

NEWMAN, THE BIBLE AND *OBITER DICTA* \*

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EVERY word of Christ is good; it has its missions and its purpose, and does not fall to the ground. It cannot be said that He should ever speak transitory words, who is Himself the very word of God, uttering, at His good pleasure, the deep counsels and the holy will of Him who is invisible. . . . All His sacred speeches, though clothed in a temporary garb, and serving an immediate end, . . . yet all have *their force in every age*, . . .<sup>1</sup>

These words are Newman's, quoted in Dr Seynaeve's recent *Newman's Doctrine on Holy Scripture*, an important monument of scholarship in a province hitherto neglected.

On the Continent last year, I was told about someone who, hearing Newman's name mentioned, remarked: 'Isn't he the man that held the theory of the *obiter dicta*?' I was also told by a Roman student of some years back that, in his time at Rome, Newman would be mentioned among the *Adversarii*, when the question of the plenary inspiration of Scripture was under discussion. I wish in this article to clear up a little of the confusion on this question, and also, in the light of Dr Seynaeve's recently published data, to consider certain other important aspects of Newman's treatment of inspiration and hermeneutics. It is well known that Newman was not a systematic Scripture scholar, any more than he was a systematic philosopher or dogmatic theologian. Yet he touched no subject without leaving his mark; and, even in the Scriptural matters, he anticipated much that we regard as typical twentieth-century Bible Introduction.

The words quoted at the head of this article reflect Newman's anticipation of the modern bible-study movement among Catholics. He complained that people would read the

\* This article was originally written for another purpose, but it will be seen to have relevance to a number of THE LIFE devoted to the Scriptures.—EDITOR.

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Seynaeve, w.f. *Newman's Doctrine on Holy Scripture*. (Blackwell (unbound) 63s. (bound) 70s.)

historical books of the Old Testament as mere historical relation of facts or antiquities. 'The *notion that God speaks in it* (the O.T.) *to them personally*; the question: "What does he say?" "What must I do?" does not occur to them.'<sup>2</sup>

In his eagerness to urge people to read the Scriptures, he would insist that God gives special graces to those who read his word. Dr Seynaeve thinks he may exaggerate this sacramental character; but it appears to me that Newman is merely insisting that all written by the Holy Spirit must be a means of grace to mankind.

In hermeneutics, he puts in the first place what we call the literal sense, i.e. that intended by the author. Unfortunately, he uses the word 'literal' in a less technical meaning, with the consequence that he sometimes appears to deny its priority in our sense. Even Dr Seynaeve thinks that, in his early days particularly, Newman was a little too wedded to the allegorical interpretation of the school of Alexandria, and not sufficiently attached to the literal interpretation of Antioch. This at least is Dr Seynaeve's conclusion; but many texts quoted by him in the body of the book seem to prove the opposite, i.e. that Newman always places first the sense intended by the sacred writer. Thus we have the following passage from Newman on page 325: '*Every passage of Scripture has some one definite and sufficient sense, which was prominently before the mind of the writer, or in the intention of the Blessed Spirit, and to which all other ideas, though they might arise, or be implied, still were subordinate.*' Again, he says (p. 331), it must have 'mainly one, and one only sense'. And again (p. 325), 'there is but one main primary sense, whether literal or figurative'. These passages make it clear that Newman, without realizing it, is anticipating the doctrine of different literary genres. If the text is written as history, its one primary meaning is historic, or (in Newman's terminology) literal. If the text is written as parable, its one primary meaning is (in Newman's language) figurative.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., 385, n. After this, the page numbers in the text refer to this book, except where they are preceded by the words *Catholic Commentary*, in which case they refer to the recent *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (Nelson).

When Newman says he prefers the school of Alexandria to that of Antioch, his meaning seems to be that Antioch was inclined to be heretical, dialectic, hair-splitting and concerned with phrases or words taken apart from the whole; whereas Alexandria was always anxious to look at Scripture as a totality and to interpret the parts in the spirit of the whole. I do not think Newman ever *preferred* to use an allegorical meaning to the one primarily intended by the sacred writer, except in the way in which we may all at times accommodate Scripture in a spiritual context.

