

# Does the Bible Suffice as the Source of Faith<sup>1</sup>

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A Dominican who is at the same time an exegete tends to suffer from a lingering bad conscience which on days like this can become quite acutely painful. As a Dominican he should follow and esteem the teaching of St Thomas, but in actual fact his memories of the illustrious friar are of a friendly voice which he listened to once upon a time in his youth. Now other voices speak to him in the rough violent language of the Canaan he has entered, which make, I'm afraid, extensive demands on his thinking.

In order to relieve my conscience I will start off, at least, in the direction of Thomism and, true to the scholastic way of doing things, begin with the *status quaestionis*. We begin then by trying to clarify the sentence we have taken as our theme.

1. By 'bible' I mean the complete collection of writings which have been recognised by Christian communities as sacred and canonical, and not just particular parts of the Bible like the gospels or St Paul's epistles.

2. By 'faith' I mean not a particular attitude of mind or way of life, but a definite theological interpretation of the world and mankind which can be expressed in a confession of faith or a creed. Scholastic theology uses the expression *fides quae* and this is what I mean in distinction to *fides qua*: in other words, what I mean by 'faith' here is the notion of faith which turns up in 'that—' sentences, such as 'I believe that God created the world'.

3. The questions I am raising here only touch the edges of theology. Whether the faith which is obtained from the Bible is true or false is outside our present scope. All I want to ask is if it is possible to derive such a faith from the Bible by itself. It is like asking if you could build a house exclusively of bricks, leaving such considerations as whether it would be beautiful, or comfortable, severely alone. The question is quite simply this: Is the Bible that sort of thing out of which you could derive a faith without the aid of any other principles?

<sup>1</sup>The translation of a lecture given on the feast of St Thomas Aquinas, 1964, in Walberberg Priory before Evangelical and Catholic clergy and laity.

4. I have taken all my quotations from the works of non-Catholic writers. This is not because I want to elevate Protestant exegetes wholesale to the rank of doctors of the Church—a complaint that people sometimes make against us Catholic exegetes—but because in this connection they are less open to suspicion than Catholics who are bound from the start to maintain the insufficiency of the Bible.

A good Thomist will now go on, after the introductory remarks, to present his thesis. You will have noticed already that the question: 'Does the Bible suffice as the source of faith?' is being used rhetorically. The question is in fact a thesis which goes 'The Bible does not suffice as the source of faith'. Four arguments will support this thesis.

1. The first argument is in no sense new; it crops up constantly in controversy between Christians—often in a very crude and clumsy way, but that doesn't make it any the less true. It is based on the fact that the Bible does not hold itself out to be holy scripture. The Koran begins the first *sura*: 'This is the book in which there is no error: a signpost for the god-fearing'. The Koran advertises itself as holy scripture. This is not so in the Bible. It is true that in our editions of the Bible you can find the words on the first page: 'The holy bible containing the old and new testaments', but this title doesn't belong to the Bible: it has been introduced from somewhere else. From where? Clearly from the Christian body which regards the Bible as its holy book. It is only because the Bible is regarded within a community as its holy book, that it can be accepted as a holy book at all. If a person who hadn't the faintest idea of the Christian churches discovered, say, a new Dead Sea cave full of scrolls, it would be quite impossible for him there and then to start separating out those which were biblical from those which weren't. He would have to ask a Christian community, and according to the claims of the particular community he happened to ask, he will include Ecclesiasticus in the pile marked 'Bible' or not.<sup>2</sup>

It shouldn't be forgotten that we are speaking here about the whole Bible. It might well be thought that certain books authenticate themselves—if only because of the beauty and depth of their thoughts. But the Bible as Bible doesn't authenticate itself. Paradoxically, we often find that apocryphal, that is non-canonical writings claim to be holy scripture more often than biblical writings do. Compare, for instance, the book of Ezra with the Ezra apocalypse. But although this seems paradoxical, it is in actual fact just what we might expect. Apocryphal

<sup>2</sup>'Only the church can determine the extent and content of the canon of scripture', Hesse.—*Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie*, 1961, 326.

books are precisely those which were not accepted and authenticated as holy books by Christians—at least by the main body of Christians; so they had to try to authenticate themselves.

This leads to the conclusion: before you can accept the Bible as a whole in faith you must first have faith in the Church. Without a faith in the Church our faith in the scriptures is suspended in the air. He who takes his stand on the scriptures has already taken a stand on the Church—whatever Church it may be.

