

THE READING OF THE SCRIPTURES.

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The study of the Scriptures is pleasant and interesting, but it would be going too far to say that it is easy. They treat of God and the supernatural, we could not expect to grasp the full sense of the Sacred text at a reading. We require help to understand the Bible. Now, the labours of the greatest scholars of the whole Christian era have done much to clarify the meaning of the Scriptures. Sound principles of interpretation have been formulated to guide us in reading; knowledge of these will be of the greatest assistance to us. Again, a general idea of the content of each of the two Testaments that make up the Bible will be at once an attraction and an aid to the reading and understanding of them. This is true of the classics of ordinary literature; it is no less true of the Bible.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

THE first rule for the interpretation of Holy Scripture is that the text be read carefully. This may appear self-evident, but at least it requires to be emphasised. Nothing is so important as the reading of the Scripture itself—continuous, assiduous reading, and so far as possible, methodical, systematic reading. An old trite axiom says: "The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself." The Bible is an harmonious whole. The books which compose it, though beautifully varied in literary form and style, are one in their principal author,—God; and one in their purpose,—to teach us God. One passage in the Bible will shed light on another, and the study of the text itself is always the first consideration.

Again, for the very reason that the Bible is difficult of interpretation the text must be read closely. The same is true of any difficult text. Thus, in the matter of Canon Law, the law of the Church, which requires close study and often a commentary by an expert, the same rule holds good. "Read the Code" is always the advice of professors to students of this subject. This is not to depreciate commentaries. These have their function and value, to be sure; but they are of secondary importance to the reading of the text. A well-known adage of philosophy warns us that "The accessory follows the principal." The commentary is an accessory; the text is the principal. The commentary is a means to an end; the end is the elucidation of the text. This golden rule of reading the text is convincingly established by its success in the case of St. Jerome,* whom the Church, in the prayer for his feast (Roman Breviary, September 30th) calls Her "greatest Doctor in interpreting the Sacred Scriptures." With reference to his stay of three years on the Aventine in Rome, he writes: "I frequently explained to a number of others, as far as I could; the divine books; reading of them had created interest; interest, familiarity; familiarity, confidence." (Epistle 45, 2).

Note the sequence—reading, interest, familiarity, confidence; and confidence implies proficiency.

THE ORIENTAL MIND.

The Bible was written in the East, and its idiom and literary form reflect the Oriental mind, and differ widely from our western mode of expression. For one thing, figurative language abounds, especially those four figures of speech which we call respectively the simile, the parable, the metaphor, the allegory. For the easterns, who are a highly imaginative people, these figures are the ordinary mode of conveying ideas; we use them too, but not nearly to the same extent. In any event, they are almost a necessity for bringing home the truths of religion to the ordinary mind. Our knowledge comes to us through the senses, and we think mainly in terms of space and time. A trained philosopher can transcend these limitations and think in the abstract, but trained philosophers are a minority of mankind. Now, the truths which the Bible teaches deal with the spiritual order, with a world not measured in terms of time and space. These figures of speech, therefore, convey the divine message in a manner suited to the capacity of the simplest mind, and at the same time add great literary beauty.

A simile is simply a comparison. Thus, Our Lord expressed His solicitude for the people of Jerusalem by comparing it to that instinctive care of the mother hen which gathers her chickens beneath her wings for their comfort and protection: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, . . . how often, would I have gathered together thy children, as the hen doth gather her chickens under her wings, and thou wouldst not?" (St. Matthew 23, 37). The idea is conveyed all the more forcibly

* *St. Jerome was born about 347 A.D.; died in 420 A.D.*

because the Saviour's love is compared with something which is familiar to us, and expressed in terms of what is known to us.

THE PARABLES.

Closely allied to the simile is the parable, which we meet especially in the Gospels where it is so frequently made a vehicle of His teaching by the Son of God. A parable is a sustained or continued simile. The parables of the Gospel are of surpassing beauty, rich in glorious and varied imagery simple, yet profound; abounding in force and divine eloquence—God condescending not only to teach us the truths of eternal life, but further to accommodate that teaching to our limited understanding so that we may be led from the things of sight and sound to the higher truth; of the immaterial order. "The kingdom of heaven is said to be like to things of space in order that the mind may rise from the things which it knows to those which it knows not." (St. Gregory, the Great,* Homily II on the Gospels).

