

QUAESTIO DISPUTATA: IS THE PASCHAL MYSTERY REALLY THE PRIMARY HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE?

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[Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl in a recent critique of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* took issue with the author on his claim that the paschal mystery does not serve as an hermeneutical principle for interpreting Scripture. The author defends the meaning and context of his original statement.]

THE QUESTION IN MY TITLE reflects two differing opinions that can be succinctly described in the following quotation taken from a recent Note published in *Theological Studies*:

Roland Murphy makes the extraordinary claim that the paschal mystery “does not seem to be meant as an hermeneutical principle; rather it designates the ultimate truth and goal, against which Christians are to measure their total understanding of the biblical message” (“What is Catholic about Catholic Biblical Scholarship? Revisited,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 [1998] 114). As we argue later, such an understanding of the paschal mystery is actually the *primary* hermeneutical principle for the Christian reading of Scripture.¹

This reference occurs in an article about the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (= PBC) entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.² I am not going to contest the views expressed by the

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¹ Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, “(Mis)reading the Face of God: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” *Theological Studies* 60 (1999) 513–28, at 521 n. 27.

² I cite from the text provided in *Origins* 23 (January 6, 1994) 497–524, a reprint of the English translation issued by the publisher (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993). The document, composed in French, is reprinted in *Biblica* 74 (1993) 451–528. The English text is also to be found in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”: Text and Commentary*, *Subsidia biblica* 18 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1995). Fitzmyer has written a shorter reflection, “Concerning the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 6 (1999) 5–20.

authors in their article which I think are, to say the least, askew. It is more profitable to examine the role of the paschal mystery as a hermeneutical "principle." Is it so, or is it not so? I intend to answer this within the perspective of its use in the PBC document. I am not interested in the historical origins of the phrase, which is also used in Vatican II's liturgical document *Sacrosanctum concilium* and occurs frequently in current theological writing. I propose to examine the "paschal mystery" as "the *primary* hermeneutical principle for the Christian reading of Scripture." This discussion is particularly important for reading the Old Testament and, *mutatis mutandis*, the New Testament as well.

TERMINOLOGY

By "hermeneutical principle" I understand some way or method of interpreting a text. This is not the place to rehearse various hermeneutical theories. For the immediate purpose, hermeneutics is taken to mean the exegesis of the biblical text according to normal procedures of literary interpretation, such as the determination of structure, genre, and so forth. Because of the distance, the "strangeness" as it were, of the text, modern interpreters of the Bible generally adopt the procedures called historical-critical methodology. There are several hermeneutical steps involved in the exegesis of the biblical text, as recognized in the 1993 PBC document, ranging from textual criticism through redaction criticism and other criticisms, not excluding newer approaches that correct or refine basic historical-critical methodology. A very sane remark in the opening statement of the PBC's Part III, "Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation," is pertinent here: "Catholic exegesis does not claim any particular scientific method as its own" (513).

One of the accepted views in hermeneutical theory is that no one interprets a text without some pre-understanding. This is not a positive hermeneutical principle; it is rather a caution, calling attention to the presuppositions of the interpreter. As we shall see, this can refer to the paschal mystery, which presumably would undergird a Christian reading of the Bible. But it is not a principle that necessarily gets the reader *into* the meaning of any and all biblical texts. It is a presupposition which may influence a given act of interpretation, but need not always be at work. The PBC document (Part II, A, 1–2) has a brief discussion of hermeneutics (Bultmann, Gadamer, and Ricoeur are mentioned), and its "usefulness for exegesis." It readily grants the need of hermeneutics today, particularly because only in that way will "a correct actualization of the Scriptural message" be achieved that nourishes the Christian life of faith. Bultmann's approach is found wanting, and the document underlines the constant reinterpretation of the Word of God that unites both Testaments. "In

church tradition, the fathers, as first interpreters of Scripture, considered that their exegesis of texts was complete only when it had found a meaning relevant to the situation of Christians in their own day. Exegesis is truly faithful to [the] proper intention of biblical texts when it goes not only to the heart of their formulation to find the reality of faith there expressed but also seeks to link this reality to the experience of faith in our present world” (511). This concern for what is later termed “actualization” runs throughout the document. A particularly poignant passage occurs in the same section: “The question which faces every exegete is this: Which hermeneutical theory best enables a proper grasp of the profound reality of which Scripture speaks and its meaningful expression for people today?” A question not just for exegetes, but for anyone who reads the Bible.