2. The second argument sets out from the accidental character in which so many of the books of the Bible came to be written. The Bible is not a manual of faith and morals. It doesn't set out to tell us what we ought to believe and how we should behave. Books came to be written because someone wanted to prove that Solomon was the legitimate king, because someone felt he had to try to explain the disaster of the exile to the bewildered faithful, because a slave had escaped, or even because somebody had gone and forgotten his coat. Much has remained unwritten. So Ernst Käsemann can write 'Only a few traces of the discussion which was going on in primitive Christianity has been left behind for us in the canon'.<sup>3</sup> This shouldn't really worry us unduly. We can derive some comfort from the teacher of philosophy who when asked 'what on earth will we do if somebody goes and discovers new writings from Plato', replied 'God preserve us from that!' We must be satisfied with the fact that only so much has been left to us, and be content with what we've got.

Much more ominous is another aspect of this accidental character of so much of the Bible. Important, sometimes even vital things, are only touched upon in passing, and this means that they are expressed in a somewhat blurred fashion. For example: I might say to you: 'God willing I shall be going off on Monday'. Now this remark besides conveying two uninteresting bits of information about my future plans (a journey, and when it will take place) also sneaks in at the same time an assertion of faith in the divine guidance of human fate. But this latter element was only incidental to the information I was conveying. This remark, you see, remains open and capable of further precision. A well-known example of this sort of thing is St Paul's treatment of the eucharist. Paul had certainly often celebrated the Lord's Supper, but he only came to write about it as the result of the unfortunate circumstance that it had given rise to impropriety in a community. If the community had behaved itself in an orderly fashion we would never have received the

<sup>3</sup>*Evangelische Theologie* 11 (1951/5) 17.

apostle's teaching about this most important of all the early Church's services. But even so his words are suggestive rather than explanatory. He simply takes a more comprehensive understanding for granted. The fact that most of the biblical writings were written to meet some actual difficulty rather than because of some principle or other, leaves much of the writing over essential matters uncertain and wide open to all sorts of conflicting interpretations. The Bible itself can't get rid of this indefiniteness—that remains the task of the interpretation which, as it were, defines from a position outside the Bible.

3. The third argument deals with a certain quality which we find in the scriptures and which, despite the fact that everybody recognises it, has been underestimated when talking about the use of scripture. I mean the simple fact that the Bible is an exceedingly difficult book; so difficult that one sometimes despairs of ever being able to understand it at all. You must forgive me if I tend to exaggerate this point a bit: exaggeration is after all a thoroughly reputable stylistic form in the Bible.

Let us try to get clear, first of all, what we mean by 'understand'. You understand words if when you hear them you can conjure up something like the same images and thoughts which caused the speaker to use these words. Such an understanding is a good deal more difficult than might appear at first sight. Obviously I am going to be understood if I shout at a Dominican to stop rattling his rosary. But as soon as a statement becomes more ambitious, misunderstandings appear on the scene. Anyone who has to give lectures comes across, sooner or later, the following experience. There sitting before him is the bloom of youth, all possessed of above-average intelligence and simply bursting with enthusiasm and willingness to understand. But if the lecturer gets hold of a copy of the notes which were taken in his class he can get quite a fright. 'Did I really say that!' If that can happen in the green wood amongst people of the same culture, the same background, the same language what will happen in the dry when the speaker and the listener are culturally miles apart?

To get another mention in of that great man whose feast we are celebrating today, let's take a look at thomistic studies. *Thomas semper formaliter locutus est*. He always thought out everything most carefully and expressed it very precisely—he also wrote an awful lot. You would have thought that he had managed to make himself understood for all time. But in spite of all this you sometimes get the impression from the lectures his disciples deliver that the whole thomist tradition has got St Thomas wrong on this or that point. Those who are somewhat less modest in their claims are even prepared to say that the whole thomist

tradition up to now is just one huge misunderstanding, and that what has been taken as the essential features of thomism is nothing but a caricature of it. It would not be fair to put these differences down to ineptitude or bad will; it's just that it is all so impossibly difficult to understand.

