

What Does The Church Really Say About The Bible?

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Foreword

The importance of the Divine Word, God's message to all mankind, was again stressed in recent times by Vatican II in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Its treatment of this Revelation through the divinely inspired Scriptures and Sacred Tradition, together with its usage in the life of the Church, does not teach anything basically new, but officially reaffirms what the Roman Catholic Church has always taught her faithful believers. She has always taught and continues to teach that Scripture, taken together with Sacred Tradition, is the supreme rule of faith. The entire history of the Church shows this profound veneration for Divine Revelation. This is particularly shown to be true by the ancient writers, who constantly quoted from or alluded to the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, and regarded the writings and teaching of the Apostles as inspired. There are, for instance, the Apostolic Fathers (as the author of the Didache, St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Papias) and the principal Apologists of the second century (as St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, the author of the Muratorian Fragment). Like the carriers of the torch to the Olympic games, these ancient Fathers handed down and furnished Christians with orthodox guidelines for their theological creeds and beliefs, the demands for moral behaviour in the world, and norms for liturgical rites.

Edith Myers in her *What Does the Church Really Say about the Bible*, which first appeared in serial articles in *The Wanderer*, has performed a gigantic task. She has given us not her personal speculations or opinions, but the authentic teachings of the Church's Magisterium over the past century. Most Catholics may not have the time or may lack the effort to read all the papal documents and the decisions of the First Pontifical Biblical Commission, all of which she discusses, giving us their substance and bringing all these teachings together and up to date for the first time in English. We should be indebted to her for a work well done. This book will also serve to create a greater love for the Bible, and thus to bring us closer to our heavenly Father through the redemptive death of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, in union with His Holy Spirit. Msgr. John E. Steinmueller (Consultor of the First Pontifical Biblical Commission) Bay Hills, Huntington, New York (1979)

So many strange ideas are in circulation today with regard to the Bible and biblical scholarship that it is important for us to review the Church's official statements on these subjects. One need not be a Scripture scholar to do this. The documents in which the Church has set forth her positions are available to everyone.

PROVIDENTISSIMUS DEUS

The first encyclical concerned with biblical study was *Providentissimus Deus*, issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1893. This encyclical, since it lays down the rules that Catholic scholars are to follow, and since it has been referred to and its principles reaffirmed in every other official pronouncement on the subject, is deserving of careful attention. It is, as Cardinal Bea wrote in 1967, "the Magna Carta of biblical studies." {*The Word of God and Mankind* (Chicago, Franciscan Herald Press, 1967), p. 174.}

In divine Revelation, wrote Pope Leo XIII, there are some things we may know by unassisted reason, but which are made the object of such Revelation so that all may know them with certainty and safety from error. Supernatural Revelation, which is necessary because God ordained man to a supernatural end, is contained in unwritten tradition and written books, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Those men of talent and learning who devote themselves to the defence and explanation of the sacred writings are deserving of high commendation, said Pope Leo; and others should dedicate themselves to the same praiseworthy effort.

Christ Himself, the Pontiff reminded us, was accustomed to appeal to the Scriptures, from which He gave instructions, confirmed His teaching, and proved that He was sent by God. He explained Scripture further after His Resurrection. The Apostles also had recourse to the sacred writings, as did the Fathers of the Church and the great Christian scholars of all ages. Through the centuries the Church has laboured to bring the Scriptures to her children, and has prescribed that they be read and reflected upon.

It is our obligation in all times to defend the Scriptures, Pope Leo declared, against the attacks of those who deny any Revelation or inspiration; who see Scripture as made up of forgeries and stories; who claim that prophecies and predictions were made up after the event, and that miracles are tricks or myths. These errors are foisted upon the people, he said, as the fruit of a great new "science," and some of the men who propose them claim to be Christians, indeed theologians. They diffuse their deadly poison through books, pamphlets, newspapers, addresses, and conversation; and they pervert minds, especially those of the young, to contempt for the Holy Scriptures.

It is permitted to no one, Pope Leo pronounced, to interpret Scripture in a way that disagrees with the interpretations of the Church. This does not restrict the pursuit of biblical science, but protects it from error. The analogy of faith must always be followed, for no true interpretation can disagree with the teaching of the Church. "Hence," he said, "it follows that all interpretation is foolish and false that either makes the sacred writings disagree with one another, or is opposed to the doctrine of the Church."

Biblical scholars, the Pontiff directed, should study the opinions of the Church Fathers and those of other great scholars. They should study Oriental languages and the art of criticism. They should gain a good knowledge of natural science, and should be well versed in history. They should look with caution on internal evidence, since it is generally of little value except as confirmation; and they must bear in mind that the sacred writers dealt with things in more or less figurative language, and described things as they appear to the senses rather than seeking to penetrate the secrets of nature.

"It is absolutely wrong and forbidden," the Pontiff declared, "to narrow inspiration to certain parts of Holy Scripture or to admit that the sacred writer has erred." Inerrancy cannot be limited to matters of faith and morals. All the books which the Church accepts as sacred and canonical are

written wholly and entirely at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; and inspiration is incompatible with error.

Biblical scholars must hold steadfastly, said Pope Leo, to the principles that have been laid down. They must remember that nothing can really contradict the Scriptures. Truth cannot contradict truth.

This encyclical was understood from the beginning as an important and authoritative document. In *Quoniam Re Biblica*, an Apostolic Letter on the Study of Holy Scripture in Clerical Seminaries, issued in 1906, Pope Pius X gave various instructions, among them being that "every doctor in Sacred Scripture will be most careful never to swerve in the least in his teaching from the doctrine and tradition of the Church," and will be careful to follow the norms in *Providentissimus Deus*.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION

In 1902, Pope Leo XIII formally established the Pontifical Biblical Commission, its original members - three Cardinal members and twelve consultors - having been appointed in the preceding year. He announced the Commission's establishment in an Apostolic Letter, *Vigilantiae*, in which he exhorted scholars to diligent study and defence of the Scriptures, the study of ancient languages, and the art of deciphering texts, and reminded them of the necessity of always adhering to the analogy of faith. They should use prudence and discernment, the Pontiff said, in their use of the works of authors outside the Church. The object of the Commission, he stated, was to shield the divine texts from error and from rash opinions.

Five years later, Pope Pius X, who had succeeded Pope Leo, issued a *Moto Proprio*, *Praestantia Sacrae Scripturae*, on the decisions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (which then, in 1907, had five Cardinal members and 43 consultors). He reviewed the makeup of the Commission: Cardinals distinguished for their learning and prudence, with consultors "of various nationalities and differing in their methods and views concerning exegetical studies." The Commission was to promote study and to judge and issue opinions, after carefully weighing the evidence on any questions. "All are bound in conscience," he said, "to submit to the decisions of the Biblical Commission which have been given in the past and which will be given in the future." We will come to discussion of these decisions later.

(Footnote [written in 1979]: The last statement issued by the Biblical Commission was in 1964, and was its Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels. The Commission as it exists at present is no longer an independent entity, as it was until 1971, but is under the jurisdiction of the Doctrinal Congregation.)