I propose to work with the following definition of the literal (not literalistic) sense by the PBC: “The literal sense of Scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors. Since it is the fruit of inspiration, this sense is also intended by God, as principal author. One arrives at this sense by means of a careful analysis of the text, within its literary and historical context” (512). I will take up later the understanding of the “spiritual sense.”

PASCHAL MYSTERY

In *Sacrosanctum concilium* the expression “paschal mystery” is somewhat interchangeable with “mysteries of salvation.” The paschal mystery is mentioned frequently as “celebrated,” and traditionally the celebration has been especially on Sunday. On that day the faithful are to “call to mind the passion, the resurrection, and the glorification of the Lord Jesus” (no. 6); it is directly associated with “Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection” (no. 61). The same understanding appears in the usage of the PBC document; the phrase stands for this triple union in Christ. For example, in discussing the canonical approach to the Bible, the document has a parenthetical remark referring to it, “the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (505). It is only to be expected that the same meaning would obtain for *Sacrosanctum concilium* and the PBC document.

It is important to observe that paschal mystery designates a mystery, a *credendum*. It is a given in this discussion and not to be questioned. The pertinent issue is the *manner* in which the paschal mystery is viewed in relation to understanding the Bible. In other words, how does the paschal mystery function in interpreting the Bible? In a discussion on the spiritual sense of Scripture, the PBC document answers in terms of context: “The paschal event, the death and resurrection of Jesus, has established a radically new historical context, which sheds fresh light upon the ancient texts and causes them to undergo a change in meaning” (512). Specific reference

is made to 2 Samuel 7:12–13, a passage that refers to the eternal reign of a son of David. When its “dynamic aspect,” and the continuity with the New Testament is taken into account, there is another level of meaning: Christ rules forever, but not on the earthly Jerusalem throne. One must readily grant the right of Christians to reread a text in the light of the new context of later revelation. As regards the Old Testament, I understand this to mean that the rereading is not a meaning *in* the text; it goes beyond it without erasing it. The Old Testament text retains its meaning, one inspired by God, in its historical context. But it is also open-ended, open to being interpreted anew in the light of later revelation. Thus a fuller understanding is reached, derived from the later context such as the paschal mystery provides.

The context of the paschal mystery is important for the “spiritual sense” which is treated by the PBC immediately after the discussion of the literal sense: “As a general rule we can define the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, as the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it” (512). As far as the New Testament is concerned, a direct relationship to the paschal mystery is already a spiritual sense (“regularly the case in the New Testament”). What about the spiritual sense of the Old Testament? The document in the same section allows that “already in the Old Testament there are many instances where texts have a religious or spiritual sense. Christian faith recognizes in such cases an anticipatory relationship (*un rapport anticipé*) to the new life brought by Christ.” This anticipatory relationship is not further explicated, but it derives from “Christian faith.” That means, I think, the construal of an Old Testament text in line with a Christian understanding that rests upon later revelation—therefore in an explicit Christian context. There is nothing unusual about that. The document goes on to speak of *three* levels for spiritual interpretation: “the biblical text, the paschal mystery and the present circumstances of life in the Spirit” (512–13).

The significant point I would like to insist on is that the Old Testament text, of itself and in its literal historical sense, can have a spiritual meaning. Obvious examples would be the Decalogue (Exodus 20:2–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21), the exclamation of the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4–5, and many passages in the Psalms (praise, thanksgiving, trust, etc.). In other words, the literal or spiritual meaning of an Old Testament text is to be recognized, and it is not to be snuffed out by superimposing a New Testament or Christian reality to which it must have an “anticipatory relationship.” In a broad sense the entire Old Testament is open ended and oriented to the future. That is why it can be actualized and interpreted for today—an emphasis that is paramount in the PBC document. One Testa-

ment is seen as an “anticipation” in the light of the one to come. But this relationship is not sufficient to dig out the meaning of a passage in a literary work. The later context of the paschal mystery provides an extended meaning where it is pertinent to and homogeneous with the literal sense. The PBC is rightly anxious to assert the continuity between the two Testaments, but not at the expense of the Old: “The spiritual sense can never be stripped of its connection with the literal sense. The latter remains the indispensable foundation. Otherwise one could not speak of the ‘fulfillment’ of Scripture.” When Christians hear the Old Testament on its own level, the revelation of God to the people of God, they can then see a fuller dimension in their faith.