The background to the Bible is certainly remote. It was written in a very different world, in a very foreign language which most of us here, for instance, have only inadequately mastered, and in which only a few of the Bible writers have taken the trouble to write distinctly. What a job it is trying to understand! You will not be surprised to hear that differences between exegetes are no less frequent than those between the disciples of philosophers. A few examples will suffice to indicate what I am getting at. In the Hebrew language, as you know, every verb has two tenses which we call perfect and imperfect. All we can be sure about is that they have nothing to do with past and present. What they are really meant to express nobody really knows. Now that can lead to all kinds of difficulties. The verbs in Hebrew are quite the most important group of words; they appear in one of two forms whose meanings we don't understand. To add to the difficulty it is often far from certain what the words themselves actually mean. At the moment there is a controversy going on about that Old Testament word which we usually translate by 'covenant'. How is the translator going to get round that? Again biblical science is still unable to clear up many important factual matters. For some time we thought of the Old Testament prophets as out-and-out opponents of cultic worship; today a whole school of exegetes maintain that these same prophets were actually employed by the cultic authorities. In the New Testament it used to be taken for granted that Jesus taught that the Parousia was near at hand, and that the later Christians had watered down this expectation. Nowadays distinguished exegetes maintain that Jesus taught that in his own person the Parousia had already arrived. That is: the expectancy of an imminent coming was an idea that was only introduced later by the primitive community. In the first case it would be claimed that an impatient waiting for the Parousia would characterize true Christianity, in the second a community with the Saviour who had already come. Earlier it was the thing to say that John knew nothing of Christian sacraments, today it is claimed that he speaks about practically nothing else. No wonder my former teacher Père Benoit always began his lectures with *Posons les problèmes*—'Let us face up to the problems'. It is difficult to get at the meaning of scripture. Even experts who have spent

their lives studying the scriptures admit that there are many things that they just haven't understood, have yet to understand, or have ceased to understand, and that what they think they understand now could very well turn out to be obsolete in the future because of some general way of looking at the problem that they have failed to take into consideration.

How can such a difficult book serve as the source of the faith of a community? The community can't just go on waiting until the experts have cleared up all the difficulties. Of course, when it comes to that, the communities have never gone in for this sort of waiting. They have far fewer difficulties with the sacred texts than the professors have. They simply open the Bible and understand. But what sort of understanding have they got?; how can they be said to understand? Are they in some way cleverer than the professors, or are we to suppose that the Spirit which has left the professors in the lurch comes to their assistance?

There is a simpler explanation. The believer understands because of his previous understanding. He has from the start definite questions he wants to put, and he finds in the text the answers to these questions. Now that clears out of the way all sorts of difficulties. Not only that, but he is already clear about the sort of answers he will get from his questioning, and automatically understands the texts in the sense of these answers. So the Catholic Bible reader of days gone by didn't bother overmuch about the difficulty of being able to formulate precisely what the evangelists meant when they spoke of the Kingdom of God. He just automatically took it for granted that it meant the Church. The pattern of death, paradise, resurrection, and Christ's second coming fitted into a nice clear framework, and this framework would bring within its order the most complicated sayings of scripture.

Where does the believer, Catholic and non-Catholic, get this previous understanding from, which makes it so extraordinarily easy for him to understand the scriptures? Clearly from the instructions which he, as a member, gets from the community. Even if he had only received biblical instruction he would be faced not simply with the Bible as an objective something, but a Bible explained in a certain way.

In the past the Catholic hierarchy did not allow the simple believer to read the Bible. The theory was that it was too dangerous to put such a difficult book into the hands of the the uneducated. Nowadays we reject this sort of embargo on the Bible. At the same time we must try to understand that it was based on a more realistic view of the Bible than that of the reformers who maintained that the Bible could explain

itself. Our objections to this sort of embargo must be made from another standpoint. It is pathetic that the Church at that time had so little confidence in her own biblical understanding that she was unable to guide the faithful in their bible reading. The same applies today. It would still be irresponsible to thrust the Bible into the hands of the faithful without giving them some understanding for the Bible. Faced with the Bible alone, people are either just perplexed or start to understand it in all sorts of weird ways. Anybody who has any pastoral experience knows at first hand that stubborn character who reads into the Bible his own cranky ideas because he doesn't want to be guided by the previous understanding of his community.

The Bible is difficult to understand—it is extremely obscure; but obscure books are hardly suitable as the source from which we can draw a faith. They can only serve in this way when along with them there is handed on a definite understanding which is preserved in the communities which claim them as holy books. Of course, I don't want to claim that this previous understanding is necessarily correct. All that I can say with any certainty is that it is necessary. No community could get along without it.

