

Sacraments as means of the grace required for the attainment of that destiny, and the rest. If these truths and the content of them 'can but come to us through fallible human agents', then there is no alternative to resigning ourselves to endless and ever-increasing division, with the inevitable consequence that Christianity will be progressively emptied of its supernatural content. Human reason and argument alone are powerless to define and determine supernatural truth. But at any rate human reason ought to carry us thus far: it would be unreasonable to accept the doctrine of the Incarnation in its fullness and its consequences, and at the same time suppose that God had not provided the means by which mankind could possess that security of faith which St Luke seeks to convey to his beloved Theophilus. That means is 'the living and abiding voice' by which the Holy Ghost speaks to the world through the Incarnate Son of God, through his Apostles, and through their true successors, as infallible today as in the beginning of the Church.

(Concluded)



## FROM SYNAGOGUE TO EARLY CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY: II

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### *The Scriptures in the Life of the Synagogue*

**T**HE primary object of the meetings in the Synagogue was the reading of the Scriptures, yet this was quite a recent innovation, seemingly introduced along with the new institution. In order to realize this better, we must go back to the time of the Temple.

In the old days, when Israel had been gathered together in her own land, leading a national life that centred round the Temple in Jerusalem and the big annual festivals held there, the whole People used to go up to the Temple to offer sacrifice. The indissoluble bond between the Temple and the sacrifices made there was indeed one of the basic requirements of the Old Testament religion.

The Scriptures had a large place in this liturgy both before

the Exile and after it, when the Temple was restored and the sacrifices and ceremonies were revived. A number of the books—Leviticus, for example—consist of codes of law, and particularly rituals, intended to fix the liturgy to be used in the Temple. The Psalms were largely a collection of hymns to be sung on liturgical occasions, especially as an accompaniment to festivals and sacrifices. Some of the historical books originated in these festivals and gatherings of the whole People: it is quite likely, though not certain, that the first fifteen chapters of Exodus, from the hardening of Pharaoh's heart to the Israelite's departure from Egypt and the Canticle of Moses, centre round stories evolved and developed in connection with the Paschal festival. These stories were told at the Jewish Pasch, they may even have been acted, and they concluded with the Canticle of Moses. It is also very likely that chapters 19 to 24 of Exodus, containing the great scenes on Sinai, were said on certain festival occasions whose object was the renewal of the Covenant. For instance, after the Exile Esdras read the Law to the People assembled in Jerusalem on a holy Day.

The preaching of the Prophets too had the Temple as its principal setting. Amos was an exception: he did not preach in the Temple, but at the schismatic procession in Bethel, which he seems to have followed to remind the people of the demands made by the God of Israel. But Isaias and Jeremias certainly lived in the Temple and Jeremias preached there—which means that the People must have been gathered within the holy precincts.

All this goes to show how the Jewish Scriptures took shape around the liturgy that accompanied the festivals and sacrifices, and how they were intended to give an inner significance to functions that might otherwise have been no more than external actions. Any liturgy or external worship runs the risk of degenerating into rites which are empty of meaning.

Yet so long as Israel was gathered together in one body, leading its national life without any hitch and remaining faithful to its traditions and customs, it does not seem to have been necessary to write down any of the things that were recited and sung. For the fundamental element in this liturgy was the sacrifice. This is a mysterious, universal and very profound feature of most religions: the object of worship, the encounter with God is brought about by sacrifice. In the act of sacrifice, man consecrates

all he is and all the results of his activity and culture to his Creator. The sacrifice consecrates his offering and ensures his communion with God.

### *The Liturgy of the Book*

But in post-Exilic Judaism Israel could no longer offer up sacrifices for they were only possible in Jerusalem. The novelty—and an extraordinary novelty it was—was that a worship was in fact still being celebrated, and with rites whose object was not a sacrifice but the reading of the Word of God. For the Liturgy of the Synagogue now became entirely centred on the Scriptures. In point of fact the Word of God had always been regarded as something divine: the prophets had been convinced of that. Now, dispersed throughout the world, the Israelites had to live their own traditions and affirm their belonging together and their unity, and they found themselves compelled to write their Scriptures down. I will not say that this had not begun before the destruction of the Temple, but it does seem that it was the dispersion, and the founding of the Synagogue, that made it necessary to fix Israel's traditions in writing—the psalms as well as the laws—and thus create the Canon. The Jews were convinced that the Scriptures were something God had given them, and so it was possible to use them as a proper form of worship. From now on worship in the Synagogue had a rite and liturgy of its own: the liturgy of the Covenant.

