

TWO ALIKE

Centuries ago there lived in Palestine an irascible monk. Controversy was his recreation. He skirmished with the sword of his tongue assured, because of its incomparable acuteness, that he would eventually obliterate his opponents. He relentlessly decried their faults, and excoriated their errors with a propensity toward caustic satire well beyond imagination. It was said that his voice was like thunder upon the world. He was the petulant, quarrelous, fiery, Saint Jerome.

There was another, a Dominican priest, who devoted his life to wholehearted labor in Palestine. He did not fear controversy, but struck with the sword of truth, not to demolish, but to persuade. He was prudent, docile and submissive, but his voice was none the less powerful. He was the confident, tranquil, saintly, Marie-Joseph Lagrange.

Between these disparate temperaments there is an overwhelming bond—the unquenchable thirst for the study of Sacred Scripture. In pursuit of this knowledge each was dedicated to exert himself for the magnificent glory of God and His Church. Whatever aptitude each possessed was developed for the purpose of adorning the Church with that intellectual prestige enjoyed by secular scholarship. Both Saint Jerome and Père Lagrange sought to withdraw from the adversity to which their commitment had led them. One embarked to Bethlehem, the other requested a transferal to another field of activity. Neither could flee from his destiny of participating and contributing to ecclesiastical scholarship. They were truly destined to be men of the Church.

It is not surprising to find many parallels in the lives and works of Saint Jerome and Père Lagrange since their careers pivoted upon the same axis of Scripture studies. But what is astonishing is the extent of the parallelism in regard to methods, attitudes, conflicts, and other factors of their lives. It is, as it were, that one was the life of the other, diversified only by the times in which they lived.

It is as specificative of the quality of perseverance that one speaks of the impatient Jerome struggling to obtain some proficiency in the Hebrew language. He persevered in this task despite the inherent difficulties that the language itself presented and the disqualifying handicap of his failing eyesight. He persevered in the knowledge that his struggle was purposeful, initially as mortification and ultimately that he might the more

comprehend the message of God and transmit it from the original texts to the rest of mankind. He further embraced, to the chagrin of his enemies, a study of Rabbinical folklore. But prior to his encounter with Hebrew, Jerome was subject to a complete classical education consonant with that era. He studied rhetoric, grammar, philosophy and law before concentrating on Scripture studies. So it was with Père Lagrange. At the minor seminary of Autun, France, Père Lagrange had become extremely proficient in Greek. Immediately upon completing his course of studies he was determined to pursue the priestly life. However he continued his education at Paris where after receiving his degree in law, he was admitted to the bar. Still preferring the priesthood, he entered the Dominican Order and following the period of philosophical and theological studies terminating in the bestowal of sacerdotal powers, he began preparation for his life's work by undertaking the acquisition of Assyrian, Egyptian, and Hebrew, amplified by the knowledge of Rabbinical folklore. He, as Jerome before him, was now well disposed for Scripture studies. A short time later he received the mandate to establish the École Biblique, commonly referred to as St. Stephen's in Jerusalem.

The dawn of the École Biblique coincided with the new approach to Scripture study. There was ushered in an epoch of singular enlightenment in those fields of scholarship which were most intimately connected with a proper understanding of the *Bible*. Advances were achieved in ancient languages and folklore, in archeology, anthropology and other allied disciplines. However, there developed two diverse reactions to this information, enhanced by the Church's response to each. The rationalist position concluded that the *Bible* was patently interspersed with contradiction and thus could hardly have been revealed. Of course, this conclusion was condemnatory, but the manner of condemnation was indeed detrimental to Scriptural investigation since the truths that these studies uncovered were consequently denied. The position espoused by Père Lagrange sought to establish within the Church a critical and scientific approach to Scripture which would educe the proper conclusions contained in the Sacred writings under the guidance of the Church's *magisterium*.

Saint Jerome in his commentary on the book of *Daniel*, had evidenced an approach similar to the methods ultimately adopted by Père Lagrange. In this work he not only urged Christians to profit by what is true in secular scholarship but obliged them to have recourse to such scholarship, since all truth is from God. Further, in reference to his commentary on *Daniel*, Jerome had to acquire a knowledge of Greek, Jewish, and Roman

history as essential to a proper understanding of this prophet. He assiduously absorbed all such knowledge which in any way would enhance his Scriptural study. While pilgrimaging in the Holy Land he was very observant of the customs, literature, and language of the people with whom he came in contact, as well as with the topography of the land. Above all, he was firmly convinced of the need for more adept understanding of languages in determining the meaning of the text.

