

Newman on Scripture

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In this year when we are awaiting the beatification of Cardinal Newman it is appropriate to reflect on his contributions to scripture scholarship. He was, of course, primarily a patristic rather than a scripture scholar. However, despite a difficulty in reading German, it is striking to see from his Oxford lectures how familiar he was with the innovative German biblical scholarship of the day. Nevertheless, at least two of his important contributions remain interesting and relevant at the present day, namely his views on the interrelationship of scripture and tradition, and his reflections on the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. The former nexus of questions has its focus during the period when Newman was working his way towards the Catholic Church, the latter when he was already within it.

1. Scripture and Tradition

Newman received his earliest religious formation from reading the Bible: 'I was brought up from a child to take great delight in reading the Bible', he says on the first page of the *Apologia*. Yet he maintains that there are three stages of religious intellectual formation: 'Our parents and teachers are our first informants' (*Via Media*, vol. 1, p. 132), who gradually resign their place to the Church in which we find ourselves. Secondly, 'the Scriptures have been added as fresh informants, bearing witness to the Church and to the moral sense, and interpreted by them both'. Thirdly, 'where there is time and opportunity for research', Christian antiquity and the present state of Christendom become further additional informants. Newman always maintained that the truths of Christianity cannot be derived entirely unaided from the scriptures, but that the scriptures build upon and inform an already existing *sensus religiosus*, normally derived from early teaching. He could never accept the *sola scriptura* principle. Early in the *Apologia* he states this clearly: 'The sacred text was never intended to teach doctrine, but only to prove it, and if we would learn doctrine, we must have recourse to the formularies of the Church' (p. 132).

The threefold structure of religious knowledge continues to be the background of his thought. Just as in the individual the scriptures build on and focus this *sensus religiosus*, giving clear articulation to beliefs and attitudes which may have been vague and unformed, so in the Christian community there is a development of doctrine in the tradition of the Church. Tradition takes two forms, which Newman calls episcopal and prophetic. The former is that tradition which is handed on from bishop to bishop in the form of creedal statements. The latter is that tradition handed on and reflected upon by what we would now, since Vatican II, call ‘the prophetic people of God’, theologians and other believers, existing primarily in the bosom of the Church itself,

partly written, partly unwritten, partly the interpretation, partly the supplement of Scripture, partly preserved in intellectual expressions, partly latent in the spirit and temper of Christians; poured to and fro in closets and upon the housetops, in liturgies, in controversial works, in obscure fragments, in sermons, in popular prejudices, in local customs (*Via Media*, vol 1, p. 250).

It is this form of prophetic tradition which leads to the development of doctrine, enabling those within the bosom of the Church to clarify and bring out the implications of the scriptures. Because of this constant development, Newman eventually rejected, or at least modified, the classic formulation of the criterion of true doctrine stemming from Vincent of Lerins, *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*, as being too static a rule of faith. By discussion and argument within the bosom of the Church, deeper understanding and new formulations of doctrine are achieved. The formularies finally reached at Nicaea, *homoousion* and *theotokos*, are not scriptural, but were reached only by this process of pouring to and fro upon the housetops, in liturgies, etc.¹ They are a development from and an articulation of the scriptural text.

The heart of Newman’s *Via Media* between the Catholic Church and the Church of England is the insufficiency of *sola scriptura*. Two very important factors especially make tradition a vital supplement to

¹ An intriguing question for the biblicist is the extent to which Newman’s theory of development influenced Loisy and so contributed to the disastrous blockage of Catholic biblical studies resulting from the condemnation of the Catholic Modernist movement. A typical instance of this is that Loisy wrote, ‘The divinity of Christ is a dogma which grew in the Christian conscience, but which had not been expressly formulated in the Gospel; it existed only germinally in the notion of the Messiah, son of God’ (*Autour d’un petit livre*, p. 117). A coarsened form of this was condemned by *Lamentabili* 27: *Divinitas Jesu Christi ex Evangeliiis non probatur, sed est dogma quod conscientia Christiana ex notione Messiae deduxit*. See the articles by Nicholas Lash and myself in *John Henry Newman and Modernism*, ed. A.H. Jenkins (Verlag Glock und Lutz, Sigmarigendorf, 1990).

scripture. In *Tract 85*, written in 1838, the year after *Via Media*, Newman stresses the positive need for tradition on account of the inaccuracies of scripture, and its haphazard nature.² The Bible is not a coherent exposition of a systematic body of doctrine, but a completely haphazard collection of books, which needs to be supplemented and interpreted by tradition:

It is as if you were to seize the papers or correspondence of leading men in any school of philosophy or science, which were never designed for publication, and bring them out in one volume.... You would have many repetitions, many hiatuses, many things which looked like contradictions; you would have to work your way through heterogeneous materials, and after your best efforts, there would be much hopelessly obscure; and, on the other hand, you might look in vain in such a casual collection for some particular opinions which the writers were known nevertheless to have held, nay to have insisted on.³

Already in 1833 in *The Arians of the Fourth Century* he had written of the other factor which makes tradition so important as a supplement to scripture, namely the widespread use, from the earliest writers onwards, but especially in the Alexandrian tradition, of the use of an allegorical or ‘mystical’ method of interpretation. His statement is still today an important counter-blast to insistence on strict limitation of exegesis to historico-critical techniques, for the patristic tradition often seems to read into a particular text more than can be drawn out of it by strictly historico-critical methods:

In all ages of the Church, her teachers have shown a disinclination to confine themselves to the mere literal interpretation of Scripture. Her most subtle and powerful method of proof, whether in ancient or modern times, is the mystical sense, which is so frequently used in doctrinal controversy as on many occasions to supersede any other (p. 404).

This is an important endorsement of traditional ‘allegorical’ methods of exegesis of the Bible, so widely used in the Church. In the *Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (1845) a whole section is devoted to the

² Among instances of the haphazard nature of the tradition which he gives are the two creation narratives, the triple story of the patriarch’s wife in the king’s harem, Moses’ single fast of 40 days (Exodus), doubled in Deuteronomy (*Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects*, Gracewing, 2004), p. 154-157.

³ *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects*, p. 126.

importance of mystical interpretation (pp. 338-342). He regards 'mystical' usage as one of the marks of continuous and therefore true development in the Church. It dates back to the very earliest apologists (such as the Dialogue between Trypho and Justin in the second century) in the Church. Newman cites the use of the psalm-verse 'My heart has burst forth with a good Word' as a proof of the divinity of Jesus, as well as such standard texts from the Wisdom Literature as Proverbs 8.22, 30-31. In supporting the Alexandrian school of allegorical interpretation, stemming from Origen, he goes so far as to condemn their opponents, the Antiochene school, as 'the very metropolis of heresy', the breeding-ground of Arius and Nestorius. Strict adherents of the historico-critical school often shy away from this type of exegesis. Especially in the Alexandrian school of allegorical exegesis, as attested in Origen and such followers of his as Jerome and Bede, the Fathers appear to think that they are deducing doctrines from texts which logically do not prove the point. In fact they are reading into the text teachings which they had already received from elsewhere.⁴ Especially names and numbers are considered to carry teachings which are far from their straightforward meaning. In this sense Newman can say that the whole Catholic faith may be proved from scripture, though 'it is not to be found on the surface of it, nor in such sense that it may be gained from Scripture without the aid of Tradition'.⁵ All the more important, therefore, is it to establish a set of criteria for the true as opposed to the false development of tradition and doctrine, by which one may judge whether tradition is true to its roots or a distortion. He provides just such a set of seven criteria.⁶ These are full of wisdom and good sense, but discussion of them would not be relevant here.

It was largely this piece of research and reflection which led Newman to be received into the Catholic Church. More important still, it was largely such work which was responsible for the overcoming of the dichotomy left open by the Council of Trent, that there were two separate sources of revelation and that Christian truth was contained *partly* in written books and *partly* in unwritten traditions. Newman quotes this interpretation of Trent without comment in a footnote to the *Essay on Development*, p. 339.⁷ The Council of Trent had deliberately left the matter entirely open:

⁴ See my *Use and Abuse of the Bible* (T & T Clark, 2010), especially p. 38-45, 69-72.

⁵ *Essay on Development of Doctrine*, p. 342.

⁶ See *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, p. 151.

⁷ 'They [the Fathers of the Council] were well aware that the controversy then was, whether the Christian doctrine was only *in part* contained in Scripture. But they did not dare to frame their decree openly in accordance with the modern Romish view; they did not venture to affirm, as the might easily have done, that the Christian verity "was contained *partly* in written books, and *partly* in unwritten traditions" – *Palmer on the Church*, vol. 2, p. 15.'

