

PÈRE LAGRANGE  
AND THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE BIBLE

FAITH, REASON, AND SACRED SCRIPTURE

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Every Christmas and Easter, the media trot out their favorite biblical scholars—scholars who, particularly at these times of year, seem to make a career out of debunking the foundational stories of Christianity: of course, Jesus was born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem; of course, Jesus did not really rise from the dead. Hearing such arguments for the first time can be unsettling. If a person's faith is not strong to begin with, it is easy to be led astray and abandon the faith. Loss of one's faith is not the only danger these shows present, however. There is another, subtler effect that can lead, eventually, to the same result. Faced with claims that the gospels are unreliable, many people, rightly desiring to remain faithful to Christ and the Church, take a position more akin to what one finds in Protestant fundamentalism. They come up with ingenious (and often convoluted) solutions to the problems raised by modern scholarship, denying any discrepancies in the Scriptures at all costs.

While it is understandable, even laudable, that the faithful exercise a certain caution when it comes to much modern biblical scholarship, we should never let this caution develop into fear. Throughout his pontificate St. John Paul II exhorted the world in the words of Scripture, "Be not afraid," and the First Epistle of John reminds us, "Perfect love drives out fear" (1 Jn 4:18). How might we put these words into practice in our approach to Sacred Scripture?

I propose that we have a model in our Dominican brother, Marie-Joseph Lagrange. Père Lagrange, as he is commonly known, presents a sound approach to Scripture that embodies the marriage of faith and reason central to the Dominican heritage.

Born Albert Marie-Henri on March 7, 1855, Lagrange took the religious name Marie-Joseph when he entered the Order of Preachers in 1879. In 1890 the Order sent him to Jerusalem to establish a school for biblical studies, the *École Biblique*. Lagrange had to start from scratch, with precious few resources. Nevertheless, within a few years he had managed to found a scholarly journal, the *Revue Biblique*, and he continued to build up the school and publish widely on both the Old and the New Testaments. Though a number of his works raised the suspicions of some in authority during his lifetime and he was silenced more than once, he remained a faithful son of the Church, obedient to every censure and directive from Rome. His mission in life was to meet the attacks of the Higher Critics on their own terms: "It's not enough to blame criticism for everything. Only criticism can combat criticism." Lagrange spent nearly 45 years of his life in Jerusalem, before returning to die in his home province of Toulouse.

#### A LIFE MODELED AFTER ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

In November of 1902, Père Lagrange presented a series of lectures on the relationship between critical scholarship and the Old Testament, first published in French under the title *La Méthode Historique surtout à propos de l'Ancien Testament*. Though the lectures deal primarily with the Old Testament, they have a broader relevance for a Catholic approach to all of Sacred Scripture.

Near the beginning of the first lecture, Lagrange invokes the patronage of St. Thomas Aquinas, who also knew the trials that often come with engaging controversial new ideas, and whose life thus offers a good analogy for Père Lagrange's own experience. Both men were engaged in studies that were (relatively) new, and their studies raised the suspicions of many in the Church. Aristotle's thought was tainted by ideas like the eternity of the world; biblical criticism was suspect because of the threat of Modernism. In addition, both areas of study had extreme partisans, whose radical teachings earned the more moderate St. Thomas and Lagrange

charges of guilt by association. In light of these connections, Lagrange begins with a plea for fair judgment: “When we see a movement led by conscientious men who are loyal to the authority of the Church, the charge of novelty brought against them can only have weight where dogma is concerned; no one has the right to forbid the Holy Ghost to shed new lights upon the Church under the pretext that the men of old have seen all and said all that was to be seen and said” (23). Just as St. Thomas’s appropriation of Aristotle shed new light on the dogmas of faith, Père Lagrange sought through his biblical scholarship to illumine our reading of the Word of God in concert with the Church’s dogmas.