4. We now come to the fourth argument. For the sake of clarity let us assume that the first three arguments have been disproved—the Bible is its own witness, it speaks plainly and clearly about the faith, and it is easy to understand. Good, now we can begin to see how little it can accomplish by itself.

There is a fairly widely held view which goes something like this: this or that is in the Bible, so it must be true. What the Bible says is without question the word of God. If the Bible should somewhere say that tyrants should be murdered, then, on the basis of divine authority, we are always bound to murder them. If on the other hand the Bible said that you cannot answer force with force that would be a valid argument for pacifism. This view is untenable, and no Church has ever consistently maintained it. Sometimes Protestant theologians drive this point home somewhat heftily. For instance, Professor Baumgärtel describes the Old Testament as 'an out-dated word'—it doesn't bind the Christian any longer.<sup>4</sup> According to P. Althaus: 'Protestant criticism of Rome cannot be made without a criticism of scripture as seen from the point of view of the gospel'.<sup>5</sup> That means that there are passages in scripture which are 'romish' and must therefore be rejected. Catholics

<sup>4</sup>*Theologische Literaturzeitung* 79/1954, 134.

<sup>5</sup>*Die Christliche Wahrheit* I, 213.

will not want to go that far; but we must remember that Catholics also make distinctions in estimating the value of biblical passages. That is not hard to prove.

Quite obviously, the early writers of the Bible believed that God had a body, or that he lived in a palace on the celestial mountain. It is quite clear that the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews believed that once a person has fallen from the faith he can never again receive grace. St Paul for some time was quite sure that the Lord would return to earth in his own life time. All these passages and others like them are not held by us as binding truths, despite the fact that they are in the Bible. Of course this does not mean that you find huddled together in the Bible true and false passages and that all you have to do is to sort them out—like sorting the good from the bad potatoes. A Catholic would not be able to subscribe to such a view. What I mean is that in *every* passage we must first of all find what is relevant, because it is embedded in material which is no longer relevant. After all hardly any statement of any importance that we make can be tied down to what it expressly says; there is always so much assumed and indirectly asserted at the same time. For example, take Psalm 6:

Turn thee O Lord and deliver my soul . . . for in the kingdom of death no man remembereth thee, and who will give thee thanks in the underworld?

This psalm is obviously saying that the person who has died is nothing more than dead: he is far from God and all life, and that goes for the religious person as well as for the scoundrel. Now we can't take that as divine truth. But these words express so much more than this shocking assertion. They assert, for example, that the religious person fears death because he thinks death separates him from God. To be united to God and to praise him seems to him to be the most wonderful thing in his life. He hasn't yet learned that even death itself cannot separate him from God, but he does know that it is dreadful to be separated from God.

To take another well-known case: 'Eat and drink for tomorrow we die'. Despite the fact that the author has exactly the same idea of death as our psalmist, he is in fact saying the exact opposite. The psalmist is saying that God has the power to deliver us from death, that God has no pleasure in death, that life is closer to God than death. It is further assumed, and therefore implied, that life in the presence of God, even now on this earth, is a precious thing and not a sort of banishment to a region far from God. All this and so much more is being said in this verse of the psalm. When faced with this richness of implication, we just can't



start talking of accepting and rejecting. That sort of attitude simply doesn't get us anywhere. We must learn to distinguish between the truth we find in scripture and that element which is no longer relevant for us today. The idea that God has a body like us is implying that God is really personal, that he is near and lively, and all this is true.

Conversely in other places we should go for what is directly said and not for what is assumed or implied. Psalm 137, for instance: 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept . . . how shall we sing a song to the Lord in a strange land.' We can pray these words from our hearts without subscribing to their implication that God can only be properly worshipped in the temple at Jerusalem. The boundaries between what is relevant and irrelevant go straight through each biblical passage. Kümmel says 'The real boundaries of the canon run straight through the middle of the canon.'<sup>6</sup> The Bible can only be a source of the faith when these boundaries are discovered? But how do you start finding out where this boundary runs? What is your criterion for knowing what the boundary actually looks like? Where is the touchstone which indicates what is relevant, less relevant, or just irrelevant? Certainly not the Bible itself—to try to maintain that would be mere make-believe.

It used to be the thing to say that the great geniuses—the old prophets, Proto-Isaiah, or Proto-Mark, contain the true religion. The anonymous people who came afterwards, the disciples and followers distorted their message. That would certainly be one way of tackling the problem, and a criterion would be ready to hand. Yes, but here again we must admit that this criterion isn't supplied by the Bible; it comes rather from the general notion of personality and genius that was so beloved by the nineteenth century. Moreover, this position was never really used consistently. One only need mention the fact that in the Old Testament the faith in a life after death comes from these same anonymous followers and disciples.

