

## Item #6 – “A Vision of Wholeness”: A Response

This was originally Entry #16 in “James Swetnam’s Close Readings”

On August 11-13, 1990, a conference on the thought Pope John Paul II was held at Loyola University of Chicago. I contributed a “response” to a paper by Fr. Terrence Prendergast, S.J., on the use of the Bible by the pope. [Fr. Prendergast is now the archbishop of Ottawa in Canada.] His presentation was entitled “A Vision of Wholeness”. My response is listed in my bibliography under §155. I recently had occasion to re-read my text and I think it would be useful to place it on my web site for in it I mention the desirability of a synod on the Bible. In the aftermath of just such a synod (October, 2008) what I wrote in 1990 still makes eminent sense. I reproduce the text below. (A reprint of the original edition of the volume is now available at the Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana in Rome.) (22 March 2009)

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### “A Vision of Wholeness”: A Response

JAMES SWETNAM, S.J.

In order to illustrate John Paul’s use or non-use of the results of modern biblical scholarship, Father Prendergast has chosen “several of the positions commonly agreed on by biblical scholarship today”. These are: 1) Pentateuchal sources; 2) multiple authorship for the *Book of Isaiah*; 3) the three levels of the Jesus tradition within the Gospels; 4) the distinction between authentic and non-authentic Pauline letters; 5) distinctive traits of biblical writers and traditions.<sup>1</sup> The choice is instructive: four out of the five norms involve source criticism in some form or other. Only the fifth position is concerned primarily with the meaning of the text as it stands, and even here source criticism enters in.

Father Prendergast’s choice of assured norms for judging the pope’s use or non-use of modern biblical scholarship is a reminder that until fairly recently “literary criticism” in the world of biblical studies involved above all theorizing about sources. Only in the past twenty years has there been a major shift in emphasis to trying to discover above all what a biblical text means as it stands.<sup>2</sup> Commonly agreed-on results of modern biblical scholarship in the realm of saying what a text means are not as easy to come by as they are for source criticism. But the meaning of the text as it stands is what John Paul seems to be principally interested in. In an address to the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on April 7, 1989, the pope remarked that an exegete should not be content with secondary aspects of biblical texts but should place in evidence their principal message which is a religious message:

Of late not a few Christians have been heard to complain that exegesis has become an exercise in subtlety with no relation to the life of God’s People. Obviously such a complaint can be challenged. In many cases it is not justified. Still, one must be on one’s guard. Fidelity to the task of interpretation should lead an exegete not to be content with studying secondary aspects of biblical texts but to place in evidence their principal message which is a religious message, a call to conversion and good news of

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<sup>1</sup> T. Prendergast, “A Vision of Wholeness”, pp. 73f.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture scholars have always been concerned about the meaning of the biblical text, of course. But granted the need for qualification in an area as vast and complicated and variegated as the history of exegesis, the generalization seems valid.

salvation, capable of transforming each person and human society as a whole by introducing it to communion with God<sup>3</sup>.

By exhorting exegetes to emphasize the principal religious message of a text, the pope is joining his voice to those scholars who feel that biblical scholarship is finally on track after decades of over-emphasis on how the biblical text came to be.

Not only does John Paul seem to be unconvinced about the commonly agreed-on results of source criticism as helpful for illumining the meaning of the biblical text, he also seems to think that the results are not as assured as they should be to warrant drawing inferences from them<sup>4</sup>. In an address to the Biblical Commission in April, 1985, the pope stated that scholars should distinguish accurately the text of Scripture from conjectures however learned:

Your ecclesial task should not be to treat the Sacred Writings inspired by God with the utmost veneration and to distinguish accurately the text of Sacred Scripture from learned conjectures, both yours and others'. It is not unusual today with regard to this matter that a certain confusion be noted inasmuch as there are some who have more faith in views which are conjectures than in words which are divine<sup>5</sup>.

Certainly the pope is not afraid to use modern scholarship when it seems to him to illumine the text: witness his use of philology in *Dives in Misericordia*<sup>6</sup>. And he does not hesitate to cite sources when they seem called for, as, for example, his references to Confucius, Gandhi, Buddhism, etc.<sup>7</sup>. It is not sources as such which he fails to use, but sources which are uncertain and/or which fail to illumine the meaning of a biblical text.

All this does not mean, of course, that the pope's use of Scripture is always at odds with the meaning of the text. But if there are documents where his use of the biblical text is impressive (*Dominum et Vivificantem*), there are others where such use is not always felicitous (*Redemptoris Mater*)<sup>8</sup>.