However, propagators of novel ideas are always subject to criticism and restraint by those who strive to maintain the *status quo*, not necessarily because the novel ideas which are propagated are detrimental, but solely because they are new. Thus any scholar, confident in the truth of what he holds, must be courageous and persevering if he wishes to achieve approval for his views within a particular school of orthodox doctrine. Even the audacious Jerome refrained from working on a translation of the *Old Testament* from Hebrew until he had completed a translation from the Old Latin version lest such novelty cause alarm. He need not have been so sensitive to criticism under the protective tiara of Pope Damasus. But once his protector had died and his enemies multiplied, he retreated, not in surrender, that would not be Jerome, but in pursuit of peace to the town of Bethlehem.

Père Lagrange met a similar fate. While Pope Leo XIII occupied the Chair of Peter, despite the clamor of his adversaries, he could continue his labor, confident that the gallant Pope would not thwart his quest for truth simply because it was new. He had certainly raised some alarm among his critics by two articles published in the *Revue Biblique* concerning the location of the city of David and the sources of the *Pentateuch*. In regard to the latter, a reply from the Biblical Commission on the Mosaic authenticity of the *Pentateuch*, though it was subject to a favorable interpretation, terminated his work on that section of the *Old Testament*. But what brought thunder and lightning was the publication of the second edition of his *Historical Method*. Many ultra-conservatives judged the work to be modernistic, while others more prudently thought that Catholic scholars ought to proceed more cautiously in this matter. When Pope St. Pius X sounded the death knell to Modernism in the decree *Lamentabili*, Père Lagrange instantly professed his adherence. Some deemed his action as hypocritical, and so the controversy went on. Seeing that he was causing such turbulence, he petitioned the then Master General, Father Cormier, to transfer him to some other activity, but the response of the General was only to advise him to exert his efforts now on the *New Testament*.

On June 29, 1912, the Sacred Consistorial Congregation issued a decree intended for only Italian seminaries but which was in fact more universally interpreted. This decree banned a rationalistic and modernistic work of another priest, but further extended the restriction to include all such works, "*ceu plura scripta Lagrange*." Attentive to the voice of the Church, Père Lagrange sent a petition to Rome requesting the Master General for a second time that he be relieved of his Scriptural studies. Fr. Cormier then ordered him to discontinue his work at St. Stephen's, and to return to Paris to engage in the active ministry. However, a year later he received the mandate to return to the École Biblique and his beloved Scripture studies. The ban was revoked, the reigning Pope Pius XI gave this obedient and scholarly Dominican his blessing, and forever removed any suspicion from his name.

It might come as a surprise to some that the arrogant Jerome was also as docile to the voice of the Church even when his views were in disagreement. He was of the opinion that the books of *Tobias* and *Judith* were not to be included in the canon of Sacred Scripture, which at that time had not as yet been formulated by the Church. However, he does not exclude these two books, giving as his reason regarding *Tobias* that it is better to be opposed to the Pharisees and obey the requests of the bishops, and regarding *Judith*, that the Synod of Nicea had enumerated it among the Holy Scriptures.

Certainly the most erudite man of his time in Hebrew and Biblical lore, Saint Jerome had been the *avant courier* of Scriptural studies. He was an accomplished man of letters, a master of controversy, a meticulous translator, a true intellectual. Père Lagrange sought to give St. Stephen's the kind of stature which Saint Jerome enjoyed among scholars throughout the centuries. Maintaining a coherence with Catholic Tradition from apostolic times, in which Jerome had played so vital a part, the École Biblique was to seek which were the original texts of the *Bible*. Further, it was to establish the existential minutiae influencing the composition and content of the Bible by means of investigation into ancient history, customs, topography, and other allied disciplines. Ultimately, St. Stephen's was simultaneously to aid theologians and seek their advice. In all things it was submissive to the *magisterium* of the Church. Père Lagrange thought this to be the best means to achieve for St. Stephen's a reputation of true scholarship in Biblical studies comparable to any the world has known.

These two men have said much to mankind in their writings. Saint Jerome not only translated the *Bible* but was the only ancient writer to have

commented on all the prophets, major and minor. He also left us his letters and other minor works. Père Lagrange wrote 1,786 items and died leaving yet another article unfinished for his *Revue Biblique*. Even to death they gave testimony of their unquenchable thirst for the Word of God, its meaning, its texts, its propagation.

Achievement in the field of Scripture was not all Saint Jerome and Père Lagrange left to mankind. Their bequest is all the more majestic since they gave an example of lives completely dedicated to God and His Church, devoid of ambition for human esteem; lives indefatigably courageous amidst overwhelming difficulties, and magnificently adorned with great virtues of mind and heart. Thus Saint Jerome and Père Lagrange are doubly ineffable benefactors of men, as Scriptural scholars, and as exemplars to those committed to a life of service to the Church.

—JOACHIM HALADUS, O.P.