‘The council clearly perceives that this truth and rule are contained in written books and in unwritten traditions...or else have come down to us, handed on from the apostles themselves’.⁸ Vatican II is, however, quite clear not only that there is only one source (‘Tradition and scripture together form a single sacred deposit of the word of God’), but also that the tradition develops (‘There is growth in understanding of what is handed on, of both the words and the realities they signify’).⁹ One of the great debates of the Council was on the sufficiency of scripture in breadth of content, whether tradition added anything which was not in the scripture. On occasion this led to heated and even personally acrimonious debate.¹⁰ Bishop Butler points out¹¹ how close the wording of the eventual decree is to the thought of Newman in the *Essay on Development*. It would be foolish to suggest that Newman’s work on the mutual interpretation of scripture and tradition was the only influence which led to these formulations, but the formulae are so close to his that Newman’s work must have played an important part. The fulsome praise bestowed on Newman (Pope Paul VI even lapsed from Italian into English), only a few months after the debate mentioned above,¹² at the Beatification of Dominic Barberi who received Newman into the Church, shows the honour in which he was held at the Council. The Pope concluded by calling him ‘so high an authority of a time like ours’.¹³

2. Inspiration and Inerrancy

One of the great problems of Christianity in the nineteenth century was the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. The previous century had been still emerging from a world in which the Bible was the principal authority in everything; it was, after all, the Word of God. The problem was raised in its acutest form by the geological discoveries which began to indicate the immense age of the world, to unseat the accepted datum of Archbishop Ussher’s calculation, published in 1658, that the world was created at nightfall on 23rd October 4004 BC. The authority and influence of this calculation is shown by the fact that in the eighteenth century it was often printed as a footnote in Bibles. The geological discoveries were reinforced in the early nineteenth century by literary and archaeological data which threw doubt on the literal historicity of the Bible. Especially on the creation narratives Newman’s lectures to Oxford undergraduates of the 1830s show his familiarity with these new scientific and literary

⁸ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner (Sheed & Ward, 1990), p. 663.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 976, 974).

¹⁰ G. Alberigo, *History of Vatican II* (Orbis, 1997), vol 2, p. 386-7.

¹¹ ‘Newman and the Second Vatican Council’, in *The Rediscovery of Newman*, ed. J. Coulson and AM Allchin (SPCK, 1967), p. 238.

¹² The debate took place in February 1963.

¹³ On 27th October, 1963, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 25 (1963), p. 1025.

data. It was, however, Darwin's publication of his findings in *The Origin of Species* in 1858 which brought to the notice of the general public the difficulty of continuing to accept the early stories of the Book of Genesis as a genuine account of the early history of the human race. The storm was given a new intensity in 1860 by the publication of *Essays and Reviews*, in which seven authoritative academics took these findings seriously and showed that they must be responsibly discussed.

Less well-known, perhaps, is the Catholic reaction, of which three instances may be given. Soon after the publication of *Essays and Reviews*, one of its authors, Mark Pattison, was daunted to find himself in the same railway carriage as the already revered figure of Newman. He wrote: 'I was in terror as to how he would regard me in consequence of what I had written. My fears were quickly relieved. He blamed severely the throwing of such speculations broadcast upon the general public. It was, he said, unsettling their faith without offering them anything else to rest upon. But he had no word of censure for the latitude of theological speculation assumed by the essay'.¹⁴ In fact Newman considered the whole problem faced by *Essays and Reviews* to be irrelevant to a Catholic 'because not the Bible but the Church is to him the oracle and organ of Revelation'.¹⁵

Secondly, a decent interval after the publication of the essays, John Cuthbert Hedley, editor of the *Dublin Review* (soon to become highly respected Bishop of Menevia), wrote a long essay, entitled 'Evolution and Faith', devoted to a serious discussion of the issues raised (*Dublin Review* 17, July 1871, p. 1-40). He comes very close to the present accepted solution of literary genres by saying, 'The literal meaning of the Holy Scripture does not always lie on the surface, or even in the sense that is popularly attached to the words of the text' (p. 9). If the meaning does not lie on the surface, there must be a hidden meaning intended by the author and waiting to be discovered. On one detail Hedley points out that, despite the six days of the narrative, Augustine agreed with the findings of modern science since he does not take the six days or phases of creation to be meant as a literal, historical account. He holds the whole of creation to have been simultaneous, 'the first establishment of the universe was completed instantaneously' (p. 14). A third notable Catholic reaction was the article in the *Dublin Review* ten years later (vol. 5, 1881, p. 311-32), 'The Days of the Week and the Works of Creation', by Bishop William Clifford of Clifton. Clifford treats the first chapter of Genesis as a hymn of creation, whose purpose was to counter the

¹⁴ Quoted in *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol xix, p. 477, fn 3.

¹⁵ Letter of 24th March, 1861.