In all this, as will be seen at once, he is fully in line with *Spiritus Paraclitus*. In his understanding of further typological and spiritual meanings underlying the sacred text, he anticipates modern revivals of patristic hermeneutics. Nothing impressed him more, as a result of his study of the Fathers, than the harmony between the two Testaments, and the importance of interpreting one by the other. Just as St Thomas before him had stated that the whole Psalter is concerned with Christ, so Newman says 'the old Testament . . . is full of figures and types of the Gospel' (p. 335), and again, 'all that our Saviour has done is again and again shadowed out in the Old Testament'. (*loc. cit.*) With regard to the Eucharist, he observes that 'in all parts of Scripture, in history, and in precept, and in promise, and in prophecy, it is given us to see the Gospel Feast typified and prefigured'. This principle has been used a great deal by continental Scripture scholars in the last few years. True, they have pointed out that the typical passages used by New Testament writers and early Christians are restricted to a limited number of texts. Yet no one will deny that Newman saw clearly the broad principles of this most important key to the Scriptures. His defect, if any, is that he applies the principle too widely.

Dr Seynaeve thinks that Newman also anticipated modern exegesis regarding the manner in which the messianic prophecies were fulfilled, namely, as to their substance. Some of the most powerful passages in Newman's *Grammar of Assent* use these prophecies as God's great indication of Christ and his Church, written large over the face of Judaism.

A less universally accepted principle of hermeneutics in

which Newman anticipated at least a large school of modern exegetes is that of the *sensus plenior*. He thought it was obvious that God might have hidden meanings not seen by the sacred writer or his contemporaries. These might become known to us at a later date by collating various passages, such as, e.g. Genesis 3, 15, with Apocalypse 12. 'Blessed are they . . . who . . . endeavour to look beneath the veil of the literal text, and to catch a sight of the gleams of heavenly light which are behind it.' (p. 341.) About our Lord, Newman thought he 'had secret meanings when He spoke, and did not bring forth openly all His divine sense at once. . . .'

A principle of a different order in hermeneutics frequently used and defended by Newman is that of totality. Often parts will give a false meaning if divorced from the whole. It was applied by Newman to the case of Arians who took passages relating to Christ's manhood apart from the context of the whole gospel, in order to prove that he was not God.

Most of these axioms of Bible use and interpretation are treated by Dr Seynaeve in the second part of his volume. The part of the first section which will be of most interest to the general reader will be that dealing with the possibility of error in the Scriptures. Newman felt very deeply the taunts of Renan and the objections of the new school of biblical criticism. Renan had advanced the historical inaccuracies of the Book of Ruth as an example of what the Catholic is bound to accept without question. Newman felt that some attempt ought to be made to indicate how a Catholic could deal with such objections. Was the Catholic bound always to reply: 'There is no difficulty; it is the word of God'?

About Judith, Newman preferred not to answer Renan. 'I have wished to lay down principles . . . his charges can neither be proved nor refuted just now, while the strange discoveries are in progress about Assyrian and Persian history by means of the cuneiform inscriptions. When the need comes, the Church, or the Holy See, will interpret the sacred book for us.'<sup>3</sup> Newman's wisdom in saying nothing on this subject is reflected in the fact that Catholic scholars are still divided in their interpretation of this book. They are not even entirely agreed how far it is history. Most of New-

<sup>3</sup> Newman, *Stray Essays*, p. 32.

man's reply is simply an anticipation of the methods adopted almost universally by Catholics today.

His general reply is perhaps not scientifically expressed, but seems in its meaning to be in harmony with our view. He says that the Bible has a human author as well as a divine, and that, just as God leaves his mark throughout, so does the human writer. Though the Scriptures are entirely divine, they are none the less human for this. The principle is expressed in modern language in the recent *Catholic Commentary* (36, i) under the heading, *The Divine Condescension*. He concludes from this that the human writer will not necessarily be aware that he is writing under God's inspiration, and may apologise for his style or complain of his difficulty in writing. He refers to 2 Maccabees. The *Catholic Commentary* fully accepts this conclusion, quoting the same passages from Maccabees (37, c).

He puts forward the theory of implicit quotations, which the *Catholic Commentary* relates to P. Prat and others in 1902-1907. Newman writes to Mr Cox, January 28th, 1865, 'Forty years ago, when I read Genesis in the Hebrew, it became quite clear that it was the work of various authors, nor have I had any reason to change my opinion since'. (p. 328.) In 1884, Newman wrote, 'Hence we have no reason to be surprised, nor is it against the faith to hold, that a canonical book may be composed, not only from, but even of, pre-existing documents, it being always borne in mind, as a necessary condition, that an inspired mind has exercised a supreme and an ultimate judgment on the work, determining what was to be selected and embodied in it'. The same principle, but carried a little further than it was by Newman, is accepted in the *Catholic Commentary* (37, h). He saw in this, as everyone does today, a possible way to explain apparent difficulties from certain books against homogeneous divine authorship. Divine authorship is not of course sacrificed, but it is allowed that there may be implicit citations which were originally written by a non-inspired hand.