PASCENDI DOMINICI GREGIS

In the same year, 1907, Pope Pius X issued the encyclical, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, on the errors of the Modernists. Modernism, the Pontiff said, is the synthesis of all heresies, and its doctrines are introduced, by devious methods, into many fields. (Here, we will concern ourselves only with the part of the encyclical which refers to the Bible and to biblical study). According to the principles of the Modernists, Pope Pius says, the sacred books may be rightly described as a summary of experiences; and inspiration, as it applies to Scripture, "is in nowise distinguished from that impulse which stimulates the believer to reveal the faith that is in him ... It is something like that which happens in poetical inspiration." The Modernist critic analyses and rearranges the sacred books in accordance with his own criteria. The Pontiff continues:

The result of this dismembering of the records, and this partition of them throughout the centuries, is naturally that the Scriptures can no longer be attributed to the authors whose names they bear. The Modernists have no hesitation in affirming generally that these books, and especially the Pentateuch and the first three Gospels, have been gradually formed from a primitive brief narration, by additions, by interpolations of theological or allegorical interpretations, or parts introduced only for the purpose of joining different passages together. This means, to put it briefly and clearly, that in the sacred books we must admit a vital evolution, springing from and corresponding with the evolution of faith. The traces of this evolution, they tell us, are so visible in the books that one might almost write a history of it. Indeed, this history they actually do write, and with such an easy assurance that one might believe them to have seen with their own eyes the writers at work through the ages amplifying the sacred books ... To hear them descant of their works on the sacred books, in which they have been able to discover so much that is defective, one would imagine that before them nobody ever even turned over the pages of Scripture.

The truth is that a whole multitude of Doctors, far superior to them in genius, in erudition, in sanctity, have sifted the sacred books in every way, and so far from finding in them anything blameworthy have thanked God more and more heartily the more deeply they have gone into them, for His divine bounty in having vouchsafed to speak thus to men. Unfortunately, these great Doctors did not enjoy the same aids to study that are possessed by the Modernists for they did not have for their rule and guide a philosophy borrowed from the negation of God, and a criterion which consists of themselves. (Pascendi Dominici Gregis, No. 34, in the book, All Things in Christ, Encyclicals and Selected Documents of St. Pius X (Westminster, Md., Newman Press, 1954), pp. 86-132.)

The ideas of the Modernists, the Pontiff notes, have found much acceptance among Catholics, principally because of two things:

first, the close alliance which the historians and critics of this school have formed among themselves independent of all differences of nationality or religion; second, their boundless effrontery by which, if one of them makes any utterance, the others applaud him in chorus, proclaiming that science has made another step forward, while if an outsider should desire to inspect the new discovery for himself, they form a coalition against him. He who denies it is decried as one who is ignorant, while he who embraces and defends it has all their praise. (Ibid.)

In the same year, Pope Pius X had issued another document: *Lamentabili Sane*, a Syllabus Condemning the Errors of the Modernists. (*Lamentabili Sane*, in *All Things in Christ*, pp. 223-228.)

As in the case of the encyclical, we will note only those parts which are concerned with Scripture. These are some of the condemned propositions (note that they are not accepted, but condemned) :

{Condemned Propositions:}

The Church's interpretation of the sacred books is by no means to be rejected; nevertheless, it is subject to the more accurate judgement and correction of the exegetes.

Divine inspiration does not extend to all of the Sacred Scriptures so that it renders its parts, each and every one, free from error.

If he wishes to apply himself usefully to biblical studies, the exegete must first put aside all preconceived opinions about the supernatural origin of Sacred Scripture and interpret it the same as any other merely human document.

In many narrations the Evangelists recorded not so much things that are true, as things which, even though false, they judged to be more profitable for their readers.

The narrations of John are not properly history, but a mystical contemplation of the Gospel. The discourses contained in his Gospel are theological meditations, lacking historical truth concerning the mystery of salvation.

Revelation could be nothing else than the consciousness man acquired of his relation to God.

Revelation, constituting the object of the Catholic faith, was not completed with the Apostles.

Opposition may, and actually does, exist between the facts narrated in Sacred Scripture and the Church's dogmas which rest on them. Thus the critic may reject as false facts the Church holds as most certain.

The exegete who constructs premises from which it follows that dogmas are historically false or doubtful is not to be reprovved as long as he does not directly deny the dogmas themselves.

The divinity of Christ is not proved from the Gospels. It is a dogma which the Christian conscience has derived from the notion of the Messiah.

While He was exercising His ministry, Jesus did not speak with the object of teaching He was the Messiah, nor did His miracles tend to prove it.

In all the evangelical texts the name "Son of God" is equivalent only to that of "Messiah." It does not in the least way signify that Christ is the true and natural Son of God.

It is impossible to reconcile the natural sense of the Gospel texts with the sense taught by our theologians concerning the conscience and the infallible knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Christ did not always possess the consciousness of His Messianic dignity.

The Resurrection of the Saviour is not properly a fact of the historical order. It is a fact of merely the supernatural order (neither demonstrated nor demonstrable) which the Christian conscience gradually derived from other facts.

The words of the Lord, "Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John 20:22-23), in no way refer to the Sacrament of Penance, in spite of what it pleased the Fathers of Trent to say.

SPIRITUS PARACLITUS

The encyclical, Spiritus Paraclitus, was issued by Pope Benedict XV in 1920. The occasion was the 15th centenary of St. Jerome's death, and it spoke of his life and his labours. Pope Benedict reaffirmed the inerrancy of Scripture; deplored the fact that there were certain children of the Catholic Church, even some clerics, who rejected this teaching. He reminded that divine inspiration and thus inerrancy extended to every part of the Bible without exception. To take refuge in "pseudo-historical narratives" or in "kinds of literature," he said, cannot be reconciled with the perfect truth of God's word. Those who question the Bible's inerrancy, he charged, whittle away the trust people have in the Scriptures.

They refuse to allow the things which Christ said and did have come down to us as unchanged and entire through witnesses who carefully committed to writing what they themselves had seen or heard. They maintain - and particularly in their treatment of the fourth gospel - that much is due of

course to the Evangelists who, however, added much from their own imaginations; but much, too, is due to the narratives compiled by the faithful at other periods.

Pope Benedict contrasted this kind of thinking with St. Jerome's assurance that "None can doubt but that what is written took place," and St. Augustine's opinion: "These things are true; they are faithfully and truthfully written of Christ; so that whosoever believes His Gospel may be thereby instructed by the truth and misled by no lie." We must avoid opinions, Pope Benedict said, which the Fathers were careful to shun. He went on to counsel love of the Scriptures, piety, and humility, such as characterized St. Jerome. He urged combat against those who deny the supernatural order, and those who "through an itching desire for novelty, venture to interpret the sacred books as though they were of purely human origin."

DIVINO AFFLANTE SPIRITU

The next encyclical on biblical study to be issued was *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, by Pope Pius XII in 1943. In this encyclical, the Pope reviewed the earlier statements concerning Scripture, and reiterated the teaching that all the books of the Bible, in all their parts, must be held to be free from error. Their truth could not be restricted, he said, to matters of faith and morals. Divine inspiration, he insisted, quoting Pope Leo XIII, is incompatible with error. "This teaching," he said, "we also proclaim with our authority and we urge all to adhere to it religiously. No less earnestly do we inculcate obedience at the present day to the counsels and exhortations which he, in his day, so wisely enjoined." He lauded the constructive work that had been done in the field of Scripture, and urged that the method of biblical study laid down by Pope Leo XIII, further explained by his successors, and by himself confirmed and amplified, be followed as the only safe way.

It is important to take note of this insistence, on the part of Pope Pius XII, on the inerrancy of the Bible in all its parts, and on loyal adherence to the method of biblical study set forth by Pope Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus*. This is important because of the frequently heard but quite unsupported claim that *Divino Afflante Spiritu* was "a complete about-face" in the method of biblical study it approved.