Egyptian dedication of each of the days of the week to separate deities. On the historical worth of the narrative he writes, ‘the assertions made in chap. i., viewed as history, are of so startling a nature as to exclude the supposition that the author intended them to be so understood’ (p. 323). Although one may not agree that this is the Priestly writer’s intention, the important point is that the solution to the problem of historicity is reached by means of authorial intention. These Catholic researches occurred in the days before Catholic scholarship was blighted by the disasters of the Modernist Movement and the Roman reaction to it. They were, perhaps, flashes of light which did not succeed in illuminating the general landscape.

At any rate at first, Newman approached the question primarily from the point of view of inspiration, a question which, according to J. Seynaeve,¹⁶ haunted him throughout his life. It is important to remember the curiously mechanistic condition of theories of inspiration at this time. Current theories of inspiration included those of the dove and the lyre. The dove theory sees the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove perched on the shoulder of the authors, so basically a dictation-theory. The lyre theory is that God ‘played’ the human authors of the scriptures in the way a musician plays a lyre. This could be made to fit with the Thomist view that God is the principal cause of inspiration and the human author the instrumental cause. An advance on this theory was made by J.B. Franzelin, who was responsible for drafting the schema on revelation for Vatican I, in that God gave the human author the material, but left him to express it, merely preserving him from error. Accordingly, Vatican I merely rejected two theories of inspiration, the theory of Lessius that inspiration consisted simply in the subsequent adoption by the Church of a book written by merely human efforts, and Hahn’s theory of negative assistance, that the Holy Spirit merely excluded any errors (Denzinger, #1787). Further questions were left open by Council formula, *Spiritu Sancto inspirante Deum habent auctorem* (‘through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they have God as author’).

Nearly a decade earlier, in 1861-3, Newman was working on the question of inspiration as part of a project for a *Prolegomena* to the translation of the Bible which he had been asked to make by the Catholic hierarchy. In the end both translation and *Prolegomena* were abandoned. In 1953, however, J. Seynaeve published a transcription of Newman’s incomplete notes for the *Prolegomena*, held in the Birmingham Oratory. These are sufficient to show how his mind was working. The most important point

¹⁶ *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplement VI* (Paris, Letouzey, 1960), s.v. Newman, col. 430.

is that he attributes inspiration not to the books themselves but to the authors. He solves the problem of inaccuracies by holding that this inspiration is indeed expressed in all parts of the Bible but not wholly (*tota sed non totaliter*). He agrees with Origen's occasional impatience with the literal sense of the Bible by maintaining that there are passages where the mystical rather than the literal sense is what is inspired. In his full article in the *Supplement to the Dictionnaire de la Bible* Seynaeve sums up,

Thanks to divine inspiration, the Holy Spirit has given the Scripture a divine meaning, and it is the task of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, to discover this divine meaning, either by the mediation of the faithful or by the teaching of authority, which gives us true certainty. Clearly, this new theory provided Newman with the means of reconciling the Bible with the data of science. This was, however, only relatively successful, for, in his re-thinking of the problem in 1884, Newman abandoned this theory (col. 440).

Nevertheless Newman retains the important starting-point that inspiration touches the whole Bible.

In the 1884 Essay, so after Vatican I, Newman takes a slightly different tack. First he says (#11) that 'it seems unworthy of Divine Greatness that the Almighty should, in His revelation of Himself, undertake mere secular duties, and assume the office of a narrator as such, or an historian, or geographer, except so far as the secular matters bear directly upon the revealed truth'. This might seem to open the door to the view that mere factual and historical details are not touched by inspiration. This seems to be his drift, for he continues by stressing that Trent four times 'insists upon "faith and morality" as the scope of inspired teaching' (#12), without saying a word directly as to its inspiration in matters of fact. Nevertheless, Newman refuses so to limit the scope of inspiration, for he continues, the whole history in the Bible is but a manifestation of Divine Providence, interpretative of universal history and preparatory of the evangelical dispensation. 'Its pages breathe of providence and grace, of our Lord, and of His work and teaching from beginning to end... In this point of view, Scripture is inspired, not only in faith and morals, but in all its parts which bear on faith, including matters of fact' (#13). Newman is careful not to limit inspiration to matters of faith and morals, and to include the whole gamut of scripture as it tells the story of God's self-revelation in his dealings with the human race. For the full revelation of God the whole story is needed. The whole story must then be inspired.

The formula in Newman's last sentence above is strikingly close to the formula of *Dei Verbum* in Vatican II: 'We must acknowledge that the books of scripture teach firmly, faithfully and without error such truth as God, for the sake of our salvation, wished the biblical text to contain'.¹⁷ Only 'for the sake of our salvation' has taken the place of 'which bear on faith'. The formula in an earlier draft, 'saving truth', was perhaps even closer; it was eventually rejected because it suggested to some of the Council Fathers that only truths of faith and morals were to be included.

