* and exhibiting a pretense of unity, and the City of God, motivated by *caritas* and forming authentic community.<sup>18</sup> The tower, constructed as an expression of pride in human strength, is therefore inevitably destined to fall, a victim of its own illusions, above all the illusion that its builders are truly able to comprehend one another, that their words are vehicles of genuine communication. In a rare contemporary reference, Merton

17. See Merton’s verse play, *The Tower of Babel* (first published in 1955), in Merton, *Collected Poems* 247–73; for an overview, see O’Connell, “*Tower of Babel*,” in *Merton Encyclopedia*, 490–91.

18. In *Tower of Babel* (Merton, *Collected Poems*, 247–48), Merton uses as an epigraph the passage on the two cities and their respective types of love from Augustine’s *City of God* (14.28); in these conference notes, he cites the similar passage from Augustine’s *Commentary on Psalm 64* (34–35).

compares Babel to his former home, New York City.<sup>19</sup> He remarks: “There is something very American about the Tower of Babel—an underlying false optimism based on a very fragile unity, an appearance of having one mind and one heart—{but} only an appearance. Men {are} united by pride and self-interest; they hold together as long as there is prosperity” (35)—but hardship reveals the fault lines that were already there. Merton brings this section of his conferences to a close by contrasting this earthly city with “the monastic ‘city’ built in the presence of God,” whose “foundation is humility” (36), a participation in “the heavenly Jerusalem” described in its fullness in the final chapters of the book of Revelation, but already established at Pentecost with its “gift of tongues to heal the division caused at Babel and proclaim {the} *wonderful works of God*” (36). This, Merton suggests, is the ultimate purpose that draws people to the monastery—to witness to the eschatological reality of authentic communion with God and with others through the grace of God, in the midst of the conflict and disunity symbolized by the story of the tower and its disintegration.

Before beginning his chapter-by-chapter discussion of Abraham, whom he calls “the Father of the People of God, one of the most monumental figures in the Old Testament” (36), Merton provides a brief overview, following the identification of Jesus as “Son of David, Son of Abraham” in the very first verse of Matthew’s Gospel, of the “*Importance of Abraham in the New Testament*” (36–37), noting the distinction between physical and spiritual descent from Abraham made in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt 3:9); citing Jesus’ parable of the eschatological banquet in which Abraham and the patriarchs share the feast with righteous Gentiles, exemplified by the centurion whose faith in the healing power of Jesus (Matt 8:5–13) reflects that “by which Abraham was able to believe in God’s promises and hope against hope”; referencing Paul’s teaching in Romans 4 on the justification that comes through faith “not just in the promise made to Abraham but *in Christ as the fulfillment of that promise*” (38), and that is brought to completion (Merton remarks in a distinctly noncumenical tone) by the works of charity (Gal 5:6); and

19. See the similar perspective in part 6 of Merton’s long poem “Figures for an Apocalypse” (1947), titled “In the Ruins of New York” (Merton, *Collected Poems*, 143–46), in which he describes the aftermath of apparent atomic warfare: “How are they down, how have they fallen down / Those great strong towers of ice and steel, / And melted by what terror and what miracle? . . . / The ashes of the leveled towers still curl with tufts of smoke” (ll.19–21, 32).

discussing Christ's debate in chapter 8 of John's Gospel with those who renounce their own identity as children of Abraham by rejecting the One who is not simply the son of Abraham but the son of God. Thus Merton takes pains to situate the Abraham story as it is told in Genesis within the broader context of the significance of that story in relation to the history of salvation that reaches its fulfillment in the person and work of Christ.