The exact opposite is frequently maintained these days. What is later is to be preferred. This, in turn, is based on the notion of a constantly progressing revelation: a religious variant of the belief in progress. It is true that this idea is not so very foreign to the Bible, although the Bible itself sees that there is also a possibility of degeneration and decline. It can serve, certainly, as a rule of thumb now and then, but only as a rule of thumb. Should every little Rabbi who makes an honest remark on the text of the great Isaiah be counted more genuine than the prophet himself, and for no better reason than that he happened to live at a

<sup>6</sup>*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 1950, 316.

later time? Again, the New Testament obviously takes precedence over the Old in the Christian Bible, but classical theology was not thereby deterred from interpreting the dualism of Pauline and Johannine theology in the light of the monism of the creation theology—in this case the old is preferred to the new.

It is simply impossible to test all the criteria that have been used. It turns out that many are taken from the Bible itself, but the fact that people take one criterion rather than another in order to determine the genuine core of the Bible doesn't depend on the Bible but on some particular interpretation of the Bible that is imposed from outside. That goes too for the excellent criterion of the reformers. They raised Paul's teaching on justification to the central position in the scriptures. What corresponds to this teaching is God's word for us. But that the central point was found there and not, as others have done and still do, in the figure of Christ the synoptic gospels give us (or at least as some people think they give us) doesn't come from the Bible but from the point of view that has been decided upon. Stauffer, along with others, thinks that Paul falsified the message of Jesus. That is certainly putting it a bit bluntly; but between the Christ of the synoptic gospels and of Paul's epistles there are actually certain divergences. And just as these divergences are resolved in a higher unity, so the Bible cannot in itself decide whether Mark is to be explained in terms of Paul or Paul in terms of Mark. This decision must come from outside, for the Bible is not capable of making it—and it comes, as can be easily shown, from the living tradition.

Only tradition can detect what is binding, the actual message for us today, in the mass of passages in the Bible which by themselves seem to make no claim upon us. Tradition is the necessary prerequisite for every theological interpretation of scripture. Sometimes we take tradition consciously into account; at other times we unconsciously take it for granted. But it would always be naive to imagine that this condition is not there, simply because we are not aware of it.

This will serve to prove that the Bible does not suffice as the source of faith. Ernst Käsemann makes the point decisively: 'Protestantism can no longer work with the so-called "formal principle" (*sola scriptura*) without making itself seem untrustworthy in the face of historical analysis. If we simply try to rely on "the Bible says so", then I am convinced that critical New Testament study must in fact end up by admitting that Lessing's fable is right'<sup>7</sup>—namely that we just can't be

<sup>7</sup>*Evangelische Theologie* II (1951/52) 18.

certain of ever finding out what is true.

What separates different Christian denominations is not the Bible, but the differing interpretations of the Bible—in other words the differing traditions. For this reason it would be an illusion to start thinking that the Bible could bring us together again; only when our traditions draw closer together can we agree about the Bible. In effect this means that only the Holy Spirit of God, who gives us an understanding of the Bible, can open our eyes so that we can together understand the Bible. Exegesis by itself cannot unite us, only God can do that.

## The Nature of Christian Worship

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Men of all ages and of every civilization have felt the need to offer worship to the being or beings on whom they acknowledge dependence. Their worship usually takes the form of animal sacrifices, the offering of food and drink and sacred meals, all of which are accompanied by dances, hymns and prayers, and regulated by the observance of sacred seasons and holidays. This is the pattern of what we call religion. It is the way in which man responds to the idea of the 'sacred', to the terrifying appeal of that awful otherness of the being he believes to govern his existence. From the anthropologist's point of view Christian worship, in spite of all its distinctive traits, is one more manifestation of general religious behaviour. There is no need for believing Christians to run away from such a point of view. In spite of divine revelation and in spite of the institution of Christ, our habits of worship remain very human phenomena. In an age where the reasonableness of religious behaviour is widely challenged and rejected, it would be very foolish for Christians to forget this fact.

Sacrifice plays a central role in many religions. Comparative study shows that behind the practice of sacrifice there lies the idea of two distinct orders: the sacred and the profane. The first is characterized by its holiness or awe-inspiring difference from the sphere with which man