In all these similes and parables there is first of all the image taken from ordinary human affairs; for instance, the unjust steward of St. Luke 16, 1-9, who, having neglected his employer's interests, is called to account.

This must be studied and clearly visualised, to begin with. Secondly, there is the point of comparison,—in every case one particular truth is emphasised, and the comparison is pointed to demonstrate that truth. In this parable of the unjust steward the point of comparison is his sagacity and foresight in making provision for his future by remitting debts due to his master while he still has power to do so; "And the lord commended the unjust steward, forasmuch as he had done wisely" (i.e. prudently). (St. Luke 16, 8). The question of the dishonesty of his action does not enter at all. The only point at issue is the prudence he displays in regard to his future temporal welfare. This then leads on to the third feature of the parable, viz., the spiritual truth to be demonstrated. This is demonstrated in our parable here by force of contrast: "the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light.." (St. Luke 16, 8). People display keener astuteness in their temporal than in their spiritual affairs.

METAPHOR AND ALLEGORY.

Metaphors are frequent in the Bible, and a metaphor may be described as "a simile with the words of comparison omitted," as, for instance, where Our Lord says: "And why seest thou the Mote that 'is in thy brother's eye; and seest not the beam that is in thy own, eye?" (St. Matthew 7, 3). People who criticise little imperfections in their neighbour's conduct when (as often happens in the case of critics) their own conduct is gravely wrong, are described, as it were concerned about a particle of dust in another's eye and oblivious of the presence in their own of a beam of timber. There is here hyperbole (i.e. exaggeration for rhetorical effect) as well, as again in the description of those "who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (St. Matthew 23, 24); this lends additional emphasis.

The allegory bears the same relation to the metaphor as the parable does to the simile—it is a sustained metaphor. Thus, the necessity of Divine Grace is forcibly taught in the Gospel passage where Our Lord says: "I am the true vine; and My Father is the husbandman,. . . Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abide in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. . . . Without Me you can do nothing" (St. John 15,1-5).

These four figures of speech are all closely related. To understand one is to understand all. Then, that done, we have already acquired much that will help us to understand the doctrine and to appreciate the literary charm of the Scriptures generally, and of the Gospels in particular.

THE CONTEXT.

After the text, the matter next in importance is the context, i.e., the part of the book before and after a particular passage. This gives us the general trend of the sense. Many difficulties which arise will be resolved by reconsidering a text in the light of the general argument, or theme of the chapter or book. And many of the objections which are urged against Catholic doctrine are simple instances of texts of Scripture arbitrarily wrenched from their context and then given a meaning which they do not bear in the Scripture itself. Even already in apostolic times there were "the unlearned and unstable" who similarly "wrested the Scriptures to their own destruction." (cfr. 2 St. Peter 3, 16).

* *St. Gregory the Great, Pope, born about 540 A.D, died 604 A.D.*

COMMENTARIES.

From this point onward good commentators have their proper place; and by good commentators I mean those Catholic scholars who, beginning from the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, have laboured in every century since to make clear the meaning of the Word of God in learned works of introduction, exegesis, and Biblical Theology. These books tell us, as far as possible, the history of the human author and of his time; the occasion which called forth a particular book of Scripture; the people to whom it was first addressed, etc. This is by way of preparation. They then take up the text verse by verse, and explain its meaning, and always in the light of the text of the original language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) in which the book was written. A translation can never convey the meaning as the original will, and a good commentary will always be able to clarify little obscurities in the text by reference to the original. Thus, Philippians 3, 2: "Beware of dogs: beware of evil workers: beware of the concision," becomes much more intelligible from the Greek text which has: 'Beware of the dogs, beware of the bad workmen, beware of the concision.' St. Paul here refers to the Judaizing heretics of the early Church whom he calls 'dogs'—symbolical of uncleanness; 'bad workmen'—because they destroyed, instead of building, the mystical Temple of God, i.e. the Church; 'the concision' (metonymy--abstract for concrete) i.e. the mutilated,—an ironical reference to the circumcision which they sought to impose as of precept.