A matter in which Newman has been frequently misunderstood is his attempted theory as to the aim and object of God in inspiration. He insisted that God was not doing it

in order to teach secular history, or geography. Scripture may indeed relate secular matters, but only when they have a bearing upon sacred matters. Newman's general expression for the doctrine God intends to convey in inspired scriptures is *faith and morals*. He is convinced that the Council of Trent says that this was the object of all revelation.<sup>4</sup> By faith and morals, he does not mean what is implied in the passage of the Encyclical *Humani Generis*: 'There are those who boldly pervert the sense of the definition laid down by the Vatican Council as to its divine authorship; they bring up again the old argument, so often censured, which contends that the inerrancy of Scripture only extends to what it tells us about God, about morals, and about religion'.<sup>5</sup> Newman admits at all times that the Scriptures are infallible throughout, when understood in the sense in which they are intended to be understood. He merely asserts as a fact, to him obvious, that in no case do they intend to convey purely profane knowledge, without relation to faith. If in any case they seem to do so, Newman answered that it is we who fail to realise that this apparently purely secular matter has a religious bearing, for the sake of which God introduced it into the inspired text.

All history recorded in the Scriptures comes under *faith*, in Newman's way of understanding it. All the historical writings of the Bible are a record of God's providence, and of grace and of our Lord; or of his work and teaching, in some way or other. They are never, he claimed, included in the Scriptures with the intention of teaching us secular human history.<sup>6</sup> They do of course give much secular history, but it is given because of its relation to the faith. Naturally, it is not for us to profess to be able to discover the connection with the faith in all cases. That is why we may not reject as unintended, anything that occurs in an historical narrative.

It is at this point that we come to the one difficult point in Newman's work on the reconciliation of Inspiration with

<sup>4</sup> cf. Denzinger, 783. (*Fontem omnis et salutaris veritatis et morum disciplinae—hanc veritatem et disciplinam contineri in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditiones . . . tum ad fidem tum ad mores pertinentes.*)

<sup>5</sup> C.T.S. edition, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Newman, *Stray Essays*, pp. 11-12; J. Seynaeve, op. cit., pp. 166-7.

Biblical Criticism. I refer to the *obiter dicta*. I have read everything written by Newman on this, and come to the conclusion that the only examples of *obiter dicta* mentioned by Newman, which would be quite indefensible in view of the recent papal documents, are the two he took from the French Father Lamy. I refer to the examples of Tobias's dog and St Paul's cloak. Newman's reason for thinking that perhaps these did not come under inspiration is his view that they are so secondary and unimportant that they would not have been part of the message, doctrine or history which the sacred writer intended to deliver. It seems that he was basing his rejection on the wrong application of a sound principle. The sound principle would be that we must accept everything in the Scriptures as true in the sense intended by the sacred writer. Newman thought that Tobias's dog could not be fully intended. It was, as it were, by the way. He was, of course, wrong in saying this. But I still think his principle was that found in the *Catholic Commentary*, 37, g, that we must first ascertain the purpose of the writer. If he is not intending to write history, his statements are not to be taken as history. Newman should not have assumed that, in the case of Tobias's dog, the sacred writer was not intending to write history.

That this was the principle Newman meant to apply seems to me clear from his description of *obiter dicta* as 'unhistoric statements'. He explains that he means by this phrase statements of (apparent) fact which are not statements intended as history. The words of a parable would be such. Such statements could be erroneous if understood as a record of actual facts, but are not erroneous if understood for what they are meant to be, e.g. parable. When our Lord said, 'The sower went forth to sow . . . and some fell by the wayside', he would be making 'unhistoric' statements, since it was not his purpose to record the history of a real sower.

Apart from the two no longer defensible examples from Father Lamy, Newman gives as a probable *obiter dictum* the statement that Nabuchodonosor was King of Nineve. In this case, Newman was obviously concerned to remove an apparently incorrect historical assertion from the domain of history. The same difficulty is today removed by Catholic

scholars by saying that Nabuchodonosor is a pseudonym.<sup>7</sup> Note that Newman and the modern Catholic scholar are agreed on the concrete inacceptability of taking the statement in its most obvious natural sense. If Newman had known more about the modern literary genres and principles of hermeneutics, he would not have had to call this an *obiter dictum*. I suggest that, though he was guilty of a technical error, he did not in actual fact interfere with the historicity of the text any more than does the Catholic commentator of today.