Conditions had changed in the foregoing 50 years, Pope Pius went on, because of the excavations that had been made in Palestine. Documents had been discovered which had clarified our knowledge of the languages and customs of ancient times; even codices of the sacred books had been found and examined. All these discoveries, he noted, had been very useful.

Biblical scholars, he continued, should apply themselves to the study of biblical and other Oriental languages, and they should study the ancient texts of the Bible. The Vulgate, as had already been said, is regarded as authentic and valid, but there should also be study of the ancient texts, and translations into the vernacular. Exegetes should strive to find the genuine meaning of the sacred writings, said the Pontiff, first discerning the sense of the words which is called literal. They should keep in mind the declarations of the teaching authority of the Church and the analogy of faith, as Pope Leo XIII had said in *Providentissimus Deus*. They should study the works of the Fathers of the Church, and at the same time employ the light derived from modern research.

The exegete should study the character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources to which he had recourse, and the forms of expression he used. He should try, as St. Athanasius said, to observe on what occasion the apostle spoke, to whom and why he wrote, and thus to grasp his real meaning. He should make use of history, archaeology, and other sciences to determine the modes of writing in use in ancient periods. He should study the ancient literature of

the east to determine forms of expression, idioms used, and figures of speech such as hyperbole. Often what seems to be an error, the Pontiff said, will be clarified by understanding of the mode of expression and narration that were in use at the time of writing. Serious inquiry has restored confidence in the Bible, and has led some to abandon modern opinion and to return to the more ancient ideas.

RECOGNITION OF LITERARY FORMS

The claim that *Divino Afflante Spiritu* constitutes an "about-face" in Papal attitudes toward biblical study is based on Pope Pius' admonition to the exegete to study literary forms. This, it is sometimes implied, is a totally new idea, and gave exegetes freedom to undertake study that had been forbidden them before. This, however, is a misconception; for the Church had long recognized the existence, in Scripture, of many literary forms. We read, in the old Catholic Encyclopaedia:

...the Bible bears throughout the distinct impress of the circumstances of place and time, methods of composition, etc., in which its various parts came into existence, and of these circumstances careful account must be taken, in the interests of accurate scriptural interpretation (Vol. II, 1907, p. 543).

...it is not to be supposed that the Biblical literature contains only few, and these rather imperfect, literary forms. In point of fact its contents exhibit nearly all the literary forms met with in our Western literatures together with others peculiarly Eastern (Ibid., p. 544).

In three respects, the modern commentary surpasses that of any past age: First, the interpreter attends in our times not merely to the immediate context of a phrase or a verse, but to the whole literary form of the book, and to the purpose for which it was written; secondly, he is assisted by a most abundant wealth of historical information practically unknown in former days; thirdly, the philology of the sacred tongues has been highly cultivated during the last century, and its rich results are laid under contribution by the modern commentator (Vol. V, 1909, p. 705).

Thus, it is clear that for a long time exegetes had taken note of literary forms, and had been concerned with the circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources to which he had recourse and the forms of expression he used. The completely traditional stand of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* was recognized by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which referred, in 1950, to its insistence upon following "the very wise norms laid down by the Supreme Pontiffs." This instruction of the Commission directed the exegete to "sedulously have before his eyes those ancient norms inculcated anew by the Supreme Pontiff, Pius XII, gloriously reigning, in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*."

HUMANI GENERIS

It is clear from the text of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* that Pope Pius XII, who explicitly directed exegetes to adhere to the methods set forth by Pope Leo XIII, had no intention of giving them liberty to disregard the counsel of the Popes, the statements of the Biblical Commission, and the analogy of faith. This is made doubly clear and is strongly emphasized in another encyclical, *Humani Generis*, which the same Pontiff issued in 1950.

This encyclical was concerned with false teachings which undermine the Faith. Some of these errors, Pope Pius wrote, are concerned with the study of Scripture. He said:

For some go so far as to pervert the sense of the Vatican Council's definition that God is the author of Holy Scripture, and they put forward again the opinion, already often condemned, which asserts

that immunity from error extends only to those parts of the Bible that treat of God or of moral and religious matters. They even wrongly speak of a human sense of the Scriptures, beneath which a divine sense, which they say is the only infallible meaning, lies hidden. In interpreting Scripture, they will take no account of the analogy of faith and the Tradition of the Church. Thus they judge the doctrine of the Fathers and of the Teaching Church by the norm of Holy Scripture interpreted by the purely human reason of exegetes, instead of explaining Holy Scripture according to the mind of the Church which Christ Our Lord has appointed guardian and interpreter of the whole deposit of divinely revealed truth.

Further, according to their fictitious opinions, the literal sense of Holy Scripture and its explanation, carefully worked out under the Church's vigilance by so many great exegetes, should yield now to a new exegesis, which they are pleased to call symbolic or spiritual. By means of this new exegesis the Old Testament, which today in the Church is a sealed book, would finally be thrown open to all the faithful. By this method, they say, all difficulties vanish, difficulties which hinder only those who adhere to the literal meaning of the Scriptures.

Everyone sees how foreign all this is to the principles and norms of interpretation rightly fixed by our predecessors of happy memory, Leo XIII in his encyclical *Providentissimus*, and Benedict XV in the encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus*, as also by ourselves in the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.

"In a particular way must be deplored," the Pontiff wrote, "a certain too free interpretation of the historical books of the Old Testament." This arises, he explained, from a wrong interpretation of a letter sent by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to the Archbishop of Paris. This letter points out, he said, that while the first eleven chapters of Genesis do not conform to the historical method used by the best Greek or Latin writers, or by authors in our own time, they do, nevertheless, "pertain to history in a true sense." They state truths which are fundamental for our salvation, and give a simple description of the origin of the human race. He added

If ...the ancient sacred writers have taken anything from popular narrations (and this may be conceded), It must never be forgotten that they did so with the help of divine inspiration, through which they were rendered immune from any error in selecting and evaluating these documents.

In all the encyclicals on biblical study, which are readily available to all, the thing which most stands out is their consistency. They are entirely in accord with one another. The same may be said of other documents which we will look at later.

THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION

As has already been mentioned, the Pontifical Biblical Commission was formally established by Pope Leo XIII in 1902, and in 1907, in *Praestantia Sacrae Scripturae*, Pope Pius X declared its decisions to be binding. These, in condensed and summarized form, are the decisions which were issued by the Commission. {The entire text of these decisions and instructions is in the book, *Rome and the Study of Scripture* (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 1964).}

1) On the Tacit Quotations Contained in Holy Scripture, 1905. The Commission stated that we cannot assume that in Scripture there are statements from an uninspired author which the sacred writer does not mean to approve or make his own, unless the sacred writer makes it clear that he is doing so.

2) On Narratives in the Historical Books, 1905. We cannot hold books regarded as historical as not historical, the Commission said, or as conveying a meaning other than their literal or historical

sense, unless it can be proved that the writer meant to speak in parable or allegory, or meant to convey some meaning other than historical.

3) On the Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch, 1906. There is not sufficient evidence to impugn the substantially Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the Commission said, or to justify the claim that the Pentateuch was compiled from sources for the most part after the time of Moses. This does not necessarily mean that Moses wrote all that is in the books, or dictated all that is in them. It is possible that he may have entrusted the writing of his thoughts to other persons and approved such writing to be made public under his name. It is possible that Moses may have used existing documents or oral traditions in his work; and there may have been, over the centuries, some modifications or additions or even some faulty readings on the part of copyists.

4) On the Author and the Historical Truth of the Fourth Gospel, 1907. There is sufficient evidence that John the Apostle wrote the Fourth Gospel, the Commission stated, to uphold this opinion against adverse critics. We may not say that the discourses of Our Lord that are reported therein are not really the words of Jesus but theological compositions of the authors.

