

## THE BIBLE AND THE ROSARY\*

---

M. J. LAGRANGE, O.P.



THE Gospels have always held a rank of honor in the Church. A portion of them is read each time during the Holy Sacrifice, and with a ritual reserved for them alone. This reading is preceded by another, less solemn, taken from one of the books of the New Testament. The Epistles of Saint Paul, by their number, by their importance, by the action which they have exercised are in the first rank. We shall pause with them. What we shall say about them may be applied to the other writings. The Acts of the Apostles have always been regarded as an historical book, consequently nothing has been changed in the manner of their interpretation. The Apocalypse most certainly contains history, more so than the majority of the early interpreters were able to discover, but it is veiled by images, and would require a particular study which would be to the taste of few of our Dominican souls living in the world. It suffices to recommend the admirable commentary of Père Allo, whose views have been set forth in abridged form by Père Lavergne,<sup>1</sup> both Dominicans.

Saint Paul makes himself felt by all, both by his own proper worth and by the credit which independent criticism accords him. This criticism has arrived at the paradoxical result of magnifying disproportionately the importance of a work already judged incomparable in its own way, since no one had thought to set it above that of his Savior Jesus Christ. As thus proposed, the Pauline problem belongs less to theology than to history.

Catholic commentators know that Paul was the faithful disciple of Jesus from the day when he had been enlightened by a sudden illumination on the road to Damascus.

What Jesus had taught, insofar as men could grasp what He saw in the bosom of his Father, Paul had taken as the basis for a complex dialectic, principally acquired at the school of the Rabbis, but reducible to the Greeks by its philosophic trend. He is the connecting link between the Christians of Jewish origin and the converts from paganism—not in the sense of having composed his doctrine by a mixture of two elements, as Philo, the most erudite Jew of Alexandria, had

---

\* Continued from the Spring issue.

<sup>1</sup> Gabalda, Paris, publisher.

attempted to do, but by attaching himself to the person of the Savior and to his Passion as the source of pardon and the guarantee of salvation. This was the energetic rejection of paganism, which had never had toward the deity more than a vague religious feeling, and the admission of the death of the old Law, expiring like the aloe after it has put forth its flower.

The Middle Ages had added to this very correct view a systematic conception according to its particular spirit, and had considered the Epistles of St. Paul as so many treatises coordinated to teach salvation by the grace of Jesus Christ: a small *Summa Theologica*.

However, it is sufficient to read the Epistles of Saint Paul to perceive that they are writings prompted by circumstances, real letters, rather than dialectical epistles after the manner of Horace, Seneca or Boileau, a solution to questions brought up at a given moment by certain bodies of Christians forming the church of a city, an exhortation to persevere in the faith despite the present difficulties, sometimes reproaches to prevaricators whose sin was a source of scandal. The Epistle to the Romans is indeed conceived as a veritable treatise, on questions then passionately controverted, likewise the two letters to the Corinthians. The most timely is the burning intervention of Paul to bring back on the right path his dear Galatians who were, like their brothers, the Gauls, too vacillating. These are lights ordained to banish doubts, outpourings of the Apostle's heart, the whole being prompted by historical circumstances. One may admire the logical deductions, but the themes proposed can only be explained by history.

These letters, pulsating with life, emanating from a powerful personality who makes his influence felt, in no wise resemble a commentary on a written book, and rarely appeal to a word or an action of Jesus preserved by tradition. On the other hand, they testify in every line to a profound attachment to, and a complete dependence on, the author of the new faith. If the old Law has no efficacy, in fact has never had any, it is because its sole purpose was to announce the work of salvation accomplished by a Man-God, Jesus of Nazareth.

This Pauline conviction is professed with so much ardor, emanating from a deep faith, that those independent writers best authorized by long studies no longer dare to deny it. But their absolute philosophical prejudice against an intervention of God in the ordinary order of things by miracle and prophecy, in a word, against the supernatural, forces them to seek to discern how Paul arrived at this persuasion for which he staked his existence and his honor. This can only be because of a development of his thought, since he left Juda-

ism which he professed passionately, and this development can be known and understood only by following the evolution of his reasoning, that is to say, by applying the historical method.

The conclusion of the non-Christian exegetes, though they may be at times professors of Protestant theology, is that Christianity would not have been born but for the action on Paul's spirit of a strong element borrowed from paganism. After having eliminated from the Gospels whatever hinders them, they arrive at the following:

Jesus was a prophet, who never preached anything but the worship of the God of Israel, while stressing, as Isaias did earlier, the preponderant importance of the sentiments of the heart over the formalism of the observances of the Law. Condemned to death by the legalistic party, dying upon the Cross after a bitter Passion, He had inspired His disciples with an attachment so strong that they thought they saw Him risen from the dead, and entered into that glory which must needs be, at all cost, the accompanying splendor of the Messiah, and in which He would cause them to share. Jesus, as the most faithful interpreter of God, and become henceforth His Messiah, was to have His part in the worship rendered to God, a very subordinate part. But this worship, even though most modest, could not fail to scandalize the Jews. Had it the wherewithal to captivate the Gentiles? Yes, said Paul to himself, and this conviction took deeper and deeper root in his soul, provided that Jesus, set nearly on a par with God, was not assimilated to the dwellers of Olympus, drinkers of nectar, laughing with open mouths at their domestic misadventures or at their dishonest conquests, but rather to those gods who suffered, died and rose again, to whom one associated oneself in the mystery religions, Attis, Osiris, even Heracles, or to those goddesses tried by misfortune, Demeter and Kore, the Eleusinian pair, or yet again Isis, and many others. In spite of all, these mystery religions were very far from the rules of temperance required by the Law. Paul, as a Jew, held them in abhorrence. But attached as he was by the person of Christ, he must have been struck by the notion that expiation by suffering could be the lot of a God. Such was the mystery of salvation for the most religious among the pagans; the religion of Jesus offered the same salvation. It would suffice to accord to Jesus the title of Son of God, then of God, in order to attract the Gentiles to a hope similar to their own, stripped of all the unseemly filth whose incongruity the pagans themselves felt.