The problem of inerrancy has still to be handled, and here the solution is not yet sufficiently refined. Newman's solution lay in his theory of *obiter dicta*. Robert Murray wisely suggests¹⁸ that he derived this from William Holden, whose book he had certainly read in 1846, and owned till his death. Holden distinguished and exempted from divine revelation 'those things that are written by the bye or have reference to something else not concerning religion'. Newman translated Holden's 'by the bye' into '*obiter dicta*', things said casually. The classic example throughout Newman's writing is the statement in the Book of Judith that Nabuchodonosor was King of Nineveh, whereas in fact he was King of Babylon, but to these Newman consistently adds 'minute matters which seem scarcely worthy of the Holy Spirit, as for instance what is said of the dog of Tobias, St Paul's *penula*, and the salutations at the end of the Epistles' (1884 Essay, #26). Among inconsistencies between books of the Bible Newman instances also such matters as discrepancies in reporting the same event between the Books of Kings and Chronicles, and in the New Testament between details of the healing of Bartimaeus of Jericho (one blind man or two? On arriving in Jericho or on leaving it?).

'Minute matters, scarcely worthy of the Holy Spirit' is not entirely clear, for it does not give grounds for judging what is important and what is 'written by the bye' (Holden) or 'scarcely worthy of the Spirit' (Newman). You can judge what is a throw-away remark and what is important to the speaker or writer only if the speaker's purpose or objective is first established. The value of a remark depends not on its length or its deliberateness, but in the wisdom it expresses. A single throw-away remark may be more memorable than an ill-considered paragraph. The distinction is similar to, but distinctly less reasoned than Chrysostom's distinction between *kephalaia*, 'matters of capital importance which sustain our life and weld together our preaching' and

¹⁷ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol 2, p. 976.

¹⁸ *On the Inspiration of Scripture by John Henry Newman*, ed. J. Derek Holmes and Robert Murray (Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), p. 68.

details (*ta mikra*).¹⁹ This has the advantage of relating the matter to the religious purpose of the writing. It was, however, left to Chrysostom's younger contemporary, Augustine of Hippo, to hit the nail on the head, with *Nihil aliud quaerendum esse quam quid velit qui loquitur* ('Nothing else is to be sought than the intention of the speaker', *PL* 34.1092). This at last brings in the intention of the author – indeed of both authors, divine and human – and leads directly on to the solution of literary genres. The Bible is religious literature, not science or geology. This attitude is neatly expressed in the Vatican II declaration *Dei Verbum* #11: 'the books of scripture teach firmly, faithfully and without error such truth as God, for the sake of our salvation, wished the biblical text to contain'. The document then directs the interpreter to investigate carefully 'what meaning the biblical writers really had in mind, and what God wished to make clear through their words' (#12).

On inspiration, then, Newman was within a whisker of the solution of *Dei Verbum*, for his statement that the whole history in the Bible is but a manifestation of Divine Providence, interpretative of universal history, is very close to the idea of God wishing to convey truths for the sake of our salvation. On inerrancy he was less close to the mark, for to characterize sayings or accounts as *obiter dicta* does not give a sufficiently reasoned explanation why *obiter dicta* may not be inerrant, and can in fact be wrong. More particularly, it is difficult to characterize the six days of creation or the 'walls of water to left of them, walls of water to right of them' at the Crossing of the Sea (Exodus 14.22) as *obiter dicta*. For this it was necessary to wait for the solution embraced by *Dei Verbum* #12, namely literary genres, although this had already been suggested as early as Bishop Clifford's article in the *Dublin Review* of 1881. It is surprising that from 1883 onwards Newman corresponded frequently and amicably with Bishop Clifford. He congratulated the Bishop warmly on his article, and even submitted to him his 'notes' on Inspiration. He acknowledges that the Bishop's article 'opens the door'²⁰, but does not seem to make any use of the article in his text.

Addendum: There remains an item which I find wholly uncharacteristic and inexplicable, Newman's own statement: 'There is one instance in Scripture of Divine Inspiration without a human medium: the Decalogue was written by the very finger of God. He wrote the Law upon the stone tables Himself' (1884 Essay #19, alluded to again in Essay 2 #33). Such a fundamentalist attitude sits strangely with the rest of the work.

¹⁹ See JD Quinn, 'St John Chrysostom on History in the Synoptics' (*CBQ* 24, 1962, 140-147), who quotes from Chrysostom in *PG* 57, cols 16-18.

²⁰ *Letter and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol XXX, p. 175, letter of 20th January, 1883.