In the discussion of the formation of the canon, the PBC document remarks that the paschal mystery is the “true fulfillment” of the Old Testament (515). That basic insight or conviction undergirds the formation of the New Testament and the eventual canon that resulted. No further discussion of the *nature* of the fulfillment is proposed. Presumably that is to be worked out by exegetes. The document on the following page goes on to note the contribution of patristic exegesis, its theological and pastoral nature, to this question, but “their type of approach pays scant attention to the historical development of revelation.” Significantly, it adds that “the allegorical interpretation so characteristic of patristic exegesis runs the risk of being something of an embarrassment to people today,” even though useful. The principles of patristic exegesis (e.g., John Cassian) came to be summarized in the famous Latin couplet, “*Littera gesta docet. . .*” quoted in the PBC document (511). It is a mistake to limit the spiritual sense to the allegorical, tropological and eschatological senses; the literal sense of the Old Testament is more than deeds or facts; it enunciates truths important for Israel and for the Church.³

In accord with the idea of fulfillment, the document proclaims that “it is the believing community that provides a truly adequate context for interpreting canonical texts” (505). It goes on to say that “above all, the church reads the Old Testament in the light of the paschal mystery—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—who brings a radical newness and, with sovereign authority gives a meaning to the Scriptures that is decisive and definitive (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 4).” Yes, but not a meaning that is exhaustive, since the PBC continues: “It [the new determination of meaning] ought not, however, mean doing away with all attempt to be consistent with that earlier canonical interpretation which preceded the Christian Passover.

³ On this point see the study of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Problems of the Literal and Spiritual Senses of Scripture,” *Louvain Studies* 20 (1999) 134–46. Equally helpful are his Maynooth lectures on the spiritual sense of Scripture published in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 62 (1996–97) 84–116, especially 107–12.

One must respect each stage of the history of salvation. To empty out of the Old Testament its own proper meaning would be to deprive the New of its roots in history” (505). Exactly! And the effect, one may add by way of comment, would be disastrous; it would reduce the Old Testament to ethereal nothings directed by YHWH to those singled out as his own special people (Exodus 19:4–6). The Old Testament is not to be emptied of its own proper meaning. Moreover, it has been said that “to know one religion is to know none.” The exaggeration in that statement is a helpful one. Christians truly know their own religion when they correctly understand their roots in the religion of Israel. That means that they first read and understand the Old Testament on its own level, even while they can choose to reinterpret it in the light of fulfillment in Christ, the paschal mystery that was the *telos* of the divine economy.

Although the phrase, paschal mystery, is not used, it is implied when the PBC document says that “the central object of all interpretation” is

the person of Jesus Christ and the saving events accomplished in human history. An authentic interpretation of Scripture, then, involves in the first place a welcoming of the meaning that is given in the events and, in a supreme way, in the person of Jesus Christ. This meaning is expressed in the text. To avoid, then, purely subjective readings [the context of this statement is a rejection of the views of R. Bultmann], an interpretation valid for contemporary times (*une bonne actualisation*) will be founded on the study of the text, and such an interpretation will constantly submit its presuppositions to verification by the text. Biblical hermeneutics, for all that it is a part of the general hermeneutics applying to every literary and historical text, constitutes at the same time a unique instance of general hermeneutics. Its specific characteristics stem from its object. The events of salvation and their accomplishment in the person of Jesus Christ give meaning to all human history (511).