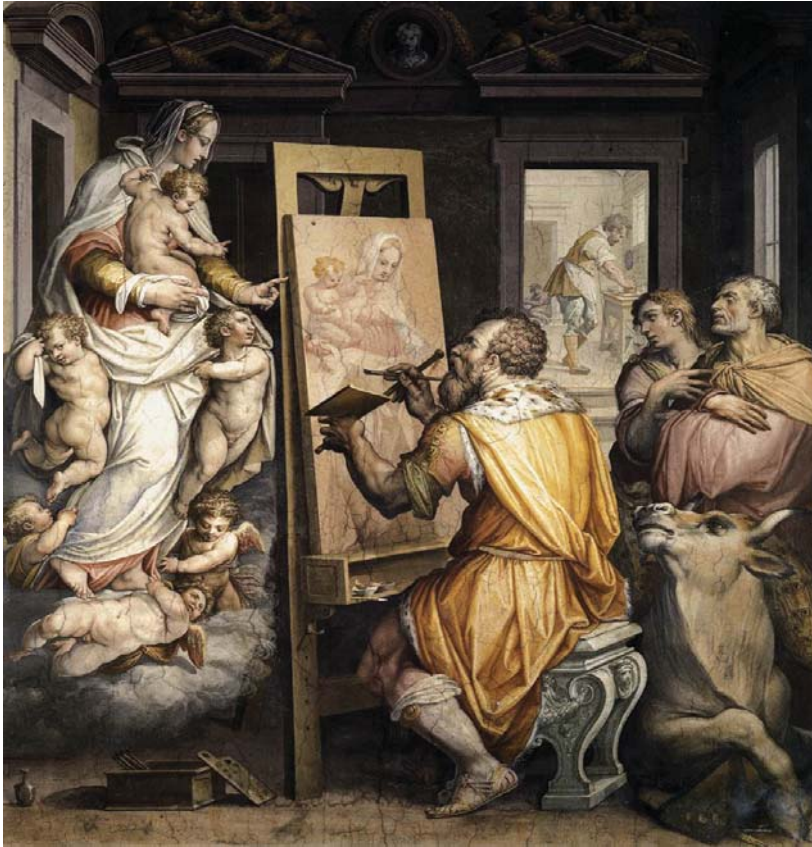
This fundamental posture of submission to the Church gave Lagrange the fearlessness to wade into the battles of biblical criticism. Secure in his fidelity to the Magisterium, Lagrange sought responsible ways to use the historical method, remarking that “modern criticism, so far from disturbing the Church’s authority, has rather set forth in a much clearer light the closeness of the bond that unites Holy Scripture and the Church” (29). This unity stems from the fact that the Church recognized these texts as Scripture, in part because they aligned with the faith of the earliest disciples. Thus, for Lagrange there is a reciprocal relationship between Church and Scripture. For this reason listening to Church authority is not only theologically sound—it is also a requisite for good criticism: “Moreover, I maintain that in using the science of criticism without losing sight of the authority of the Church, our method is sound, since it is one of the primary canons of criticism that the environment should be taken into account, and it is precisely in the Church that we have the environment in which the Sacred Scriptures appeared” (37). To see contradictions between Scripture and the Church is an absurdity for Lagrange, because this would mean the Church had canonized a text that contradicted its own teaching.

## LAGRANGE SPEAKING TODAY

With this context in mind, we can now consider how Père Lagrange would address our proverbial media scholars. Lagrange takes a balanced and reasonable view on the relationship between the Gospels and the life of Jesus, avoiding the Scylla of fundamentalist literalism and the Charybdis of radical skepticism. With the freedom of a son of the Church, he proposes innovative ways to read the data, both biblical and extra-biblical.

Take the Gospel of Matthew. Many Church Fathers assert that Matthew's Gospel was the first written, but that it was written in Aramaic. By contrast, most modern scholars argue that the Gospel of Matthew as we have it was composed in Greek. Lagrange proposes an elegant solution: the Aramaic text referred to by the Fathers was a source for the canonical Gospel we now have. While this proposal has not been widely accepted, it highlights an important point about the Gospels and the nature of translation. Jesus most likely spoke primarily in Aramaic, and no translation can capture exactly what a speaker originally said. Thus, we should not approach Matthew (or any of the Gospels) expecting a precise reproduction of Jesus' words. Lagrange is not suggesting that Matthew put words on Jesus' lips. Rather, he is proposing that our reading of the Gospels needs to be nuanced and to take into account their transmission process.

The diversity of the Gospels, another "problem" often supposed to undermine their reliability, reflects the fact that no author could completely capture the meaning and significance of the Son of God. Père Lagrange compares the Gospels to other accounts of ancient figures. Just as Xenophon and Plato portray different aspects of the character of Socrates, so the four Gospels offer distinct but complementary depictions of the Savior. Lagrange uses the imagery of an artist to illustrate the point: "We have admitted the principle that the words and teaching of Jesus have necessarily taken a particular shade according to the brush that



GIORGIO VASARI - ST. LUKE PAINTING THE VIRGIN

[illuminated] them. But it is precisely because an artist is inclined to emphasise his own personality in his work, that when several painters reproduce the same features they must have been led to do so by some objective reality” (45). The Gospel writers are like portrait artists. Each presents a different perspective on the life of Christ, bringing out elements that suit the evangelist’s theological concerns.

The second edition of *La Méthode Historique* includes a letter of Lagrange to another French scholar addressing some of the

concerns raised by their contemporary, Alfred Loisy. Like Lagrange, Loisy had begun his career in biblical scholarship as a Catholic priest. Unlike Lagrange, Loisy ended up renouncing the faith and produced a number of studies questioning the historicity of many events in Jesus' life. With the charity and generosity characteristic of St. Thomas, Père Lagrange briefly takes up some of the problems Loisy raises and presents an account of the relationship between history and faith that honors both the integrity of the Gospels and the canons of biblical criticism.