Another useful matter in exegesis is the history of secular events contemporary with the biblical narrative. Thus, the history of the rise of the Persian Empire under Cyrus sheds much light on the text of the Books of Esdras : that of the Herodian dynasty on the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. In his explanation of St. Matthew 10, where we read of the return of the Holy Family from Egypt "when Herod was dead", St. Jerome. has: "many err through ignorance of history thinking that the Herod by whom Our Lord was mocked during His Passion is the same as he who is here said to be dead. That Herod, who afterwards renewed friendship with Pilate is the son of this Herod and a brother of Archelaus." (Commentary on St. Matthew, Book I). The geography of Palestine is equally useful. In this latter we can assist ourselves by a little study of the maps which are found in all good editions of the Scriptures. We will easily familiarise ourselves with the physical and geographical features of the Holy Land; its position north of Arabia, south of Syria, with Phoenicia at the north-west; its capital, Jerusalem ; the course of the river Jordan,—rising at the foot of the Anti-Lebanon range of Mountains, flowing southward through Lake Merom (modern Hûleh), and the Lake of Genesareth, through the Jordan Valley (El Ghor) till it empties into the Dead Sea; the sites of Hebron, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Cana, Naim, Bethania, etc. A small country, no bigger than the Irish province of Munster, the Holy Land has been the theatre of the most wonderful events in the history of the world.

THEOLOGY.

Finally, and especially, a good commentator on the Scriptures will come to his task "well acquainted with the whole circle of Theology and deeply read in the commentaries of the Holy Fathers and the Doctors, and other interpreters of mark." (Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*). This is an essential qualification in an exegete; it is not merely an advantage, it is absolutely indispensable, *a sine qua non*. This by reason of the very nature of the Scriptures. They are not ordinary books; they are the inspired Word of God; they have a dual authorship,—divine and human. Their purpose is to teach us divine truth, and, to quote again from the same source, "the language of the Bible is employed to express, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, many things which are beyond the power and scope of the nature and reason of man—that is to say divine mysteries and all that is related to them." The Pope quotes at length to the same effect from the writings of the Fathers of the Church, especially from St. Irenaus,* St. Jerome, St. Augustine.[†] Then, he goes on to say: "Wherefore the first, the dearest object of the Catholic commentator should be to interpret those passages which have received an authentic interpretation either from the sacred writers themselves, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost (as in many places of the New Testament), or from the Church, under the assistance of the same Holy Spirit, whether by her solemn judgment or her ordinary and universal magisterium (Council of the Vatican. Session 3, Chapter 3)—to interpret these passages in that identical sense, and to prove by all the resources of science, that sound hermeneutical laws admit of no other interpretation. In other passages

* *St. Irenaus, Bishop of Lyons, lived in the second century.*

[†] *St. Augustine-354-430*

the analogy of faith should be followed, and Catholic doctrine, as authoritatively proposed by the Church, should be held as the supreme law; for, seeing that the same God is author both of the Sacred Books and of the divine command to the Church, it is clearly impossible that any teaching can by legitimate means be extracted from the former, which shall in any respect be at variance with the latter." These words put the Catholic position clearly.

AN OBJECTION ANSWERED.

"This is eminently reasonable, as every Catholic knows well. Many non-Catholics, however, object to this ruling of the Church as being tyrannical and a curtailment of our freedom in biblical study. On the contrary, this ruling "rather protects it (the pursuit of biblical science) from error, and largely assists its real progress. A wide field is still left open to the private student in which his hermeneutical skill may display itself with signal effect, and to the advantage of the Church." (Ibid.) There is no curtailment of freedom properly so called. Freedom is a mean between unreasonable servitude on the one hand and unreasonable licence on the other. We are not free to think contrary to the laws of mathematics; yet no one calls it tyranny because we may not think that ten and ten make fifteen. So likewise we are still free though we are bound to conform to the laws of logic and Theology. Our opponents might as reasonably maintain that a physician's freedom is curtailed by his knowledge of chemistry. It is,—in the sense that he has no longer freedom to administer wrong drugs through ignorance, and so poison his patient. The freedom which the Catholic exegete enjoys appertains to the true freedom referred to in the Gospel: "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed in him: if you continue in My Word you shall be my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth and the truths shall make you free." (St. John 8, 31-32). Truth is the friend, not the enemy of freedom.