5) On the Character of the Book of Isaiah and its Author, 1908. The Commission ruled that the prophecies in this book may not be regarded as having been written after the event, and it upheld the reality of predictive prophecy. It said further that there was not sufficient evidence to justify the thesis of a dual or plural authorship of Isaiah.

6) On the Historical Character of the First Three Chapters of Genesis, 1909. The Commission ruled that we cannot exclude the literal, historical sense; that we cannot regard these books as legend or symbol; that we cannot deny the reality of man's creation in an original state of justice and integrity, his fall at the instigation of the devil, and the promise of a future Redeemer. It is recognized, the Commission said, that in some passages these chapters speak in a figurative rather than a literal sense, and also, that there are allegorical and prophetic interpretations, as are justified by the example of the Fathers of the Church. We are not bound to look for scientific exactitude in these chapters. There may be free discussion, for example, as to whether the word yom means an actual day, or a certain space of time.

7) On the Author, Time of Composition, and Character of the Psalms, 1910. The Commission said that we need not consider David as the sole author of the psalms, but that it cannot be denied he was author of many; and we cannot deny the Davidic origin of those expressly attributed to him in the inscriptions affixed to them. Some of the psalms have probably been slightly remoulded or modified. We may not say that some of the psalms, on the basis of internal evidence, were written after the time of Esdras (Ezra) and Nehemiah. Some of the psalms are without question prophetic and Messianic.

8) On the Author, Date of Composition, and Historical Truth of the Gospel According to St. Matthew, 1911. Matthew, the Commission said, is in truth the author of the Gospel published under his name. The Gospel was originally written in Hebrew, sometime before the destruction of Jerusalem. We cannot accept the idea that the book was merely a collection of sayings compiled by an anonymous author. While the book was first written in Hebrew, the Greek is regarded as canonical, and is to be regarded as historically true, including the infancy narratives, and passages relating to the primacy of Peter (Mt: 16:17-19) and to the Apostles' profession of faith in the divinity of Christ (Mt: 14:33).

9) On the Author, Time of Composition, and Historical Truth of the Gospels According to St. Mark and St. Luke, 1912. The Commission upheld the authorship of these books by Mark and Luke, their historicity, and their having been written before the destruction of Jerusalem. It cannot prudently be called into question, the Commission said, that Mark wrote according to the preaching of Peter, or that Luke followed the preaching of Paul. Both of them told what they had learned from "eminently trustworthy witnesses."

10) On the Synoptic Question, or the Mutual Relations Between the First Three Gospels, 1912. It is lawful, the Commission said, for exegetes to discuss varying opinions about similarities and dissimilarities in the first three Gospels, and about hypotheses of oral or written tradition, or the dependence of one on another; but they are not to freely advocate unproven theories.

11) On the Author, Time of Composition, and Historical Character of Acts, 1913. Luke, the Commission said, is certainly to be regarded as the author of Acts, and complete historical authority may be claimed for him.

12) On the Authenticity, Integrity, and Time of Composition of the Pastoral Epistles, 1913. The Commission affirmed that Paul may be accepted as the author of these epistles, which were written between the time of Paul's liberation from his first imprisonment and his death.

13) On the Author and the Manner and Circumstances of Composition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 1914. We may not hesitate, the Commission said, in counting this book among the epistles of Paul, because of its harmony of doctrine and principles, cautions and counsels, and close correspondence in words and phrases with the writings known to be those of Paul, and because of its acceptance as such by the Church; but it need not be regarded as certain that Paul planned it and composed it in its entirety, or that he put it in the form in which it now stands.

14) On the Parousia or the Second Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ, 1915. The Catholic exegete cannot assert, said the Commission, that the Apostles, in this matter, express merely their own human views into which error may enter. On the contrary, we may affirm that Paul, in his writings, said nothing that is not in harmony with the ignorance of the time of the Parousia which Christ said to be men's portion. Paul does not imply affirmation of an imminent Parousia.

15) On the False Interpretation of Two Texts, 1933, Matthew 16:26, "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?" and Luke 9:25, which is parallel to it, the Commission said, must be understood to refer to man's soul; to his soul's eternal salvation ; and not to the temporal life of man.

16) Letter to the Archbishops and Bishops of Italy, 1941. Against charges of error in biblical study and interpretation, the Commission reaffirmed the principles that had been laid down for biblical study. It defended the literal sense of Scripture, the value of textual criticism, the study of ancient languages, and so on.

17) On the Use of Versions of Sacred Scripture in the Vernacular, 1943. Versions of Scripture translated into the vernacular from the Vulgate or from the ancient texts might be read and used by the faithful, the Commission said, provided they had been approved by the competent ecclesiastical authority.

18) Response of the Biblical Commission to Cardinal Suhard, 1948. This was a letter issued in response to an inquiry by Cardinal Suhard, concerning the sources of the Pentateuch and the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. The Biblical Commission saw no need, the letter

said, for further decrees on these subjects. The decisions that had been made did not preclude proper study of the problems. The Commission had already said that it may be affirmed that Moses made use of written documents or oral traditions in composing his work, and that modifications or additions have doubtless been made after the time of Moses. Further study on this subject would doubtless confirm the great part played by Moses "both as author and as lawgiver."

The literary style of the first 11 chapters of Genesis, the Commission said, corresponds to none of our classical categories, and so cannot be judged in that light. To say they are not history in the modern sense might easily be taken to mean that they contain no history at all; whereas they do relate, in simple and figurative language, "the fundamental truths presupposed for the economy of salvation, as well as the popular description of the origin of the human race and of the Chosen People."

LATER INSTRUCTIONS OF THE BIBLICAL COMMISSION

Other documents issued by the Biblical Commission took the form of instructions, rather than replies to specific questions, as had been the case with the earlier decrees. In 1950, the Commission issued an instruction to Ordinaries, superiors general of religious institutes, rectors of seminaries, and professors of Sacred Scripture, and was concerned with the proper way to teach Scripture in seminaries and colleges of Religious. The instruction commemorated the 50th year after the publication of *Providentissimus Deus*. The professor of Sacred Scripture, it said, should be distinguished for his priestly life and virtue. He should read the Scriptures every day and should urge his students to do so. He should devote time to the meaning of inspiration, the truth of Sacred Scripture, and the laws of interpretation.

The professor of Scripture should set forth lucidly the theme of each book, its purpose, authorship, and date (here, the Commission refers to *Quoniam in Re Biblica*, the Apostolic Letter of Pope Pius X, which was issued in 1906), avoiding a vain erudition on the opinions of critics, which disturbs rather than instructs. He should always keep in mind the fact that Scripture is not to be explained "except in the name and according to the mind of the Church"; and he will in fact "consider it sacred never to depart in the least from the common teaching and tradition of the Church." He will make use of modern knowledge, but will "neglect the rash theories of innovators." He must never sever his exegesis from the Church's universal teaching.

Another instruction was issued in 1955, and was directed to local Ordinaries, on Biblical Associations. The Commission expressed regret that at some of the meetings of such associations, there was not always adherence to the norms that had been laid down; and that some reached the point of being destructive rather than edifying. Some of the speakers, the Commission said, were all too ready to rashly spread "doubtful or false opinions," and to recommend reading material of questionable value. Some of them set forth theories already condemned by the Church, or proposed a "new exegesis," as had been noted by Pope Pius XII in *Humani Generis*. The Commission set forth rules to be followed for the meetings of these associations, to ensure the promotion of sound instruction as well as love for the sacred books.