The crux of the issue, as Lagrange presents it, is the nature of the Gospels as historical documents. Do they present an unvarnished account of the things Jesus did and said while on earth? Or are they, as Loisy argued, completely unreliable? Faced with a false dichotomy, Lagrange again offers a more nuanced and reasonable approach.

Lagrange argues that the Gospels cannot be taken as histories "in the strictest sense of the word" (237). They do not give us a number of things we normally expect from (modern) histories: a chronological order of the events of Jesus' life and his precise words. With respect to chronology, each evangelist arranges his material primarily according to theological rather than chronological concerns. Even St. Luke, who proposes to present an "orderly account" of the major events in Jesus' life (Lk 1:3), does so not chronologically, but thematically. While we can determine some elements of the chronology of Jesus' life, the order of the larger part of his ministry eludes us.

With respect to the precise words of Jesus, Lagrange notes, "it is the law of history that, generally speaking, words cannot be transmitted with complete accuracy, and that facts change their aspect in the course of time" (235). Agreement among the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke is sometimes verbatim, sometimes much looser. But even when the evangelists agree on the exact words of Jesus, Lagrange argues, we cannot be certain that they accurately represent what Jesus actually said. Often, he notes,

the evangelists are relying on common sources, and there is no way of knowing how accurate their sources were in reporting the words of Jesus. Again, one should also recall that Jesus' primary language was probably Aramaic, and so, given the complexities of translation, it is unlikely that we have any of the exact words of Jesus. When the evangelists disagree, Lagrange goes on to say, it is even more unlikely that we can determine Jesus' exact words, since it is impossible to determine which (if any) of the evangelists preserved the saying accurately.

At this point, the reader may begin to wonder: With all these dismissals, is Père Lagrange simply another Loisy? On the contrary, Lagrange's point is not that we cannot know anything about Jesus, much less that the evangelists invented stories out of whole cloth. Indeed, he protests, "We have no right to suppose that [the evangelists] related any fact in the life of Christ without believing it, nor that they placed in His mouth any teaching simply because they wanted to speak to the Church under cover of His authority" (238). The point is not that the Gospels are unreliable. The point is, rather, that the Gospels do not purport to offer a precise account of Jesus' words.

Lagrange illustrates the point by considering one of the most foundational stories for the early Church: the institution of the Holy Eucharist. Even a cursory glance at the accounts of the Last Supper shows substantial differences in wording between Matthew and Mark on the one hand (Mt 26:26–29; Mk 14:22–25) and Luke and Paul on the other (Lk 22:14–23; 1 Cor 11:23–26). Lagrange notes that in Matthew and Mark's version, Jesus does not say "Do this in remembrance of me." Are we, then, to conclude that Jesus did not intend the rite he performed to be repeated? By no means. The fact that the early Church continued the practice from the earliest times suggests that this was Jesus' intention. As Lagrange elsewhere notes, the Church does not insist on finding the precise formulation of her dogmas and practices in Scripture. Whether Jesus explicitly told his disciples to repeat the rite is of



secondary importance. For Lagrange, “The usage of the Church and the Gospel text lend mutual support” (240). The testimony of the Church complements and clarifies what is at times left implicit in the Scriptures. It is her witness as a whole that guarantees the reliability of the Gospels.

#### READ AND BELIEVE

“**W**hat has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9). For centuries the Church has had her detractors, and the charge that the Gospels are unreliable is nothing new. We must not let the semi-annual media frenzy shake our faith, nor should we overreact out of fear. In Père Lagrange we have a model for approaching the Scriptures – and biblical criticism – with faith, confidence, and humility. Despite the early concerns about Lagrange’s work, his scholarship played a significant role in shaping the Church’s appropriation of modern biblical criticism. *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, offers this account of the formation of the Gospels, one remarkably similar to Lagrange’s: “The sacred authors, in writing the four Gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form; others they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches, the while sustaining the form of preaching, but always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus” (DV 19). Differences in order, paraphrases, and summaries are not things to be feared or to be denied. Rather, as Père Lagrange teaches us, they are the means the evangelists used to hand on the story of Jesus for the building up of the Church.

In Père Lagrange we have not only a model for Catholic biblical scholars, but also a patron. By opening the cause for his canonization the Church recognized not only his brilliant scholarship, but also



his witness to the faith. Through his intercession may God continue to raise up scholars to guide the faithful through the ever-present challenges of modern biblical criticism.

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#### ENDNOTES

All quotations in this article are taken from Edward Myers's translation of the second edition, *Historical Criticism and the Old Testament* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1906).