### *The Covenant continues*

All Israel's liturgies were, of course, liturgies of the Covenant, since the Covenant was the basis of Israel's religion. It was not only a bilateral contract of 'give and take', God granting his blessing to the people if they remained faithful to the Law. The Covenant meant more than that: it meant a joint life lived together by God and his People. Previously such a Covenant had only been able to be lived in the Land of God, where the Lord received his People, for this land had been given to them so that the People of God could live there as a holy People.

When the worship of the Synagogue took the place of the Temple, this alliance, this Covenant, which had formerly been sealed by sacrifices, was now sealed by the worship itself. The People of Israel still received the Word of God, the pledge of God and the Law of God, but in return they now gave their Faith.

Their worship became more inward and to a certain extent more spiritual. Israel gradually came to realize that animal victims could be of no avail without an interior offering and a real consecration of human life.

### *The Part played by the Scribes*

Thus the Synagogue was in fact the origin of the written Bible, which became the Sacred Book of the liturgy. From this point dates the great tradition of the copyists and scribes of Israel, a tradition so perfect that the Hebrew Bible has in fact been handed down to us much more faithfully than were the Books of the New Testament—a fact proved recently by the discoveries made in the Qumran caves. The Scriptures were regarded as things absolutely sacred. From this time dates the movement which tended to turn the religion of Israel into a religion of THE BOOK (a tendency which became a real aberration in the Islamic religion, where the Book itself became a divine object). Hence the importance of learning, which has been so great in all subsequent Judaism. The Synagogue was not only a place of worship, but also a school-house and a place of study. Here lay the source of Jewish culture and education throughout the centuries; and it explains why the Jews were able to keep their unity and their Scriptures. 'Israel will have nothing to fear from her enemies', one Rabbi said, 'as long as children's voices can be heard repeating the words of the Law in the Synagogues.'

### *He who fulfilled the Scriptures*

The fact that the Synagogue gave Israel the Scriptures may have been providential for Christianity. For Jesus certainly presented himself as the One who came to fulfil the Scriptures. And this did not simply mean that he was able to give the answer to enigmas or riddles posed by Holy Writ, or to fulfil such and such a mysterious prophecy whose sense till then had been obscure. There is of course this element in the fulfilment of the Scriptures. But there is also something much greater and more wonderful; for what was meant was that Jesus manifested in his own Person, in his movements, his words, his life and death, everything towards which the People of Israel had till then been tending. It meant that he was to show why God had chosen Israel, why he had given her the Law and inspired her with a certain expectation.

The fulfilment of the Scriptures meant first of all, literally, that Jesus was the One who observed the Scriptures and kept the Law to perfection. It meant that it was Jesus whom the prophets had called for, when they had preached righteousness, for he alone achieved the righteousness they required. He alone was faithful to their teaching. He realized what no other Israelite had been able to realize: an utter faithfulness to the Scriptures and the perfect fulfilment of them.

It seems to me providential that Jesus should have revealed the meaning of the Scriptures at a time when they were taking the shape of a Book and forming a Canon. In a sense it may be said that the portrait of Jesus was taking shape and being traced in the Holy Book just when its original was being revealed in the living Face of Our Lord. Thus Israel was able to do all that God required of her in the Scriptures and at the same time to discover in Jesus Christ One who gave God his full due. It seems therefore quite natural that Jesus should have appeared in the Synagogue—where the Scriptures were read and re-read—as the One who came to fulfil them.

### *The Septuagint*

There are a few minor points contained within this great providential fact which are worth emphasizing. The Synagogue, for instance, was responsible for the Greek text of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, so called because it was done by seventy translators locked up in separate rooms, who, tradition says, were found in the end to have produced exactly the same text. This is certainly a legend, but it has an underlying truth behind it, namely the fact that the translation bears the mark of the hand of God. Whether it was inspired or not is a disputed question. Some excellent theologians and a number of Church Fathers have asserted that after all the translation of the Septuagint may have been just as inspired as the Hebrew original was. However that may be, the translation itself was made necessary by the existence of the Synagogue which had to provide an intelligible text for communities scattered in countries where Hebrew was not understood. And, important for us, it supplied the first missionaries with a vocabulary which enabled them to address the pagan world directly, and thus win it to Christ.