Not all exegetes, it is evident, were obedient to the instructions. In 1961, the Holy Office, with the approval of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, issued a monitum to Biblical scholars. It read

In the midst of the fine progress of Biblical studies, some opinions and affirmations are circulating here and there which call into question the genuine historical and objective truth of Sacred Scripture - not only of the Old Testament (as the Supreme Pontiff Pius XII already sadly noted in his

encyclical *Humani Generis*) but also of the New Testament, even with regard to the words and actions of Jesus Christ.

Now since opinions of this kind create anxieties both for pastors and faithful, the eminent Fathers who are charged with the protection of the doctrine on faith and morals consider it necessary to give this warning to all who work with the sacred books either orally or in writing. Let them always handle so great a subject with corresponding prudence and reverence. Let them always keep in mind the teaching of the Holy Fathers and the mind and Magisterium of the Church. Otherwise, the consciences of the faithful will be disturbed and harm will come to the truths of the Faith.

During the last 25 years, [written in 1979] it has sometimes been charged that the early decisions of the Biblical Commission were severe and restrictive, and some exegetes (as was noted by the Commission itself) chose to ignore them. It is interesting to note, however, that there are non-Catholic scholars, unrestricted by the Biblical Commission's decrees, who have arrived, through their unrestricted research, at the same opinions that had been voiced by the Biblical Commission. There are Jewish and Protestant scholars who reject the documentary theory of the Pentateuch and uphold its substantially Mosaic authorship, and who uphold, with convincing arguments, the single authorship of Isaiah. There are Protestant as well as Catholic scholars who uphold the historicity of the Gospels, and their authorship by the men to whom they are attributed.

FOOTNOTE:

{Albright, William F., *History, Archaeology, and Christian Humanism* (McGraw-Hill, 1964); "Archaeological Discovery and the Scriptures," *Christianity Today*, June 21st, 1968;

Allis, O. T., *The Unity of Isaiah* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1950); *The Five Books of Moses* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1964); *The Old Testament: Its Claims and Its Critics* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972);

Archer, Gleason, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Moody Press, 1964);

Bruce, F. F., *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (Eerdmans, 1960);

Gordon, Cyrus, "Higher Critics and Forbidden Fruit," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 23rd, 1959; *The Ancient Near East* (Norton, 1965);

Hahn, Herbert F., *The Old Testament in Modern Research* (Fortress Press, 1965);

Harrison, Everett F., *Introduction to the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964);

Harrison, Roland K., *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1969);

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Horn, Siegfried, "Recent illumination of the Old Testament," *Christianity Today*, June 21st, 1968;

Kline, Meredith, *The Treaty of the Great King* (Eerdmans, 1963);

Merrill, Eugene, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament* (Craig Press, 1966);

Kitchen, Kenneth A., *The Bible in Its World* (Intervarsity Press, 1977);

Montgomery, John Warwick, *The Shape of the Past* (Edwards Bros., 1963); *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Bethany Fellowship, 1971); *Where Is History Going?* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1969);

Packer, James I., Revelation and Inspiration (Westminster, 1966);

Pinnock, Clark, A Defence of Biblical Infallibility (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing House, 1967);

Schultz, Samuel J., The Old Testament Speaks (Harper and Row, 1960); The Prophets Speak (Harper and Row, 1968);

Segal, M. H., "The Composition of the Pentateuch: A Fresh Examination," pp. 68-114 of Scripta Hierosolymitana, Vol. VIII of Studies in the Bible, ed. Chaim Rabin (Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1961);

Surburg, Raymond, How Dependable Is the Bible? (Lippincott, 1972);

Tenney, Merrill, The Bible: The Living Word of God (Zondervan, 1968);

Unger, Merrill F., Archaeology and the Old Testament (Zondervan, 1970); Archaeology and the New Testament (Zondervan, 1962);

Wiseman, D. J., "Archaeology and Scripture," Bulletin of Westminster Theological Seminary, Fourth Issue, 1969;

Wilson, Robert D., A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament (Moody Press, 1965);

Yamauchi, Edwin, The Stones and the Scriptures (Lippincott, 1972);

Young, Edward J., The Book of Isaiah (Eerdmans 1965); Introduction to the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 1970);

Margalioth, Rachel, The Indivisible Isaiah (Yeshiva University, New York, 1964);

Morris, Leon, "The Fourth Gospel and History," in Jesus of Nazareth, Saviour and Lord (Eerdmans, 1966);

Preus, Robert D., "Notes on the Inerrancy of Scripture," Crisis in Lutheran Theology, Vol. II (Baker Book House, 1967).

This is only a sampling; by no means an exhaustive list.

It is interesting to note that most of these authors include, in their footnote references and bibliographies, scholars of varying shades of opinion. Books by liberal scholars, on the other hand, tend to give references only to those who are in general in agreement with their own opinions. }
(End of Footnote)

Acceptance of the JEDP theory, despite all the evidence against it, the archaeologist Cyrus Gordon wrote in 1959, had become "the badge of academic respectability," and a great many scholars were swept along with the tide. It appears that some Catholic scholars, in rejecting the decisions of the Biblical Commission, accepted in their place the arbitrary opinions of the liberal Protestant school of exegesis which would like to erase the supernatural from the pages of Scripture.

These exegetes cannot claim that they base their opinions on new discoveries, for they are, rather, disregarding new discoveries. As Dr. Edwin Yamauchi writes in *The Stones and the Scriptures*:

We have today the ironic situation in which some New Testament scholars who have been guided by axioms of literary criticism reject the historicity of the New Testament, whereas professional

historians of antiquity, examining the documents against the background of classical texts and archaeological materials, find the New Testament to be historically accurate.

The ready acceptance by some Catholic scholars of old liberal Protestant ideas has occasioned comment by not a few Protestant scholars. Dr. David F. Wells sums it up as follows, in *Revolution in Rome*: (Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1972, p. 8.)

Present-day Catholicism, on its progressive side, is teaching many of the ideas which the liberal Protestants espoused in the last century ... Since these ideas have only come into vogue in Catholicism in the last two decades, they appear brilliantly fresh and innovative. To a Protestant, whether he approves or disapproves of them, they are old hat.

INSTRUCTION ON THE HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THE GOSPELS

The next document to be issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission - and, as it turns out, the last one it has issued [written in 1979] - was in 1964, and was concerned with the historical truth of the Gospels. More than ever, the Instruction said, the work of exegetes was needed, because "many writings are being spread abroad in which the truth of the deeds and words which are contained in the Gospels is questioned." It is worthy of note that this statement repeats, almost verbatim, the concern expressed in the *Monitum* of the Holy Office which was issued in 1961.