Finally, the Bible presupposes Theology. Consider its opening sentence: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." (Genesis 1, 1). This statement supposes at least that the reader believes in the supernatural and that he is a monotheist; otherwise, the Bible would begin by stating and proving the existence of God. And, as a fact of history, the Israelites of Moses' time, for whom Genesis was first written, had Theology.

THE NEW TESTAMENT.

The word testament means a covenant, a pact, an agreement between two parties. It was used to denote the covenant or agreement made by God with Abraham (Genesis 17), where the latter in return for faith in God and obedience to God's commands was promised great blessings for himself and his descendants. This Testament was only to lead on to another which was frequently foretold in the prophecies, viz., "the New and Eternal Testament," inaugurated by Our Divine Lord at the Last Supper and on Calvary, sealed in His Precious Blood, and solemnly promulgated on the day of the first Pentecost. St. Paul explains that the New Testament makes the former old (cfr. Hebrews 8, 13); thus came the terms Old and New Testament. The books of the Old Testament are those written during the period of the first Covenant; the books of the New are those written after the Christian era began. We speak of them respectively as the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.

THE GOSPELS.

When we open our New Testament the first books we meet are the four Gospels. The word Gospel is from the old Anglo-Saxon godspel, a compound of god (good) and spa, (tidings). It is a literal rendering of the Greek word, euaggelion, latinised into evanyclium. We have the same root in the word evangelist. The word was used several times by Our Lord to mean the doctrine of Christianity, e.g., in St. Mark 16, 15: "Go ye into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature." The meaning of the word is clarified from the parallel passage in St. Matthew 28, 19-20: "Going, therefore, teach ye all nations: baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." In this sense also the word is used by St. Paul: "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel. For it is the power of God unto salvation. . ." (Romans I, 16). It means the whole economy of the Christian dispensation with its divine benefits on the one hand and on the other, its doctrine—dogmatic and moral, mystical and liturgical. This is what we mean when we speak of "the Gospel" without further qualification. The word is admirably adapted to its purpose—the Gospel is primarily and above all the glad tidings of victory in and through Christ Our Lord.

Here I digress for a moment to reprobate the practice of misapplying to merely human doctrines this word, gospel, consecrated by Our Lord Himself to connote His incomparable divine teaching, and so used for nineteen centuries. In rhetoric and literature we find this misapplication frequently. However good and desirable these doctrines may be thought to be by their advocates, the latter should be able to realise that they are separated by a gulf of infinity from the unique doctrine of Christ in which "the justice of God is revealed . . . from faith unto faith," (Romans 1, 17). The practice has now taken on the character of a literary vogue, and Catholics require to be warned against adopting it.

THE WRITTEN GOSPELS.

To resume our theme, we can now understand the meaning of the title "according to" given to the written Gospels. "The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St. Matthew" means the record of the life and teaching of Our Divine Lord while on earth, written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost by St. Matthew. And so for SS. Mark, Luke and John, respectively. This we understand always, when for brevity we speak of "the Gospel of St. Matthew," or simply (as in references) "St. Matthew." Strictly speaking it would be more correct to say the four books of the one Gospel than the four Gospels, as St. Augustine observes. (in *ioannem*, tractatus 36, 1). Also this form of title indicates the fact that the Gospels are not merely historical books, but in addition, doctrinal, and primarily doctrinal. (Rudolf Comely, S.J. *Compendium Introduction-is in U.T. libros*. 8 ed. Paris, 1914 p. 474).