John Paul's relative neglect of the conciliar document *Dei Verbum* may be an indication that he is not entirely at ease in the field of Scripture, as contrasted with philosophy and theology<sup>9</sup>. Could it be that this document of Vatican II, for all of its epoch-making significance, is not really adequate for giving detailed guidelines as to how Scripture should be fully restored to its place at the center of Catholic life and

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<sup>3</sup> "Ces derniers temps on a entendu bien des chrétiens se plaindre de ce que l'exégèse était devenue un art raffiné, sans rapport avec la vie du Peuple de Dieu. Cette plainte peut évidemment être contestée; en bien des cas, elle n'est pas justifiée. Il y a lieu, cependant, d'y être attentive. La fidélité même à sa tâche d'interprétation exige de l'exégète qu'il ne se contente pas d'étudier des aspects secondaires des textes bibliques, mais qu'il mette bien en valeur leur message principal, qui est un message religieux, un appel à la conversion et un bonne nouvelle de salut, capable de transformer chaque personne et la société humaine, en l'introduisant dans la communion divine" (AAS 81 [1989] 1124).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Prendergast's view (p. 77): "I suggest here that a conclusion worth considering is the recognition that the higher the authoritative level of the teaching given, the less likely the pope will be to allude to scriptural theories".

<sup>5</sup> "Vestrum ecclesiale munus efficere debet ut Sacras Litteras a Deo inspiratas maxima veneratione prosequamini, utque accurate secernatis textus Sacrae Scripturae a doctorum coniecturis, tum vestris tum aliorum. Non raro in hac re hodie quaedam confusio potest animadverti, quandoquidem quidam sunt qui recognitionibus maiorem fidem adiciant, quam quae verbis divinis debetur" (AAS 77 [1985] 972).

<sup>6</sup> Prendergast, pp. 72 and 78.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72f.

<sup>8</sup> Mariology is an area in Scripture where contemporary biblical scholarship is bearing fruit. But much remains to be done.

<sup>9</sup> To judge from the non-biblical citations in the three encyclicals examined by Prendergast, the Vatican Council documents on the Church have pride of place in the thought of John Paul II. (Prendergast, p. 72.)

thought<sup>10</sup>? Father Prendergast's use of David Kelsey instead of some authoritative work of the magisterium seems to suggest as much<sup>11</sup>.

Catholic scholarship should devote more attention to the elaboration of ways in which Scripture can find a purchase in contemporary Catholic life<sup>12</sup>. Father Prendergast suggests the category of "wholeness"<sup>13</sup>. While useful to remind Catholic scholars that they should work within not only the totality of Catholic tradition, but also within the global outreach of Christ and his Church, this seems too general to suffice. What is also needed is an agreed-on hermeneutics which will single out specific ways in which the Bible should enter into the life of Catholics.

In sum: unqualified negativity about John Paul's use of Scripture is not warranted; not infrequently it is insightful and inspiring. But when Father Prendergast's findings are viewed from the perspective of the pope's statements to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, the pope emerges as a wistful biblist. If he seems to be wistful, perhaps his wistfulness is caused by his vague suspicion that despite his willingness to learn from contemporary biblical scholarship he is still to some extent on the outside of the Bible looking in. And this can only be because, to a certain extent, contemporary biblical scholarship is in the same position.

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An important complement to the above is the interview of Father Albert Vanhoye, S.J., with the Scripture scholar Dr. Peter Williamson, given in Rome on January 14, 1997. Father Vanhoye served for two terms as secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and was rector and dean of the Pontifical Biblical Institute where he served as professor of New Testament for many years. He is now, of course, a Cardinal of the Church. The interview was published in the journal *First Things* (Copyright © 1997) 74 (June/July 1997) 35-40. Father Vanhoye makes the important point that it is the *religious* meaning of the biblical text that above all should be presented by the exegete. **(22 March 2009; 27 June 2019)**

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<sup>10</sup> The Church universal could benefit from a Synod of the Bishops centering on the pastoral use of the Bible. Such a synod could be the occasion for working out a preliminary official draft about the way in which Scripture is "used" in the Church and thus act as a complement to "*Dei Verbum*".

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Prendergast, pp. 83-85.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the remarks by R. Brown in his article on biblical interpretation in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. J.A. Fitzmyer, *et al.* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1146-1160.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Prendergast, pp. 85-88.