Cardinal Bea has supplied us with further background information concerning the Instruction. Its content, he says, "makes it clear that it refers to the school of so-called form criticism, which in recent years has thrown new doubts upon the historical accuracy of the Gospels." Form criticism, Cardinal Bea explains, seeks to explain the origin of the Gospels by tracing their history - the development of the literary "forms" in which the message was presented. These critics draw their ideas from literary criticism, sociology, and the comparative history of religions. They assume that there were smaller literary units which preceded the Gospels, further assuming that the Gospels' "vital context" - the place where the Gospel message grew to maturity - was the early Christian community, which through "creative talent," expanded the original material, making it subject, in the course of this process, "to alterations, infiltrations, and even in part to grave deformations." {*The Word of God and Mankind*, pp. 247-49; [and see also his *The Study of the Synoptic Gospels* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1965). The title of the latter is somewhat puzzling; for the title of the Italian from which it is translated is *La Storicita dei Vangeli* (The Historicity of the Gospels), and the Spanish translation corresponds with the Italian. While Cardinal Bea does focus on the synoptic Gospels (and says so in a footnote), their historicity was certainly a chief concern.}

The Biblical Commission, in the Instruction, set forth and insisted upon certain points. The Catholic exegete, it said, should follow the guidance of the Church and derive profit from earlier interpreters, especially from the holy Fathers and Doctors of the Church. He should also use new exegetical aids, textual criticism, literary criticism, and the study of languages. He should examine the manner of expression or literary genre used by the sacred writer. "As occasion warrants," the Commission said, "the interpreter may examine what reasonable elements are contained in the 'form critical' method that can be used for a fuller understanding of the Gospels." It followed this carefully qualified permission with words of caution:

But let him be wary, because quite inadmissible philosophical and theological principles have often come to be mixed with this method, which not uncommonly have vitiated the method itself as well as the conclusions in the literary area. For some proponents of this method have been led astray by the prejudiced views of rationalism. They refuse to admit the existence of a supernatural order and

the intervention of a personal God in the world through strict Revelation, and the possibility and existence of miracles and prophecies. Others begin with a false idea of faith, as if it had nothing to do with historical truth - or rather, were incompatible with it. Others deny the historical value and nature of the documents of Revelation almost a priori. Finally, others make light of the authority of the Apostles as witnesses to Christ, and of their task and influence in the primitive community, extolling rather the creative power of that community. All such views are not only opposed to Catholic doctrine, but are also devoid of scientific basis and alien to the correct principles of historical method.

It is important to note that the Commission says the exegete "may examine what reasonable elements are contained" in the form critical method; and that it goes on to warn of the disastrous consequences that have often resulted from the use of this method. This is a far cry from urging the use of the method itself.

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

The Commission goes on to speak of the reliability of what is transmitted in the Gospels, and the stages through which the Gospels have come down to us. The stages are, briefly, these, which are of course well known to any educated Christian. The first is the teaching of Jesus Himself, which was by word of mouth; the second is the oral teaching of the Apostles; and the third, the writing down of the things that had been taught. The chosen disciples of Christ, the Instruction says, saw His deeds, heard His words, and were thus equipped to be witnesses of His life and doctrine. Jesus saw to it that what He taught was firmly impressed on their minds. They understood the miracles and other events of the life of Jesus correctly. After Christ's death and Resurrection, the Apostles faithfully explained His life and words, in a manner appropriate to the circumstances. Their faith indeed rested on what Jesus taught and did. There is no reason to doubt that they passed on to their listeners what was really said and done by Our Lord, having seen the events themselves and having been taught by the light of the Spirit of Truth. The original instruction, in various literary forms, was at first passed on by word of mouth and later on committed to writing. The sacred writers adapted their narrations to various situations and purposes. However, the Instruction adds:

the truth of the story is not at all affected by the fact that the Evangelists relate the words and deeds of the Lord in a different order, and express His sayings not literally but differently, while preserving their sense. For, as St. Augustine says, "It is quite probable that each Evangelist believed it to have been his duty to recount what he had to in that order in which it pleased God to suggest it to his memory - in those things at least in which the order, whether it be this or that, detracts in nothing from the truth and authority of the Gospel."

The exegete, the Instruction goes on, should make use of all the laudable achievements of recent research. Then, by his tireless scrutiny of the Gospels, he will be able to show more profoundly their perennial theological value, and "bring out clearly how necessary and important the Church's interpretation is." There are many things, it continues, in which the exegete can exercise his skill and genius. "But let him always be disposed to obey the Magisterium of the Church, and not forget that the Apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, preached the good news, and that the Gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who preserved their authors from all error" (the emphasis is added). In connection with this point, the Commission quotes St. Irenaeus:

Now, we have not learned of the plan of our salvation from any others than those through whom the Gospel has come to us. Indeed, what they once preached they later passed on to us in the Scriptures

by the will of God, as the ground and pillar of our faith. It is not right to say that they preached before they had acquired perfect knowledge, as some would venture to say who boast of being correctors of the Apostles. In fact, after Our Lord rose from the dead and they were invested with power from on high, as the Holy Spirit came down upon them, they were filled with all His gifts and had perfect knowledge.

(Adversus haereses, 3, 1, 1.)

The Commission ends its Instruction with some counsel to those who instruct the Christian people, in sermons or in published material. They are to refrain entirely, it said, from "proposing vain or insufficiently established novelties." They should not add imaginative details. They should consider it a sacred duty never to depart in the slightest degree from the common doctrine and tradition of the Church. They should make use of real advances in biblical study, but should "avoid entirely the rash remarks of innovators," and they are "forbidden to disseminate, led on by some pernicious itch for newness, any trial solutions for difficulties without prudent selection and serious discrimination, for thus they perturb the faith of many." Those in charge of biblical associations, the Commission said, are "to comply faithfully with the norms laid down by the Pontifical Biblical Commission."

STRANGE INTERPRETATIONS

One notes that this Instruction, like the other documents we have reviewed, is entirely consistent with the statements that have preceded it. It made the important point that at each stage of its transmission, the Gospel message has been preserved from error; that the written Gospels do not deviate from the earlier oral teaching; for, as St. Irenaeus says: "We have not learned of the plan of our salvation from any others than those through whom the Gospel has come to us. Indeed, what they once preached they later passed on to us in the Scriptures by the will of God, as the ground and pillar of our faith."

The Instruction, however, was no more than issued before it began to suffer strange interpretations. A commentary by Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer tells us that the document does not commit the student to any "fundamentalist literalness in the matter of their (the Gospels') historicity," and that in it, exegetes are "now encouraged to pursue the form critical method." (Fr. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Historical Truth of the Gospels, the 1964 Instruction of the Biblical Commission, with Commentary* (Paulist Press, 1964), p. 4.)

In this commentary, we are told in a footnote that while there is a numerous and articulate group convinced that the Gospels and Acts are objectively accurate historical documents, truly reporting what Jesus said and did, which may be legitimately used in apologetics, "such a position will have to be nuanced in the light of this Instruction." (Ibid., p. 19.)

It is difficult to see how one could draw such conclusions from the actual Instruction, which staunchly maintains the Evangelists' truthfulness and accuracy as to what Jesus did and said, and carefully qualifies its permission for exegetes to use the form critical method. The use of some elements of the form critical method is not revolutionary, for, as Cardinal Bea observes, literary criticism "is neither the exclusive patrimony of form criticism nor was it invented by it." Exegetes naturally try to determine from data taken from the book in question the person of the author, his characteristics, his mentality, his style of writing, his purpose. "The existence of definite modes of speaking, narrating, and teaching which are proper to Sacred Scripture has always been recognized by all who have had any familiarity with the Bible," says Cardinal Bea. (*The Study of the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 29 and 30. One finds mention of literary forms in many old books on The Bible. Fr.

Leopold Fonck discusses them at some length in *Parables of the Gospels* (New York, Frederick Pustet, 1915). Msgr. John E. Steinmueller devotes 170 pages to the subject of literary forms in *Some Problems of the Old Testament* (New York, Bruce, 1936). Fr. Cuthbert Lattey, S.J., also discusses them in *Back to the Bible* (London, Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1944). Fr. Lattey insists, in the course of his discussion, that to interpret as fiction what is intended as fact is an error of judgement about literary forms.)