The first three Gospels (SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke) are called the Synoptic Gospels, or the Synoptics simply. This term has a history. From the time of St. Augustine at least, Scriptural scholars had been impressed by the many resemblances in the matter, order and style of the first three Gospels, whereas St. John is in complete contrast on all three points. For one thing, St. John treats almost exclusively of Our Lord's ministry in Judea, while they treat mainly of His ministry in Galilee. The question becomes the more complicated by reason of many points of difference which exist between the said three Gospels mutually. The better to study this question, a German biblical critic named Johann Jacob Griesbach (1745-1812) had the text of the first three Gospels printed in parallel columns. This was called a synopsis, because all three could be seen simultaneously; this is the etymological meaning of the word, which has now come to denote an epitome. From that arose the terms Synoptic Gospels and Synoptic Problem. Granted the synoptic problem, however, the four evangelists are at one in giving a detailed history of the Passion and Crucifixion of Our Divine Lord. This agrees in turn with St. Paul : "We preach Christ crucified. . ." (I Corinthians I, 23).

The Gospels are particularly dear to us, for they are the Word of God in a twofold sense. They are written under divine inspiration, and have God for their author. In addition they record the acts and words of the Incarnate Son of God during His glorious life on earth. If this record had been written by an ordinary historian who was a contemporary and an eye-witness it would still be very valuable indeed; but written as it is by the inspired evangelists it is of transcendent value.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES.

St. Luke, the evangelist, "the most dear physician" (Colossians 4, 14), tells us the history of the early Church in this eminently beautiful book of the Acts, and in his simple and distinctive style. It is intended to be a sequel to the narrative of the third Gospel.

Beginning from Our Lord's Ascension into Heaven, it describes (chapters 1-12) the Descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost; the first preaching of the Apostles; the piety and fervour of the first Christians and the waywardness of some few; the ordination of the first deacons; St. Stephen, the first of the Christian martyrs; the conversion of St. Paul the Apostle; the vocation of the gentiles; the persecution of the Church by Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod who had caused the Holy Innocents to be massacred (Matthew 2, 16). From this point onward (chapters 13-28), the narrative centres entirely around St. Paul. It tells of his three great missionary journeys; his introducing the Gospel into Europe; the persecutions he suffered; his arrest, trial, imprisonment, and the shipwreck at Malta; his arrival in Rome, "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (Philemon 1), in 61 A.D.

THE EPISTLES OF ST. PAUL.

St. Paul the Apostle—the "vessel of election" (Acts 9, 15), i.e., the divinely elected instrument, the "Doctor of the

gentiles"—was suddenly changed from a persecutor of the Church into a zealous preacher of the Gospel by a stupendous miracle (Acts 9). Christ, Our Lord, Who had ascended into Heaven, came down to earth again and appeared to him. Christianity took to itself all that was good in the three great civilisations of the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans; And St. Paul united in himself all three—born in Asia Minor, a Roman citizen, of Jewish-parentage, and educated in Jerusalem "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22, 3)— Gamaliel who was one of the seven greatest Jewish Doctors of all time. Christianity, through the aid of divine Grace, gives the perfection of every natural endowment; and this perfection was realised in the Apostle to an extraordinary degree.

In the New Testament we have fourteen of St. Paul's Epistles.* They are inexhaustible sources of the most profound and sublime doctrine; and side by side with this the wonderful personality of St. Paul reveals itself so clearly that you soon come to know him and to love him, and to think of him as a friend.

THE CATHOLIC EPISTLES;[†] THE APOCALYPSE

The seven Catholic Epistles are written in very simple language. They were written to meet the practical spiritual needs of the Christians of the first century, and they contain exhortations to virtue and to the observance of the Christian law. St. James treats, among other things, of the necessity of good works, without which faith lacks its life, which is charity. He denounces in very convincing words the myriad evils which arise from an unguarded tongue, and by an apt comparison shows how unreasonable it is that the same tongue should be employed to bless (i.e. praise) God, and curse a fellowman: "Doth a fountain send forth out of the same hole sweet and bitter water?" (St. James 3, 11). There are two Epistles of St. Peter, "the first Papal Encyclicals." The first Epistle of St. John is a covering letter of introduction to his Gospel; his three Epistles exhale that spirit of love which we associate with "the beloved Disciple." The brief Epistle of St. Jude denounces heresy and vice, and is written in a style of plain unstudied eloquence.