This same strategy is immediately in evidence once again in Merton's comments on the very first mention of Abraham in Genesis, his removal from Ur to Haran that is the initial stage of his journey to Canaan (11:31), a detail cited by Stephen in his sermon in Acts 7 and explicitly mentioned in the commendatory prayer for the dying in the Cistercian *Ritual*, which asks that the soul be liberated as Abraham was liberated from Ur, as well as in the prayer for travelers, the *Itinerarium*, which likens the journey to be made to that of Abraham from Ur (40), identified by Merton as "the center of the highest civilization at this time" (40), so that Abraham's withdrawal from what is secure and familiar can be likened as well to what Saint Benedict called for in his *Rule*. The call of Abraham as related in the following chapter is presented specifically as a paradigm for the vocation of religious life, which is also a journey into the unknown, and in fact it provides a pattern for every authentic Christian life, which has the apostolic task of witnessing to and working for the reunification of divided humanity, begun with the call of Abraham and completed in the death and resurrection of Christ. Implicitly looking ahead to Abraham's encounter with the three travelers in chapter 18, Merton proposes that the "heart of this mystery of travelling is that God Himself is hidden in those He calls and sends; it is He, in them, Who seeks to bring back to unity the scattered family of man; hence the mystery of the stranger, of hospitality, the guest {as} an 'angel' or messenger of God" (42), a mystery obscured in contemporary society where the stranger is typically regarded either as a consumer, a potential customer, or else as a potential threat. It is once again evident here that Merton's consistent intention is to highlight the relevance of the scriptural texts for the lives of his novitiate audience in particular and for the church, the People of God, as a whole.

Continuing with the remainder of chapter 12, Merton considers the blessings, both temporal and spiritual, that are connected with the promise made to Abram, above all that "the knowledge of the true God was to be communicated to the whole world by the seed of Abraham" (44), and the journey from Haran to Sichem (Shechem) and into Egypt, where the fulfillment of the promise is threatened by the attraction of Pharaoh

to Sarai. The separation of Abram and Lot in the following chapter is marked by Lot's choice of the superficially attractive site of the Jordan valley around Sodom, whereas Abram is divinely directed to go and dwell in the place God has chosen. Again Merton sees the application to the life of the disciple: "Lot just looked straight ahead to the Jordan valley and went to dwell there among others. With the saints it is different—they suddenly awake and find that all around them in every direction has been given to them by God. {An} application of the two cases to the spiritual life {can be made}: Lot {has} an ordinary spirituality that gets nowhere, Abram a spirituality guided by God, on an entirely different level" (46). Chapter 14 tells the story of Abram's rescue of Lot, which Merton recognizes as an insertion that serves to connect Abram with Jerusalem, represented by the mysterious figure of Melchisedec, "King of Salem (Jerusalem—City of Peace) . . . priest of the most High God" (47), who offers a sacrifice of bread and wine and blesses Abram, an encounter that is already seen to have profound messianic significance in Psalm 109[110] and in Hebrews 7 is interpreted as anticipating the appearance of the true King of Justice (*tsedeq*) and King of Peace, the unique High Priest in the Order of Melchisedec.

The discussion of chapter 15, the renewal of the promise that contains the key declaration of Abram's faith being "*reputed unto justice*" (49) (or reckoned to him as righteousness), notes his surrender of intellect, will, and life itself to God and God's plan. The words "pact" and "contract" are used by Merton here (49), but surprisingly he does not refer to this encounter as a covenant (or "alliance," the favored term at the time of writing), reserving this for the discussion of chapter 17 where it is again explicitly found in the text (as it is in vs. 18 here). Despite the Lord's reassurance, the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, the focus of Merton's comments here is largely on the darker elements of the episode: the birds of prey attacking the ritually split carcasses are interpreted as "signify[ing] the enemies of Abraham and his sons" (49) and foreboding the exile and oppression in Egypt to come that the Lord now predicts.