FAITHFUL COMPLIANCE

A surprising statement has been recently made that the 1964 Instruction, combined with the Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation, "reversed and superseded all the earlier decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission," this assertion being attributed to the Commission's secretary. (Archbishop John F. Whealon, "The Magisterium: Biblical and Pastoral Aspects," *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 13th, 1978, p. 8. Rumours that the decisions of the Biblical Commission have been revoked have apparently arisen from time to time. Msgr. Steinmueller says, in the 1962 revision of his three-volume work, *A Companion to Scripture Studies*, that some scholars falsely concluded that the decisions were revoked, on the basis of two articles, one by the secretary and other by the under-secretary of the Commission (New York, Joseph F. Wagner, *A Companion to Scripture Studies*, Vol. I, 1962), pp. 300-01, footnote; and this statement also appears in the 1969 edition.)

This statement seems quite evidently based on misinformation; for the Commission's secretary at the time. Fr. Benjamin Wambacq, made no statement concerning earlier decrees, but merely said the Instruction was approved by Pope Paul, who had ordered its publication. As we have noted, the Instruction itself counsels faithful compliance "with the norms laid down by the Pontifical Biblical Commission" (see the Footnote following); and the Constitution on Divine Revelation, far from regarding the Commission's early decrees as invalid, refers to one of them in its footnotes! (Footnote: In an article titled "The Study of Sacred Scripture," Cardinal Taguchi of Japan clearly regards the decisions of the Biblical Commission as binding. This article was first published by The Seido Foundation in Japan; was then translated and published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 15th, 1975; and is reprinted, with Cardinal Taguchi's approval, in Msgr. Steinmueller's latest book, *The Sword of the Spirit* (Waco, Texas: Stella Maris Books, 1978) in an appendix. It can be viewed and downloaded on the Internet at <http://www.pamphlets.org.au/cts/australia/acts1722.html>)

Exegetes who have enthusiastically espoused form criticism would like the 1964 Instruction to say some things that it does not say: in particular, they would like it to defend their thesis that the Gospels were not written by the men to whom they are attributed, but by others, and that they reflect "the memory of the early Christian community." This is not, however, what the Instruction says or implies. It says, on the contrary, that the idea of the "creative power of the community" is one of those facets of form criticism that is not only opposed to Catholic doctrine, but "devoid of scientific basis and alien to the correct principles of historical method."

The New Testament itself, says Cardinal Bea, stands in direct opposition to the hypothesis of the form critics, in its emphasis on speaking as a "witness," and on "witnessing" - something which is repeated more than 50 times in the New Testament. A witness, says the Cardinal, "is a person who is in a position to make authoritative statements, on the basis of his direct personal experience." And while it is true that the Gospels were written for a religious purpose, religious truth, he insists, does not impair historical accuracy. On the contrary, "faith presupposes and guarantees total historical veracity." (*The Study of the Synoptic Gospels*, p. 25; *The Word of God and Mankind*, p. 259.)

AN ABANDONED APPROACH

In Fr. Fitzmyer's commentary, which we mentioned earlier, the Commission's acceptance of the "reasonable elements" in the form critical method (which, as Cardinal Bea reminds us, are not the exclusive patrimony of that school) is transformed into "a sane use of the form critical method" - that is, of the method per se. And certainly some exegetes have pursued their research in full accordance with that method. We now have books and essays by Catholic scholars expressly stating that none of the Gospels was written by an eye-witness; that the infancy narratives are not historical; that the virgin birth is open to question; that Jesus was ignorant in many matters, and probably did not know His own identity; that the Resurrection may not have been a historical reality; and many other strange things. It is plain that this was not the intention of the Biblical Commission.

Form criticism, it should be remembered, has been tried and virtually abandoned in other fields of literature. As Dr. John Warwick Montgomery writes:

The collapse of form-critical techniques in Homeric and other classical literary criticism, and the presently recognized debility of that approach even in the study of English ballads, has raised overwhelming doubts as to the whole presuppositional sub-structure of the Dibelius-Bultmann approach to the New Testament documents.

(The Suicide of Christian Theology (Minneapolis, Bethany Fellowship, 1971), p.320.)

It is strange indeed that the proponents of such an unstable and subjective method should believe they have disproved the careful research of eminent scholars through the centuries. It is illogical to say that it does not matter who wrote the Gospels, and other biblical books. It mattered a great deal to the early Church, at the time the Canon was established. The Church Fathers were convinced, by the evidence, that the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses and their disciples - men who were in a position to report what they had seen and heard. They wrote, as Cardinal Bea reminds us, as witnesses.

Fr. Domenico Grasso tells us that there are more than 4,000 codices or manuscript scrolls of the Gospels, which came from every part of the Roman Empire, all of them giving the respective authors as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Syriac codices, yet there is perfect unanimity as to the authors. (Fr. Domenico Grasso, S.J., *The Gospels, Historical and True* (Surrey, England, Faith Pamphlets), pp. 5-8.

The form critics tell us that it was an ancient practice to attribute writings to persons who did not actually write them. However, Fr. Grasso points out, it was extremely important to the Church Fathers to know that they had reliable sources; books actually written by eye-witnesses and their disciples. Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, in support of the same thesis, notes that some writings were not incorporated in the Canon for the reason that their authorship could not be definitely known. (*Crisis in Lutheran Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1967), Vol. II, p. 45.)

In the third volume of *A Companion to Scripture Studies*, Msgr. John E. Steinmueller gives detailed evidence for the authenticity of each of the Gospels in turn. And their authorship by "Apostles and other apostolic men" is attested by the Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, the document we will look at next.

DEI VERBUM, THE DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION ON DIVINE REVELATION OF VATICAN II

Vatican II was primarily a "pastoral council." Pope John XXIII said, in his opening address to the Council, that the Council's objective was not to discuss the fundamental doctrine of the Church, which was "presumed to be well known and familiar to all," but to determine methods for the transmission of the doctrine, "pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion, which throughout 20 centuries, notwithstanding difficulties and contrasts, has become the common patrimony of men."

Nevertheless, some of the documents issued by the Council were of a more solemn and authoritative character than others; and the "dogmatic constitutions" were the documents which carried most weight, and which without question demand the assent of the faithful. The document on divine Revelation was one of the dogmatic constitutions.

This constitution was finally issued, after much discussion among the Council Fathers, on Nov. 18th, 1965. Fr. Ralph Wiltgen tells us, in considerable detail, of the discussions and revisions of the schema on divine Revelation. {The Rhine Flows Into the Tiber (New York, Hawthorn Books, 1966).}

The record shows that the Council sought to make it absolutely clear that the inerrancy of Scripture was not qualified or restricted. Cardinal Bea, at the express wish of the Holy Father, was very much involved in the final stages of the document's preparation. This fact is important; for because of this, Cardinal Bea was singularly well qualified to write his book, *The Word of God and Mankind*, which is a commentary on the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation and on the Bible itself.

Article 11 of the document was one of those which occasioned much discussion and underwent some revision, in order to make sure that it could not be construed as in any way limiting the inerrancy of Scripture. (Wiltgen *Ibid.*, p. 182.)

Article 19, which concerns the Gospels, was another. In the latter, Pope Paul regarded the wording of the initial schema as unclear, not seeming to guarantee sufficiently the historical truth of the Gospels, and he said he could not approve a wording which "left in doubt the historicity of these most holy books." The passage in question was therefore made to read: "Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held that the four Gospels ...whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ really did and taught for their eternal salvation." (*Ibid.*, p. 183.)

The Council began the Constitution on Divine Revelation by saying that "following in the steps of the Council of Trent and Vatican I," it wished to set forth the true doctrine on divine Revelation and its transmission. It went on to reaffirm the sequence of Revelation: God first revealed Himself to our first parents; after the fall He buoyed them up with the promise of redemption; He taught men through the patriarchs and through Moses and the prophets; and prepared the way for the coming of His Son.