Lastly, there is the Apocalypse** written by St. John the Evangelist when he was a prisoner, exiled by order of the Emperor Domitian in the rocky island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. (1, 9). The first three chapters are easily understood; he addresses admonitions to the bishops of the seven principal churches of Asia Minor, and his gentleness is not incompatible with strength and force when abuses call for correction. From chapter 4 the book contains prophecies relating to the future of the Church and the end of the world, and these are veiled in imagery which is not a little obscure.

Appropriately, the Apocalypse ends with a description of Heaven under the symbolism of a city. Thus the Bible begins on earth and ends in Heaven. So also with regard to the understanding of its divine message; it too, begins on earth and it will end and be complete only in the light of the beatific Vision in Heaven.

THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Both Testaments alike are the inspired Word of God. The Council of Florence states clearly: "The Holy Roman Church . . . professes that One and the Same God is Author of the Old and the New Testament, i.e., of this Law and the Prophets and of the Gospel: because the holy men of both Testaments spoke under the inspiration of the Same Holy Spirit." (Decree for the Jacobites. Denzinger Bannwart. 16 ed. No. 706). The New Testament itself bears witness to this in Our Lord's own words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not think that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy but to fulfil." (St. Matthew 5, 17).

** The authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews has been from Patristic times an open question among Catholic scholars, and remains so still. I speak of its Pauline authorship without prejudice to the opinion of those who claim that in its final form it was written by another than St. Paul, since they agree that "St Paul conceived and conveyed the matter of the Epistle . . . leaving its form to another hand." (C. C. Martindale, S.J. Princes of His People, 2. St. Paul. "The Household of God" Series. London, 1924, p. 240). This opinion has the full sanction of the Biblical Commission : Denzinger-Bannwart 15 ed. Nos. 2176-2178.*

† Catholic or Universal, because not addressed to particular churches or individuals as were St. Paul's Epistles.

*** apocalypse is a Greek word meaning Revelation.*

Again, when we read the New Testament we must be impressed by the number of citations from, and references to the Old Testament. This is especially true of the Gospel of St. Matthew and of St. Paul's Epistles. St. Matthew in writing his Gospel had in mind the immediate needs of those Jews who were the first converts to Christianity, and in consequence he proved for them that Christ Our Lord is the Messiah promised and foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures. St. Paul was well versed in the Old Testament before his conversion. He quotes it very frequently, and uses it with great effect in defending and expounding the Gospel. To understand the New Testament, therefore, it is necessary to read and study the Old.

Nor is the interest which we discovered in the study of the New Testament absent from that of the Old. On the contrary, it is, if possible, still greater. It was to the Old Testament Scriptures Our Lord referred when He said:

"Search the Scriptures . . . the same are they that give testimony of Me." (St. John 5, 39). This testimony of Our Divine Redeemer has an imperative claim on us. Again, the heroic virtues of many of the saints of the Old Law are proposed in the New Testament for our admiration and imitation, e.g., the faith of Abraham (Hebrews 8, 10) ; the patience of Job (St., James 5, 11); the modesty of Sara. (I St. Peter 3, 6).

THE HISTORICAL BOOKS.

The first five books of the Old Testament are called the Pentateuch.* They were written by Moses to whom we have frequent reference in the New Testament. He begins with a short account of the creation of the material universe and of man in two sublime chapters. Then already in the third chapter of the first book (Genesis) we have the terrible tragedy of the Fall by which sin and sorrow were introduced into the world, disturbing the harmony of all creation. The narrative moves rapidly on to describe the circumstances leading to the Deluge; then we have the call of Abraham, and thenceforward Abraham and his descendants are the chosen people to whom "the words of God were committed" (Romans 3, 2).

THE TYPICAL SENSE OF HOLY SCRIPTURE.