Merton actually gives considerably more attention to the chapter that follows—the conflict between Agar (Hagar), who flaunts her fertility after becoming pregnant with Ishmael, and Sarai, whose resentment of her slave leads her to "beat her so much that Agar fled into the desert" (50), which of course for Merton is the locus par excellence for the contemplative experience of the presence of the living God, as Agar discovers

in the apparition of the Angel of the Lord, the “Mal’akh Yahweh.” The question posed to her—“Where are you coming from, whither are you going”—is seen by Merton as one with universal application: “the Lord speaks to us and immediately brings us face to face with the actual reality of our life, not in a static way, but dynamically, a sudden consciousness of our life in its ‘becoming,’ its tending, its development, its meaning, its value. This {is} typical of true religious experience” (50–51). The subsequent directive to return prompts both the general observation that “[w]e cannot find our reality, our true self, our place in the world, by merely running away aimlessly from suffering and persecution,” and a specific recognition that even though Agar’s child is not the child of the promise he, and she, still have an integral place in the divine plan. Merton finds in Agar’s simple statement “I have seen Him Who sees me” (an explanation of her name for God: El Roi, “God sees”) “a perfect expression of the deepest experience of God, an expression of the soul’s meeting with His infinite Truth in mystery, {with an} emphasis on the concreteness, the personality of God” (51) that corresponds to the focus on the divine presence found in Saint Benedict’s *Rule*. It is quite remarkable that Merton finds in this relatively minor incident in the Abraham story evidence for Genesis being “one of the great source books for Christian mystical theology” (52).

The definitive identification of the child of promise with the offspring of Abram and Sarai (now to be known as Abraham—“Father of multitudes”—and Sara) comes in chapter 17, the covenant of circumcision, in which, as Merton circumspectly notes, the organ of the propagation of the race is consecrated to God, a symbol that contrasts with pagan fertility rites, a visible sign of the new peoplehood that continues until this communal identity is no longer based on physical kinship, already foretold in chapter 4 of Jeremias (Jeremiah) and effected by the coming of Christ and the institution of baptism. Once again Merton calls the attention of his audience to the importance of a personal appropriation of the message of the passage. The gradual unfolding of the meaning and accomplishment of the promise first given at the very beginning of the Abraham story provides a pattern for Christian spiritual growth:

So too in our own lives, God’s plan and His promises are fulfilled by degrees. He subjects us to a long preparation, gradually revealing to us the magnitude of His gift (sanctity—salvation) and the greatness of Him Who gives it to us. The longer and more completely this preparation goes on, the better and holier

we will be for it. We should learn seriously to see our own lives in the light of Abraham's life—the child of the promise, Christ, is to be manifested in us. We already possess Him in hope, from the baptismal font, but our life is a gradual growth to the clear vision of Him living in us. (53)

Likewise the command “*Walk in my presence and be perfect*” (17:1) is to be understood not merely as pertaining to the practice of piety and virtue, the pursuit of moral perfection, but as a transformation brought about by the intimate personal experience of the divine presence, which “is not known except by love. Love gives us the contact by which we are *aware of His sanctity and power*” (54). Abraham's relationship with God becomes a kind of template for all those who have become children of Abraham through Christ, who is “the child of the promise” in the full sense, the perfect realization of the redemptive process set in motion with the conception and then the birth of Isaac (whose name, meaning “laughter,” is recognized as connoting “a very human reaction to wonder and joy . . . the laughter of a mystical liberation” [56–57]).

Before the actual birth of Isaac, of course, comes the apparition of the three mysterious figures at Abraham's encampment by the terebinth of Mambre (Mamre) and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that follows, which Merton calls “one of the most impressive passages in Genesis,” with its stark drama, the suspense of Abraham's (ultimately fruitless) intercession and its foreshadowing of both the definitive appearance of God in space and time through the incarnation and of the definitive eschatological reckoning at the final judgment. But Abraham's response to this unprecedented event is completely consistent with his manner of behaving in much more ordinary circumstances, and as such is exemplary for others, monks in particular. “Abraham's hospitality, offered in a spirit of faith, is a classic example of supernatural charity which attains directly to God in and through the neighbor” (59). His care for his guests is simply an expression of his habitual sensitivity to all those he encounters. “The lesson in all this is the incomparable solicitude and politeness and piety of Abraham toward the Lord in all this—his love of God needs no higher expression, ordinarily, than the perfect performance of the customary duties practiced among his own people” (60). Even the extraordinary conversation in which Abraham bargains for the survival of the city, in which “the tone of confident pleading and reproachfulness mingles with respect” (62), is consistent with the rapport which had been established as soon as the visitors appeared. Merton finds the same