St. Paul was re-read with the intention of verifying this hypothesis, and re-read in the order of the origin of the Epistles. The

same study imposes itself upon us. Though we do not find there that which others seek there passionately but in vain, we will profit because the works will make us know the life and the life will explain the works.

There is first of all the radical opposition that not a single text of antiquity attributes to the sufferings of the gods or the divinised heroes any relation with the sins of humanity which would be expiated by them. On the contrary, the Jewish religion was aware of the mystery of penance and expiation in order to appease the just wrath of God. Paul had always known this, but at first it was absolutely repugnant to him that this rôle should be confided to Jesus of Nazareth, condemned by the heads of the nation to the death on the cross as a blasphemer, for it was written in the Law: *Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree.*<sup>2</sup>

No argument could have prevailed against a text for this spirit stubborn with pharisaism; but he was forced to give in to the evidence when he saw and heard on the road to Damascus that the Crucified had entered into His glory. Thereupon he understood, and openly confessed<sup>3</sup> that the Son of God had revealed Himself to him and invested him with the mission of preaching Him among the Gentiles.

The whole life of Paul from this time on will be the realization of this program. The Christians whom he went persecuting from city to city held Jesus for the Messiah. If they had not adored Him as the Son of God, Paul would have had to found a new religion himself. But no, he is immediately in agreement with them on this fundamental principle. None of these Jews, as Jewish as himself, reproach him with introducing a pagan divinity into Israel; Paul has now grasped the sense of what they preached. Yet he does not abandon his belief that cursed is he that hangeth on a cross. But now this curse is the one we have deserved and which Jesus has taken upon His shoulders in order to obtain his Father's forgiveness. Where can there be found in paganism anything approaching this?

One point, and a very serious one, seemed to divide the faithful. The Gentiles were to share in the promises made to Israel, since the prophets, above all Isaias, had stated this very clearly. But was it necessary for a Gentile to be taken into the chosen people and consequently to be subject to its Law, especially in those points of major importance, circumcision, the sabbath, abstention from certain impure meats? This was energetically upheld at Jerusalem, even among those around James, the bishop of the holy city. But James,

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 3:13.

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 1:16.

the brother, that is to say, the cousin of the Lord, in agreement with Peter and John, gave the hand of fellowship to Paul,<sup>4</sup> commissioning him to preach the faith to the Gentiles, only imposing upon them abstinence from meats offered to idols, or from animals slaughtered without their blood having been poured out,<sup>5</sup> or from this blood itself. It seemed at the time that these latter laws were less ordinances imposed specially upon Israel than rules of common law for all men who adore a single God. As for those who had been born and reared in Judaism, they were free to follow its laws provided that they did not imperil the unity of the Church in charity. Peter remained more attached to these rites in order not to scandalize the Jews; Paul was more attentive to retaining the Gentiles in whom he already saw the dominant element of the Church. On both sides they were convinced that the sacrifices of the Law had no other efficacy than that of figure of the sacrifice of the Son of God; once that had been accomplished, all the rest no longer had any reason for being. The moral law remained, but less as the exigency of a special law than as an impulsion of the Spirit of Jesus, giving more clarity and force to the conclusions of reason.

Henceforth the apostolate among the Gentiles could be pursued without hindrance, and Paul gave himself up wholly to it. But if he had borrowed any idea from them, especially a fundamental idea, what resistance would he not have encountered on the part of the first and faithful disciples of Jesus! Yet he remains in full agreement with them. Others offered him a fierce opposition, whether Scribes of the Law or converted Jews who persisted in imposing upon the Gentiles the observance of the Law. His controversy with the former resolved itself into overt acts of violence on the part of the Jews which led often even to the tribunal of the Romans. With the latter, it was more subtle, yet fierce. Paul was forced to defend himself, and he did so vigorously. Never was the least accusation of a leaning towards the gods of the mystery religions proffered against him. This reason alone amply suffices to declare him innocent, since, on this matter, Jews and judaizers and the Church herself would have agreed in condemning the apostolate.

Paul's rôle was then indeed the one which tradition has always conceived. Against all, even on occasion against Peter, too complacent toward the Jews, he defended the liberty of the Gentiles and the considerations of charity toward them. But neither did he hesi-

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 2:9.

<sup>5</sup> The *kosher* meat which Jews call for in restaurants is that of animals slaughtered by cutting their throats.

tate to reproach the converted Hellenists with the faults into which they were drawn by the spirit of independence, the groupings into separate sects, their moral laxity, their dreaming of angels since they could no longer exercise their imagination upon the gods.

Read the Epistles with this guiding thought, or rather with this double preoccupation of the Apostle of assuring liberty of the spirit without tolerating license. I do not say that all the difficulties will be thus resolved, but there will be torrents of light that will spread over your souls as to the Christian life in Jesus Christ.