The Book of Exodus tells of Moses and his mission to deliver the Hebrew people from Egypt, where they had been persecuted and reduced to slavery. In connection with this deliverance it describes the first institution of the Pasch, which became the greatest religious festival of the Old Law. The exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb are two examples of many places in the Old Testament where there is a typical or mystical sense in addition to the literal. The words tell us the historical facts which occurred, but, moreover, these facts themselves had a further meaning, and were prophetic of future events which found fulfilment in the New Law. From St. Matthew 2, 15, we know that this liberation of the Israelites under Moses' leadership was a type or prophetic figure of the return of Christ from Egypt. Similarly, the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb was a type of the immolation of Our Lord on Calvary. (cfr. ,St. John 19, 36). Even the ceremonies prescribed for the celebration of the Paschal ritual were significant and symbolical. No leaven could be used during the week of the festival (Exodus 12, 15); the full significance of this is explained by St. Paul—leaven is the symbol of corruption and sin, and the unleavened bread symbolises "sincerity and truth" (I Corinthians 5, 7-8).

The Pentateuch brings the history of the Old Testament down to the death of Moses and the end of the Patriarchal period about 1400 B.C. Josue describes the conquest and division of Chanaan (Palestine) by the Israelites, under the valiant hero of that name who is also the human author of the book. Judges tells of their system of government under divinely appointed Judges or dictators for a period of about four hundred years. The idyllic Book of Ruth (of four chapters only) tells how Ruth, a Moabite woman, and therefore a gentile, became the wife of Boos and so the ancestress of King David. She is one of the three women mentioned in the genealogy of the human ancestry of Our Lord (St. Matthew 1, 5). The four Books of Kings and the two of Paralipomenon treat of the Monarchy of Israel until the Babylonian Exile (1051-586 B.C.). In 4 Kings 17, we have the origin of that strange people, the Samaritans. They were "planted" into Palestine from Babylon and its environs by the Assyrian King, Salmansasar; a fact which accounts for their peculiar cult (St. John 4, 20), and explains the mutual antipathy between Samaritan and Jew, thus illustrating many passages in the New Testament.

* *Pentateuch is a compound Greek word meaning five sheaths (or cases) in which the rolls or volumes were kept.*

Tobias is of special interest in that it belongs to the former Exile, that of the Ten Tribes. Judith and Esther tell of the Jewish heroines whose names they bear. The two Books of Esdras relate the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Exile, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its Temple. Then there is a lacuna in Sacred History until the Machabees (1 and 2), which record incidents in the religious persecution under the Syro-Grecian Seleucids, successors of Alexander the Great (166-40 B.C.).

THE PROPHETS.

In the Scriptures the word prophet means one who speaks for another rather than one who foretells future events. Thus Aaron is called the "prophet" of Moses (Exodus 7, 1), because he acted as spokesman for the latter before Pharaoh. Moses is called a "prophet" (Deuteronomy 34, 10) because he was bearer of God's message. In time this meaning (spokesman of God) became the technical one, and in the period of Monarchy a "prophet" is one who announces the word of God, generally under divine inspiration. This meaning is retained until the end of the New Testament. The Prophets whose books we read in the Old Testament were all inspired preachers sent in times of religious crisis to preach repentance to sinners and to comfort the just.

In the ninth century B.C. the Prophets begin, and the most delightful chapters of 2 and 4 Kings are those which tell of Elias the Thesbite, the prophet of Carmel (one of the greatest personalities of the Old Testament), and his successor, Eliseus. In the following century, and thence till the end of the Babylonian Exile we have the literary prophets, so called because they have left us their writings in the Bible. Of these there are sixteen (not including Baruch who is generally reckoned with (Jeremias)—the four Greater and the twelve Lesser Prophets. The prophetic books contain the preaching of those Prophets,—vehement denunciation of sin and vice, and moving appeals to repentance and perseverance in virtue.