attitude “of *respect coupled with realism*” rather than “a lot of grandiose and dramatic considerations without foundation in the affections of the heart” to be characteristic of Benedictine spirituality (60–61), in which each visitor is received as Christ, and the duty “to intercede for sinners” is an integral part of “our own vocation” (62). At the same time, the situation of Lot in the midst of the arrogance, lust, and sacrilegious insolence of the Sodomites, the monstrous inverse of Abraham’s hospitality, is a lesson in the necessity for monastic detachment:

We must certainly work and live ordinary lives . . . but in such a way that we are completely detached and ready to let go of what we have at any moment. . . . Our “contemplative” life is not a matter of sitting in the middle of Sodom thinking about divine things. It is a going forth from this world which passes away to seek and find God we know not where. While we are in this life, we continue to work and to live as other people do—without of course the evil that they do!—but we are living in heaven . . . by hope, and we are ready to leave all things behind at a moment’s notice in order to follow Christ wherever He may lead us. (64–65)

After a brief look at chapter 20—which Merton rightly recognizes as a somewhat more morally elevated doublet of the Yahwist story of Abraham, Sara, and Pharaoh (Abimilech in this version) in chapter 12 (the only time in these conferences a passage is explicitly attributed to the Elohist source)—he reaches chapter 21, the birth of Isaac, whose name once again is perceived as symbolic, as Sara is filled with laughter, no longer the skeptical laughter of her reaction to hearing the prophecy of the visitor at Mambre (18:12), but a “pure cry of joy” that “has reached the mystical quality of the laughter of Abraham” (66). It is, Merton suggests, the same joy experienced at another, greater birth that can also be seen as fulfilling the promise to Abraham, “the quiet, supernal laughter we feel in our hearts on Christmas night . . . reproduced more perfectly in the simple hearts of the shepherds,” expressed by the angels in “their song of joy . . . on a higher and more eminent level. It is the laughter of the created world which wakes up to discover that its God and Creator has become part of it, has taken flesh and lives in the midst of the works of His own hands!” (66–67). This scene of exultation, however, is immediately juxtaposed with the passage on the casting out of Agar and Ishmael, which Merton characterizes as a “deeply touching narrative” (67) that is in its own way a story of salvation, of providential care



for the one whose rejection was nevertheless part of the working out of the divine plan. Merton goes on to reflect on the Pauline application of this story in Romans and Galatians—in which the literal descendents of Isaac are ironically identified with Ishmael, and the apparently excluded Gentiles with Isaac—as well as on the interpretation of the passage by John of the Cross, in which the desire for “carnal” liberty, for temporal success (“prelacy”!) and worldly satisfactions, is in fact an enslavement that precludes true sonship and authentic freedom.

The climactic, though not quite the final, episode in the saga of Abraham is of course the sacrifice of Isaac, which Merton calls “the high point of the book of Genesis, one of the most important passages of the Old Testament and one of the keys to the meaning of Christian revelation” (69), and to which he devotes the most detailed discussion of his entire text. He repeatedly emphasizes that it is the story not only of Abraham’s total loyalty and obedience to God but of a faith in God’s promise even in the face of apparently incomprehensible contradiction, including an awareness that human sacrifice is itself an abomination to God, “a mark of pagan degeneracy” (70). Abraham’s willingness to follow God’s instructions without question, “believing that this is the way to the fulfillment of the promise, *believing firmly that Isaac will not be lost to him but will somehow be recovered*” (69–70), even though he cannot understand how this can be so, is an expression of total self-surrender, submission of both will and mind, a journey into the darkness of unknowing, the darkest of the dark nights of the soul. He lets go of what is most precious to him in all creation; he chooses God over God’s own greatest gift.<sup>20</sup>