A word must be added in explanation of Newman's definition in another place of *obiter dicta* as 'phrases, clauses, or sentences in Scripture about matters of mere fact, which, as not relating to faith and morals, may without violence be referred to the human element in its composition'. This statement, however, appears much more innocent when one bears in mind that, for Newman, 'faith and morals' include everything taught by the sacred writer, whether history or doctrine or ethics. His position would have been almost unimpeachable if he had been able to anticipate the principle of literary genres, and asserted something like this: 'phrases, clauses, or sentences in Scripture about (apparent) matters of fact, which, however, unless understood according to the literary genre of the writer, do not record history, doctrine or morals'. It seems that such a definition would apply, say, to the phrase 'Nabuchodonosor is King of Nineve', since this statement, unless understood according to its proper literary genre, does not record history, doctrine or morals.

I believe one will search in vain for another example of an *obiter dictum* in Newman. It is as clear as daylight that he was desperately anxious, on the one hand, not to betray the full inspiration of the Scriptures; and, on the other, to find a way out of the embarrassment caused by certain passages, until one knows in what way they are to be understood. As Dr Seynaeve tells us, if Newman were alive today, he would have had many Catholic critical principles which would have enabled him to do what he was trying to do both more effectively and without even an appearance of compromise.

<sup>7</sup> *Catholic Commentary*, 308, h.

It is often stated that Leo XIII had Newman in mind when he condemned the view that 'divine inspiration reaches to matters of faith and no farther'. Dr Seynaeve thinks that it was rather Mgr D'Hulst whom the Holy Father envisaged. The condemnation certainly would affect some of those who succeeded Newman into a view which Newman would never have approved. It will be clear from the above, as from Dr Seynaeve's book, that Newman did not hold the view condemned. First of all, he admitted that purely secular matters often came under inspiration for the sake of spiritual things. Further, he held that all Bible history, in fact everything the sacred writer intended to convey, came under the heading of either faith or morals. This was certainly not the same as saying one could reject or regard as uninspired what does not appear to concern faith or morals, especially if faith is taken rigidly. Finally, Newman would have said that, if we could not discover the connection between any statement in the Bible and faith or morals, the connection would still be there or it would never have got into the Bible. Consequently, we could never reject a historical event on the grounds that it did not concern faith and morals. Why, it may be asked, does Newman use such an ambiguous phrase as 'faith and morals' if he means so much by it? Simply, I believe, because he thought it was a consecrated phrase, used at least four times at Trent, for the whole content of revelation, whether coming to us in scripture or tradition. That this is the true interpretation of Newman's understanding of 'faith and morals' can be shown from a passage such as the following: 'When we consider the Old Testament as written by divine inspiration, and preserved, beyond the time of its own Dispensation, for us Christians, . . . we ought not surely to read any portion of it with indifference, nay, without great and anxious interest. . . . Christ and His Apostle cannot have put the Law and the Prophets into our hands for nothing. . . . If the Old Testament history be intended as a permanent instruction to the Church, much more, one would think, must such prominent and remarkable passages in it as the history of Balaam.'<sup>8</sup> Whether or not we can see it, every

<sup>8</sup> *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, iv, 18, 19.

historical event and saying in the Old Testament is for our faith and instruction. It is all 'faith and morals'.

Newman's mistake was more accidental than formal. He wrongly thought that a small phrase here and there might slip into the text having no bearing on the narrative. However much he may seem to have been guilty of material heresy, Newman most carefully points out that his view is only personal, and he utterly and completely submits every word he writes on this matter to the judgment of the Church.

The reader of the above will perhaps get some realization that, in this province of scripture exegesis, which is one about which Newman wrote least, he yet was able to anticipate some of the most important methods of biblical scholarship of today; and that, if he did not completely escape error, it was in good faith, and only in the slightest degree, in a matter of the least possible importance, to qualify his acceptance of plenary inspiration. And even then he accepted it in principle. Newman himself expressed his position either by saying that Scripture was inspired throughout, though not in every possible respect, or by saying it was inspired *in omnibus suis partibus*, but not *in omnibus suis rebus*. One passage might be inspired as a doctrine conveyed in a parable, but not as history; another as history, but not as a statement of doctrine. If this were not true, he used to say, there would even not be different styles, some better than others.

The greatest value of Dr Seynaeve's book is that it will entirely remove any sort of stigma which still remains attached to Newman's name through the suggestion that he was condemned by Leo XIII for his doctrine of *obiter dicta*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> One admits, of course, that the doctrine of the papal document would have called for a revision of some parts of his articles on this subject. This he would immediately and gladly have done.