It is difficult for us to gauge the importance of a translation *in*

the matter of evangelizing pagans. A missionary can understand the seriousness of the problem. When he lands in a new world he wonders what words he is going to use to convey the fundamental realities he has brought with him, how he is going to translate into the pagan language certain words which have no equivalent outside the Christian world, words like 'God', 'Sacrifice', 'Penance', 'the Spirit'. This is a very difficult task and it means that the missionary has to be fully acquainted with the civilization he is entering.

There is an example of these risks and dangers in the life of St Francis Xavier, who, when he first began to preach, was given a word for 'God' by a Japanese. He used it, only to discover later that it signified a dreadful and terrifying divinity, more demon than god, and that he had in fact been teaching his hearers to worship the devil.

Not all the early Christian missionaries were so well up in Greek civilization that they could speak to the people they approached in an intelligible religious language, and the Greek version of the Old Testament was therefore a first-rate instrument for establishing and spreading Christianity. And this was due to the deep and thoughtful work done two centuries earlier by the translators in Alexandria, who knew very well what they were about.

There is one very striking example of this. In translating the first commandment, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God', a less thoughtful translator would naturally have rendered 'love' by the usual word *eran*, which sounds equivocal even to our ears, and we have been Christian for centuries. If this had been done, the Greek world would never have grasped what it really meant to 'love God'. Fortunately the Jewish translators in Alexandria deliberately chose the verb *agapan*, a word less frequently used but one which enabled the Greeks to understand what the love of God and men really meant in Revelation and in the Bible.

The establishment of the Scriptures and the Greek translation for use in the Synagogues seems to have been providential. Pagan converts to Christianity were brought into contact with both the Jewish scriptural tradition of the true God and him who had come to fulfil the Scriptures. The importance of this double discovery becomes plain when we find St Luke, a writer from the pagan world, faithfully adopting the Jewish Scriptures along with

the Christian faith: the stories of our Lord's childhood, especially in the first two chapters of his Gospel, are closely interwoven with passages from the Old Testament. This is not surprising in the case of St Matthew, who was a Jew, but St Luke had been a pagan, and it shows that when he became converted to Christ he knew that he had to become converted to Israel too, and to the Bible which Israel gave him.

### *More sacred than the Scriptures*

In the first part of this paper we remarked upon the essential difference between the unity of the Church and the unity of the Synagogue. Here is another remarkable difference. Although the Church accepted the Word of God in the Scriptures as something sacred, she had something more sacred than a written Book, and that was the Eucharist. The Scriptures are made perpetual and eternally living in the Eucharistic Presence, and this fact appeared historically from the very first day. The Jewish Christians continued to attend the meetings in the Synagogue along with the other Jews, and for a long time they found no difficulty in this. However, they realized that they had something else besides the Scriptures, and they began to meet in their own homes to celebrate the Eucharist. Today these two meetings, the one in the Synagogue and the Eucharistic meeting, which used to be separate, are joined together: first we celebrate the reading service inherited from the Synagogue, then the Eucharistic service which forms the Mass proper. We saw earlier that the destruction of the Temple deprived Israel of the encounter with God that took place in the Sacrifice. This the Christian Church rediscovered, and with the Eucharist she reintroduced the Sacrifice of Christ into the worship of the Book. The Synagogue had sprung from the destruction of the Temple, as a providential but imperfect alternative to it, but it could not claim to take the place of the Temple; whereas the sacrifice of Christ contains and sums up the whole of the Temple liturgy.

### *Memorial and Expectation*

Worship in the Synagogue, however, centred entirely around a tradition—the past, surviving in the holy Book—and an expectation. The Eucharist has both these features: it is a memorial of the past, but a memorial which really becomes present on the

altar; it has a past history, yet is perpetually present; and it is also an expectation, but what we, Christians, look forward to is ours already. This is possible because the Word became Flesh and the Word brings the Spirit. The Word of God is not fossilized in a book, it goes deeper than the written words: in the Sacrament it is a Life, the Life of Jesus, the Word of the Father. And in fact it is more than that, for in Jesus all was Life, his actions, his movements, even his times of silence. There are certain things that the Scriptures are unable to tell us: the Person of Jesus is absolutely necessary to convey the Mystery of God to us and to give us access to what God is: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This Person is given to us in the Scriptures, but he is given to us in a better way in the Eucharist. Thus the Sacrament, the Food of Christians, deeply modified the Synagogue as an institution.