The Council affirmed, as had Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus*, that God might be known by the light of human reason, but that divine Revelation made things known to man with "firm certainty and without the contamination of error" (No. 6).

It is in Christ that Revelation is summed up, the Council said; and fulfilling the promises of the prophets, Christ told His apostles to preach the Gospel. The document continues :

This was faithfully done: it was done by the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, by what they themselves

had received - whether from the words of Christ, from His way of life and His works, or whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit; it was done by those apostles and other men associated with the apostles who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing (No. 7).

Here, the Council refers in a footnote to statements of the Council of Trent and of the First Vatican Council, Careful note should be taken of the last lines in the section just quoted; for the Council unequivocally attributes the written Gospels to "apostles and other men associated with the apostles."

The apostles left bishops as their successors, the Council affirms, and made their position one of teaching authority. Thus, the apostolic teaching in the inspired books "was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time" (No. 8).

Then, the Council speaks clearly on the status of sacred Tradition:

Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine wellspring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal. Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit ... Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal feelings of devotion and reverence" (No. 9).

Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church (No. 10).

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of Revelation, the Council continues, whether it be in written form or in Tradition, "has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone." The Church teaches what has been handed on to it.

It is clear, therefore, that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls (No. 10).

Thus, the Council makes it plain that interpretations of Scripture cannot disagree with Tradition. Scripture and Tradition, the two channels of Revelation, "make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God."

Then the constitution goes on to reaffirm the Church's constant belief in the inerrancy of Scripture.

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures (No. 11).

Since God speaks to men in human fashion, the exegete, the Council says, should carefully look for the meaning of the sacred writer, and should pay attention to literary forms, for truth is expressed in "the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetic texts, and in other forms of literary expression" (No. 12).

He [the exegete] must look for the meaning which the writer, given the circumstances of his time and his culture, intended to express. (Here, the Council refers to writings of St. Augustine. As Cardinal Bea has reminded us, the existence of many literary forms in Scripture has always been recognized).

Since sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind, says the Council, the analogy of faith must always be kept in mind. The manner of interpreting Scripture "is ultimately subject to the judgement of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God" (No. 13). (Here, the Council refers to Vatican I.)

Then the Council makes some further comments on the Old and New Testaments individually. It reaffirms the belief that God revealed Himself to the chosen people as the one, true, living God; and that He spoke to them through the prophets. The books of the Old Testament, then, have lasting value. The Old Testament prepares for and declares in prophecy the coming of Christ, Redeemer of all men. God brought it about that the New Testament should be hidden in the Old, and that the Old should be made manifest in the New.

When the time had fully come, the document continues, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." Among all the inspired writings, even among those of the New Testament, "the Gospels have a special place, and rightly so, because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Saviour" (No. 18).

Then the Council Fathers make this important statement, supplementing what they have already said of the Gospels in section 7.

The Church has always and everywhere maintained, and continues to maintain, the apostolic origin of the four Gospels. The apostles preached, as Christ had charged them to do, and then, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they and others of the apostolic age handed on to us in writing the same message they had preached, the foundation of our Faith: the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy maintained and continues to maintain, that the four Gospels just named, whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while He lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when He was taken up (cf. Acts 1:1-2). For, after the Ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what He had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed. The sacred authors, in writing the four Gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form, others they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches, the while sustaining the form of preaching, but always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus. Whether they relied on their own memory and recollections or on the testimony of those who "from the beginning were eyewitnesses of the Word," their purpose in writing was that we might know the "truth" concerning the things of which we have been informed (cf. Lk 1:2-4) (No. 19).

This section of the document, we should recall, was one of those over which there was much discussion, and much painstaking work to achieve an unambiguous statement of the accuracy and historicity of the Gospels. It is doubly important today, in view of the numerous errors which are being spread on this subject.

Besides the Gospels, the New Testament contains the epistles of St. Paul, and other apostolic writings composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These writings "formulate more and more precisely" Christ's authentic teaching (No. 20).

In conclusion, the Council says that the Church "has always regarded, and continues to regard the Scriptures, taken together with sacred Tradition, as the supreme rule of her faith" (No. 21).

The Scriptures "make the voice of the Holy Spirit sound again and again in the words of the prophets and apostles." The Church honours the ancient Septuagint and the other Eastern translations, and the Latin translations, especially the Vulgate. But she also sees to it that there are translations in the various languages.

The Council recommends exegetes to the study of the Church Fathers of both East and West. Catholic exegetes, it said, and other workers in the field of sacred theology should combine their efforts, and "under the watchful eye of the sacred Magisterium" should examine and seek to explain the sacred texts, carrying on their work "with complete dedication and in accordance with the mind of the Church" (No. 23).

Sacred theology rests on the Scriptures, together with sacred Tradition, "as on a permanent foundation" (No. 24).

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation is one of the briefest of the documents issued by the Council. It takes up only 15 pages in the Flannery edition of the Council documents, the one from which we have quoted. It is, at the same time, one of the most important, since, as the Council said, Scripture and sacred Tradition form the foundation of the Faith. A great deal of discussion, revision, and deliberation were entailed in the composition of the final document; and as Fr. Wiltgen tells us, "the life span of the schema on divine Revelation covered all four sessions" of the Council. (Wiltgen *Ibid.*, p. 175.)

Pope Paul himself felt obliged to intervene at some points. But how well the final document represented the mind of the Council is shown by its almost unanimous approval. On Nov. 18th, 1965, the Council Fathers voted 2344 to 6 to accept it.

SOME COMMENTS BY CARDINAL BEA

The Second Vatican Council was concerned, said Cardinal Bea, writing two years later, with dispelling errors which are "being ever more widely diffused by certain exegetical and theological schools." (The Word of God and Mankind, p. 247.)

To refute theories of the form critical school, the Council was emphatic in reaffirming the Gospels' apostolic origin, and was even more emphatic in reaffirming their historical truth. It insisted that the Gospels were truthful in recounting what Jesus did and taught, and added the words "until the day He was taken up," to show that the Gospels cover the 40 days of which St. Luke speaks in Acts. These 40 days, the Cardinal adds, "may also properly be considered as the life of Jesus among men." While His appearances after the Resurrection belong to the supernatural order, they are "nevertheless also facts which have their place in human history, and are guaranteed by the historical veracity of the Gospels." (*Ibid.*, p. 255.)

While the "literary form" of the Gospels was one of preaching, the authors made it perfectly clear that they were transmitting facts. While they did not intend to write a complete, chronological life

of Jesus, they had a "historical-biographical interest" which extended to His whole life and doctrine. (Ibid., p. 259.)

These statements of Cardinal Bea's seem relevant since he was, as we noted, one of those in the midst of the preparation of the Council document.

SOME CLOSING OBSERVATIONS

One can readily see, in reviewing the Church's statements on the Bible and biblical study since *Providentissimus Deus*, in 1893, a complete consistency in outlook. We find no "about-faces" or "new directions," despite some exegetes' eagerness to find them. The documents frequently refer to others which preceded them; they frequently refer to the writings of the Church Fathers, or quote them. They recognize literary forms, but do not forget that one of those forms - and one very widely used in the Bible as in other writings - is narration of historical fact. They show a prudent disinclination to accept unfounded or unproven opinions; and they insist that Catholic exegetes observe "the analogy of faith," rejecting interpretations of Scripture which are contrary to tradition and to the Magisterium.