One may be allowed to add that this later perspective, deriving from belief in the person of Christ, does not yield the *direct* meaning inherent in a text; rather it presupposes such an independent meaning. In this lengthy quotation the PBC is using “the person of Jesus Christ” in a credal sense. Christians cannot divest themselves of their Christian faith in “the person of Jesus Christ,” and remain Christian. But this Christian orientation does not dictate methods of literary interpretation. One must distinguish between a reality that is a matter of belief—such as the paschal mystery, which is itself already an interpretation of an historical event—and the literary expression of the plan of God that led up to and including it. The paschal mystery, as defined above, is real. The mystery is a matter of belief, not a principle for interpreting the vast body of literature constituted by both Testaments. The mystery is in a sense a negative hedge, an enlightening perspective within which an exegete works. But it is not a positive indication about the way a text *must* be interpreted. It constitutes a context

within which the Bible can be understood and in particular not be misinterpreted, for a Christian. The new context created by the paschal mystery still must rely upon basic rules of hermeneutics. These cannot be waved aside by a faith affirmation. Rather, we have here a question of literary reality, interpretation of texts. The paschal mystery is given a richer literary expression when it is set in the context of the entire Bible, in the context of what went before the mystery itself. In short, the mystery of Jesus Christ is not a “hermeneutical principle,” much less “primary.”

It follows from the above that the notion of “the Christian reading of Scripture” is ill conceived. It is an abstraction. It is Christians, along with others, who read. They read and interpret it in many different ways, as the history of biblical exegesis demonstrates. There is no one way of reading it, especially the Old Testament. To *exclude* the context of the paschal mystery would be a fatal mistake for a Christian. One may prefer a christocentric interpretation, developed along the lines of given hermeneutical principles such as typology, etc. Doubtless a Christian pre-understanding asserts itself in various ways, but hermeneutical outreach enables one to include the literal sense of the divinely inspired word of the Old Testament. This is not a matter of quibbling over primary and secondary; it is a matter of acknowledging the openness of the literary word of God.

One of the key emphases of the PBC document is found in the opening sentence of its reflection on “Methods and Approaches for Interpretation”: “The historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts” (500). It goes on to describe the Bible as the “word of God in human language,” alluding to the human aspect of its origins. The phrase reflects a time-honored way of describing the Bible as being human and yet containing God’s Word. This is highly symbolic, for God does not speak or write. This is not meant to be a “christological parallel.” It is merely another way of expressing what has been traditionally called “divine condescension.” The very fact that the word of God has received literary expression in human words “not only admits the use of this [historical-critical] method but actually requires it” (500). After all, the inspired writers were human.

CONCLUSION

The document of the PBC needs no one to write an apologia for it. The point of this brief note is certainly not to defend it, but to fend off a misunderstanding of the phrase “paschal mystery.” I repeat, this is not a hermeneutical principle; it is a context in which another meaning of a biblical text can be discerned. Moreover there is no evidence that “paschal mystery” can be described as “the *primary* hermeneutical principle for the

Christian reading of Scripture,” as stated in the opening quotation.⁴ Such a statement assumes that there is a univocal meaning to “the Christian reading of Scripture.” That is not so. In fact, “the Christian reading” can be misleading. As already indicated, Christians interpret the Scripture, and they are not locked into any one hermeneutical principle or method; there are many “principles” and methodologies, according to the nature of the biblical text. They are free to interpret in the light of the paschal mystery, but also to interpret outside of it in order to understand particularly the revelation of the Father of Jesus Christ that is contained and given literary expression, as they believe, in the Old Testament. How many times does a Christian invoke the paschal mystery as a means to appropriate a biblical text, even from the New Testament, but especially the Old Testament? Even when it is most appropriately invoked or celebrated in the Eucharistic liturgy, it provides context for self-understanding. The paschal mystery is a primary element for Christian belief, but not for biblical literature—not for entering into the interpretation of such varied texts as both Testaments provide.

⁴ There is no need to quibble about the word “principle.” But in the case of “paschal mystery,” for the sake of clarity, a preferable term would be “context,” or “presupposition.” For example, contemporary Christian and Jewish exegetes use the same methodologies in textual analysis. Of course, their presuppositions are different and this often affects their interpretation. Moreover, “primary” cannot describe a presupposition that is relatively remote to the task of understanding the literal meaning of a text. Thus, one may even ask how the New Testament is to be read in the light of the paschal mystery. It does not provide explicit hermeneutical insight on many texts, for example, the practical hard-headed wisdom of the Letter of James, or even many of the sayings and parables of Jesus. This observation is all the more pertinent to the Old Testament, where the immediate context is all the mysterious YHWH, the God and Father of Jesus Christ. The role of the Old Testament in nourishing the faith of Christians *after* the coming of Christ differs from the one it had in explaining Christ to the first believers.