As such, Merton tells his audience, the “application of this to us is obvious.” Abraham is the model par excellence of “the soul perfectly consecrated to God,” whose life of fidelity ultimately must go beyond the trust that marked its earlier stages when he steadfastly believed, despite his age and that of his wife, that God would honor his pledge to make of him a great nation. Merton clearly conceives of this trial as exemplifying that final death to self that leads to union with God, “the greatest trial, when *all that has been acquired* through the grace and mercy of God

20. See Merton’s comments on Abraham in *Inner Experience*, 29: “The religion of Abraham indeed was primitive, and it hovered, for a terrible moment, over the abyss of human sacrifice. Yet Abraham walked with God in simplicity and peace, and the example of his faith (precisely in the case of Isaac) furnished material for the meditations of the most sophisticated religious thinker of the last century, the father of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard” (a reference to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*).

must also be sacrificed. We must rise above it to God alone—in doing so, however, *we recover all*. In losing all we gain all, and we must have Abraham’s faith and courage to do this. Only then can God fully manifest Himself in our lives, in the great darkness like that which came upon Abraham” (70).

Such a reading of the Abraham and Isaac story certainly seems incompatible with the traditional typological reading that Merton also provides, in which the sacrificial rite involving father and son is seen as foreshadowing the sacrificial death of Christ the Son in total acceptance of the will of his Father; and on a strictly logical level it is evident that they cannot be reconciled. But this divergence provides a salutary warning against constructing a simplistic one-to-one correspondence between type and antitype—after all the ascent of Moriah has a quite different outcome from the ascent of Calvary: a symbolic death and rebirth should not be equated with actual death and resurrection, which is redemptive in a way that the sacrifice of Isaac, even if carried out, could never have been. The value of viewing the two events in tandem, Merton suggests, is to allow them to cast light on one another: to discover in Abraham’s seemingly impossible commitment of unconditional love at once for his God and for his child some intimation of the ultimately incomprehensible mystery of the Father’s love for his Son that nevertheless gives him up to a full participation in the human lot of limitation, rejection, suffering, mortality—a sign of the divine compassion (however that be understood) for a broken world that is made whole only by being brought, through Christ, into the experience of God himself. As Merton says, “as a manifestation of the loving mercy hidden in the bosom of the Father, this passage is scarcely surpassed by any other in the Bible except the great manifestations in the New Testament: the Baptism of Jesus, the Transfiguration, Calvary and the Resurrection” (70).

Merton then develops both of these perspectives through a phrase-by-phrase commentary on the text of the chapter, which includes such traditional elements as associating the wood for the sacrifice carried by Isaac with the cross, along with some applications that are apparently original with Merton, as when he wonders if it might be “permissible to push this a little far” and liken the fire carried by Abraham to the Holy Spirit, who can be described as “fire that consumed the Victim on Calvary” (73–74); or the attractive suggestion that Abraham’s words to Isaac that God will provide the victim might be considered as true not only in the immediate context of the ram caught in the bushes but in the

accommodated sense of the Lamb of God whose life is a sacrificial offering for not just a single individual but for the entire world, so that “we can see in the mystery of Abraham and Isaac the longing of the heavenly Father for sinners, His prodigal sons, and His desire to offer even His only-begotten Son to recover them.” Here, Merton declares, is “depth beyond depth of mystery” (73). He concludes by finding in Abraham’s willingness to leave “the destiny of the chosen people entirely in the hands of God” and “to act in all humility as a perfectly obedient instrument of the divine will” a model for a religious life of interior poverty that recognizes and accepts the inadequacy of one’s own limited perspectives, and of unquestioning obedience that trusts God’s will is being realized even when “*human standards of judgement and comparison*” (75) seem to indicate otherwise.