Especially do the Prophets foretell the coming of the Redeemer. They describe in marvellous detail His character, mission, and miracles, and many circumstances of His life, particularly His sufferings and death. Isaias in places reads more like a Gospel than a Prophet. Icrentias, "the most pathetic of the Prophets," is a Prophet of the Babylonian Exile. His mission was in an evil time, and he was cruelly persecuted by his own people. Yet he loved them intensely, and his Lamentation for the destruction of Jerusalem and the ruin of the Temple are unique in all literature. Ezechiel also is a Prophet of the Babylonian Exile: he prophesied in Babylon itself. The last of the Greater Prophets, Daniel, was also in exile in Babylon. His life, miraculously preserved on many occasions, is rich in interest. His prophecy is quoted by Our Lord. (St. Matthew 24, 15):

The Lesser Prophets are so called because their books are of lesser extent; their prophecies are not less sublime. Jonas is referred to by Our Lord (St. Matthew 12, 40); his miraculous rescue from the sea is another instance of the typical sense of Scripture. St. Peter cites Joel (Acts 2, 17-21) ; St. Stephen, in his discourse before the Sanhedrin, quotes Amos (Acts. 7, 42-43) ; St. Paul quotes Habacuc (Romans 1, 17), and Osee (Romans 9, 25-26). The short Book of Abdias (of one chapter only) is praised by St. Jerome for the sublime mysteries it contains. Micheas foretold the teaching mission of the Church; Nahum, foretold the fall of Ninive, the Assyrian capital; Sophonias foretold the election of the gentiles and the rejection of the Jews. Aggeus and Zacharias, by their zeal for the House of God, forwarded the rebuilding of the Temple under Zorobabel. Malachias, the last of the Prophets, is thought by some to be the same as Esdras. In his prophecy there is a beautiful passage (1, 11), foretelling the Mass, the perfect and universal and continual sacrifice of the New Law.

THE DIDACTIC BOOKS, THE PSALTER,

The remaining seven books of the Old Testament are called the Didactic or Sapiential Books.* They contain precepts and counsels to guide human conduct in accord with the good designs of God. "Job" and "Job's comforters" have passed into the language of the proverbial; the Book of Job describes this marvellous man, his sufferings and his patience.

Proverbs is written in the language of the parable ; Ecclesiastes (i.e. the Preacher) speaks eloquently of the vanity

* *DIDACTIC* because they teach; *SAPIENTIAL* because they contain precepts and maxims of wisdom.

of human glory; the Canticle of Canticles (i.e. the greatest of Canticles) is an allegory in which God's love is described in terms of human love. Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus are very easily read and understood.

Lastly, there is the Psalter or Book of Psalms, which is of special importance because so very extensively used by the Church in the liturgy. The word psalm also is from the Greek. Its original meaning was the striking of notes on a musical instrument. Later it came to mean a song or poem set to music, and finally its meaning was restricted to the sacred songs or hymns of the Old Testament. The Psalms, therefore, are inspired hymns, i.e. inspired prayers in poetic form. The Book of (one hundred and fifty) Psalms is called the Psalter. The word at first denoted the stringed instrument resembling a harp on which the psalm was played,

CONCLUSION.

1. The Bible itself speaks of "the comfort of the Scriptures" (Romans 15, 4). The reading of the Bible in a spirit of faith and humility is an excellent and a practical and a pleasant exercise of piety. But as every good gift of God can be misused, so, too, can the Scriptures. The Church has made just and reasonable laws to protect the Sacred Books from misuse, and to guide us in reading them.

2. We must read the Scriptures from a Catholic edition of them, guaranteed as such by the Ordinary. Such an edition, either of the New Testament separately, or of the whole Bible, can be obtained easily and at a modest price.

3. The reading of the Scriptures is good and praiseworthy and eminently desirable. Our advocacy of the reading of the Bible differs, however, from that of non-Catholics. The Bible is one source of Divine Revelation; Apostolic Tradition is another. The infallible teaching of the Catholic Church makes known to us the doctrines of our faith from these two sources. The reading of the Bible, therefore, is not necessary to salvation; it is an aid: and a powerful aid.

Guided by these very reasonable principles every Catholic who can read may and should draw great spiritual and intellectual profit from THE READING OF THE SCRIPTURES.