#### *The Christian Tradition*

The Synagogue was based on a book and a verbal tradition: one man said something to another, and he in his turn said it to a third. The Christian tradition is not a verbal tradition. It still has the Scriptures as its nucleus and centre, and it never gets estranged from them, but it overlaps and completes them. Being broader and more extensive, it is bound to be more faithful to Jesus Christ as a living Person. This fidelity to the Spirit of the Christian tradition finds tangible proof in a fact to which I referred above when speaking of the Jewish copyists and scribes: the New Testament writings were not transcribed as carefully and faithfully as the Jewish Scriptures which had been copied in the Synagogues. This is not difficult to understand.

In the Jewish world, the Bible, precisely because it was a holy thing, was never taken out of the Synagogue, so that the number of copies remained comparatively small. The Christians, on the other hand, who were on the whole less well educated than the Jews, all wanted to have the Scriptures at home. There was a great demand for copies of the Gospels and St Paul's Epistles. As these had to be produced for a wide public and the Christians had no specialized copyists the work was not done as carefully and faithfully as in the Synagogue. The Christian copyists sometimes took liberties with the text. While reading or copying one Gospel they would suddenly remember another, and they had no scruples whatsoever about changing a word here and there and sub-



stituting another which they thought better. Technically, this is a serious loss, yet nothing was lost to the Faith. The miracle—if one may so call it—was that in spite of these occasional liberties the Gospel remained absolutely unaffected: the worst Christian manuscripts—and some are very bad indeed—do not contain a single error. The Christian tradition was not affected because it had a living tradition to support it.

*'What hast thou that thou hast not received?'*

In conclusion, let us remember one last thing we owe to the institution of the Synagogue: it forces us to be continually remembering our origins. One of the great temptations for the members of any chosen group is to believe that they have deserved their election. Both Christians and Jews are prone to imagine that their privileges—Baptism in one case, Choice in the other—have been granted them because of their exceptional merits. It was Israel's temptation to believe that she had deserved her election, and it is a temptation facing the Christian today to believe that he has deserved his vocation.

The Bible reminds the People of God unceasingly that left to themselves they are nothing, that the Lord has made them what they are. They would have been reduced to nothing in Egypt had not God taken them out of that land of paganism and oppression. When the author of Deuteronomy describes the ideal life for Israel, he insists on the helplessness of the people and the free gifts they have received from God in 'a land flowing with milk and honey'.<sup>1</sup> The Jews were a peasant people and like all peasants attached to their own soil, yet the Holy Book did its best to root them even more firmly, reminding them that they had not been born in the land but brought there, finding 'great and goodly cities which they had not built for themselves, houses full of riches which they had not set up for themselves . . . vineyards and oliveyards which they had not planted themselves',<sup>2</sup> a land where everything came from God and whose fertility was a result of the rain that fell from heaven, which man himself could not provide. And in this 'land of God' they had to 'do all his precepts before the Lord', so that they might enjoy the gifts of God.

The Prophets insist on this teaching too, and we, Christians,

<sup>1</sup> Deut. vi, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Deut. vi, 10, 11.

should apply it to ourselves. As a help in this, the Church always finds herself facing a religion and a People which compel her to remember her origins. Everywhere she finds the Jewish People on the same path as herself, scattered as they are, competing with Christians and partly at least possessing the same riches as she herself does. This is a constant reminder that she does not hold these riches from herself but from the divine mercy.

Thus the Christian is continually being encouraged not only to be modest, which is only human, but to be humble, in the sense of acknowledging that he owes everything to God, and through the ministry and instrumentality of other men. The Church has received her inheritance from a People who suffered to preserve it and hand it on. This seems to me to be one of the chief services the Synagogue still renders the Church to this day, and we Christians should never stop thanking God for it.

*(Concluded)*



## THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

P. J. O'MAHONY

**T**HE Fourth Gospel has variously been called the 'Gospel of Grace', 'of Love', 'of the Divinity of Christ', and all these may be applied to it with equal aptness. Perhaps the most striking title is that of 'Grace'. It is the Gospel of hope in our future glory and of our present bliss. We are presented in it with a divinely optimistic view of life because it brings the message of God's infinite and eternal love for mankind. One cannot read it, it seems, and not deepen one's love of God. All this arises from its central theme, which is Restoration. It brings to sinful man new hope of salvation.

If one were asked to produce a text in support of the doctrine of original sin, as a preamble to the doctrine of grace, one could only offer the whole Gospel, for, although original sin is nowhere specifically mentioned, the notion of our estrangement from God is everywhere evident. It is from this estrangement that Christ came to save us.

The Gospel pictures for us the world in a state of utter darkness; in need of light which is the power to believe, for mankind