Except for a brief look at the death and burial of Sara in the following chapter, featuring a rather juridical but “very lively” account from the “levitical” author of Abraham’s bargaining for a burial place, the first property in the promised land actually owned by the patriarchs, Merton’s discussion of the first of these patriarchs is now virtually complete. (He does not explicitly mention Abraham’s own death, related in chapter 25.) Abraham does make an appearance in chapter 24, but only to set in motion the lovely story of the journey of his servant back to the “old country” to find a wife for Isaac, which is clearly a favorite passage for Merton, who refers to the “beauty and simplicity” of the narrative (76), the “charm and reality” of the scene (77). He points out the mystery of journeys such as this, which result in providential encounters and witness to a longing for unity and peace in God through union with other people, and refers as well to “the mystery of hospitality” (77) already seen in the story of Abraham and his guests and now displayed by the family of Rebecca, Abraham’s kinsmen. Merton stresses once again the important exegetical principle of the “*spiritual value of the simple literal sense*” (78) as exemplified in this narrative, in which key spiritual insights are intrinsic to the story itself, not just fanciful applications devised by an inventive commentator.

Having said this, however, Merton immediately goes on to present a rather extensive section on “REBECCA AND ISAAC IN THE FATHERS” (78–84), in which the ingenious allegorical interpretations of Origen and Ambrose have only the most tenuous connection to the literal sense but nevertheless possess a spiritual wisdom of their own that Merton is not willing simply to exclude from his own commentary. Building on the

identification of Isaac as a “type” of Christ, even a “sacrament” of Christ for Abraham in that he is a visible sign of a still invisible reality, Origen then turns to the scene of Rebecca at the well as an image of the patient, simple soul who comes to draw sustenance from the “well” of Scripture, the living water given by Christ to the Samaritan woman in John 4 and identified with the Holy Spirit (in John 7:37–39), and who at the right time encounters the servant who has come to reveal Christ’s desire to espouse her to himself. Merton extends this “sacramental” perspective to apply to the experience of his novices, suggesting that “our monastery, the community, the abbot, the brethren” can and should function as Isaac does for Abraham, as signs of Christ, “capable of being vehicles and containers of grace” (78). For Ambrose, the story of the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca serves as the occasion for developing “a brief treatise on mystical theology” in which “the union of Christ with the Church and . . . of the Word with the individual soul” (80) is described in four successive stages, drawing not from the Genesis text itself but from the Song of Songs. The first degree identifies the “kiss of the mouth” (Song 1:1) with the enlightenment of wisdom, and the ointments of the following verse with the experiential perception of divine goodness and mercy through the spiritual senses; in the second degree the soul enters into the inner chamber of the Word (the “*cubiculum*”) and recognizes both her own radical insufficiency and her intrinsic dignity and potential for union with the Word, now experienced as absent and the object of her search; the third degree is that of mystical rest and silence, after encountering the Word unexpectedly; the fourth and final degree, when “I sleep and my heart wakes” (Song 5:2), is the full conformity of wills in spiritual marriage, in which the soul becomes fecund, spiritually fruitful, and Christ is “placed on the soul like a ‘seal’” (Song 8:6) signifying “perfect transformation” (84).

Compared with his father and his son, of course, Isaac receives relatively little attention in Genesis, at least as a principal character, so these patristic amplifications of this love story (in which the initiative is still not his own) do go some way to redress the balance. The brief details of his activities found in chapter 26—another iteration of the patriarch and his wife motif (in which Abimelech is now attracted to Rebecca rather than Sara), the conflict with the Philistines over wells, eventually resolved, the renewal of the promise made to his father and the construction of an altar at Bersabee (Beersheba), and the dissatisfaction of the parents at their son Esau’s marriages to local women—are all mentioned by Merton, but with little interpretive comment.