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HOW LIBERMANN READ THE GOSPEL: A STUDY OF THE COMMENTARY ON ST. JOHN

As I browsed in the index of authors in the library of the Biblical Institute in Rome, I was surprised to find the name of Father Libermann and the information that his *Commentaire de l'Evangile selon St-Jean* could be found in the shelves. It was Father I. de la Potterie, an expert on St. John, who put this work among those of famous exegetes.

I should like to talk about the Commentary, without any illusions about this sort of conference which takes the place of salty crackers before the *aperitif* . . . Still, it is a family custom, and a good one, to spend an hour a year in the company of Our Venerable Father. We can also, however, have another purpose in mind.

St. Francis de Sales said: "There is no more difference between the Gospel and the lives of the saints than between printed music and sung music." As I read the Commentary, I do not meet a man who is writing *about* the Gospel, but a man who is telling us how he understands and lives the Gospel. What he has to say interests me to the degree that it can help me to read the Gospel. In Gabon the Gospel is getting back more and more its place of importance: in catechesis and in local catechetical works, in the liturgy, and in community discussions in the towns or villages "the priests no longer hide the Gospel from us," say certain groups. In our pastoral work, we spend at least half our time teaching Gospel texts and getting people to meditate on them. But how do we read the Gospel ourselves? No doubt we ask ourselves this question from time to time. We shall simply ask Father Libermann if he has some enlightenment for us.

After a brief review of the work in general, we shall bring out some characteristics of Libermann's way of reading the Gospels in terms of his Jewish background and his experience in the Church.

I. SOME REMARKS ABOUT THE COMMENTARY

The text is presented in the form of a spiritual commentary following the Gospel verse by verse. It ends abruptly with John 12: 23. We know the circumstances of the composition: Libermann, a 38-year old seminarian held back from orders because of epilepsy, was working at the formation of Eudist novices at Rennes and his work was generally esteemed. He left it all and in 1840 we find him in Rome requesting nothing less than a green light for the foundation of a missionary association to go to the Blacks in the French Colonies. The friends who had first initiated the idea had now practically given it up and our acolyte was alone in his garret lodging with the Patriarca family. That is where he wrote his Commentary. We must, however, correct the legend that would speak of this work as a youthful production written in one single burst of enthusiasm and under the influence of an extraordinary inspiration.

During the Canonical Process for the examination of his life, one witness, with a peculiar idea of grace, testified:

“For him there was no labor, no effort of mind or scientific research; it seemed as if it was all pure grace.”

This is false! There was labor. Ever since the St-Sulpice days the fourth Gospel was his bedside reading and he commented upon it in the “pious groups” at Issy. Mgr. Poirier, who knew his work with the novices at Rennes, tells us:

“I admit that I took particular pleasure in consulting him about difficult passages in the sacred books. He had devoted a great deal of study to the Catholic commentators . . .”

(Card. J. B. Pitra, *Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu, François Marie Paul Libermann*, Paris, 1913, pp. 206-7).

As we read the Commentary, this statement seems entirely well founded, even if Dom Pitra casts some doubt upon it . . . in the name of a certain image he wants to present of the Servant of God.

Contrary to another legend, Father Libermann attached great importance to this work. Father Le Déaut, C.S.Sp. has studied the manuscript and noticed differences in the hand-

writing. He believes that the Venerable Father re-worked the Commentary during practically all the rest of his life insofar as his strength and available time permitted. It is too bad that we still do not have a critical edition of the work. It is even more regrettable that some editors in the Congregation have taken their founder at his word when he spoke of himself as a "poor fellow" and have dared to make some unfortunate corrections and have doubtless also suppressed some interesting notes.

These remarks are made in order to establish one fact: we are here in the presence of a solid and mature body of thought. There is, however, an obstacle in the way of the XXth century reader: in the Commentary it is hard to identify the technique the author used: sometimes the interpretations seem to be based upon fantasy rather than upon the text. We shall take a look at this problem.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF LIBERMANN'S WAY OF READING THE GOSPEL:

Venerable Libermann's personality seems to be so at one with itself that it is difficult to separate different aspects. Still, we shall make a tentative distinction between what, in his reading of St. John, seems related to his Jewish roots and what comes more from his experience in the Church.

A. His Jewish Background

In 1827, Mr. Drach introduced Libermann to the Superior of St. Sulpice. The candidate, he said, has a thorough knowledge of hebrew, but is less well accomplished in latin. The Sulpician answered: "The theology classes are conducted in latin, not hebrew."¹ Thus encouraged (?) in the study of biblical languages, the former aspirant to the rabbinate will not forget his previous training and will use it for the benefit of others, notably in the case of his knowledge of the Jewish en-

¹ Quoted by J. B. Pitra, *op. cit.*, p. 37, and *Notes et Documents*, I, pp. 66-67.

vironment and the Jewish technique of scriptural commentary.

1. *Knowledge of the language and the environment*

The first time Jacob Libermann read the Gospels it was in a Hebrew translation. He was then engaged in his rabbinical studies at Metz. In his Commentary on St. John he does not forget that the Gospel has Semitic undertones. There is no erudition for its own sake, but his scholarship comes to the surface whenever it can aid in giving a deeper understanding of the text. Now it will be explaining an Aramaic usage underlying a grammatical form in New Testament Greek; again it will be giving an etymological note which takes us back to Deutero-Isaiah:

*“Capharnaum means ‘city of consolation’ because it is in that city that the consolation of Israel began to appear and become known.”*²

His knowledge of Jewish customs helps in interpreting a scene from the Gospel:

*“Among the Jews, it was a custom and a highly esteemed work of mercy, to console those in mourning during the seven days following the death of a relative. This custom is still respected among them.”*³

In another instance, the rites for the Feast of Tabernacles highlight the deeper meaning of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.⁴ In still another, the categories of Old Covenant sacrifices clarify the meaning of the Bread of Life.⁵ The witness from Rennes whom we quoted above reports:

“Every evening we made it a custom to talk only about Holy Scripture. Each one in turn would quote a text and explain it as best he could in terms of the studies he had done. It was here that Father Libermann's knowledge and piety shone brightly. His thorough knowledge of the he-

² *Commentaire de Saint Jean*, 2nd edition, p. 67.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 591.

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 680.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 268-70.

brew language and of Jewish customs enabled him to supply us with most interesting explanations.”⁶

We must not forget the greatest talent which the Venerable Father owed to his Jewish training: his technique of scriptural commentary.

2. *The Midrashic Tradition*

What might appear to some to be a fantastic interpretation is, as a matter of fact, the product of a long and solid tradition in Jewish exegesis which was also used to advantage by the Fathers of the Church and which is called “Midrash.” R. Bloch, an expert in the subject, defines Midrash as “an exegesis which, going beyond the mere literal meaning, tries to enter into the spirit of the Scripture, to study the text on a deeper level, and to draw from it interpretations which are not always obvious.” The purpose of this tradition was doubly practical: 1) for edifying the community *of the day* by penetrating the meaning of the history and of the biblical personages (“aggadah” midrash); 2) for adapting the laws and customs to the community (“halakah” midrash). This was the task expected of every Scribe “who brought forth from his treasure both old things and new” (Matt. 13: 52), ever since the great Scribe Esdras who, according to the Bible, “applied himself to scrutinizing⁷ the Law of God” (Esd-ras 7:10). Probably without intending to, the Commentator on St. John describes himself in terms of this midrashic tradition:

“We need to realize that there are two ways of knowing and meditating upon the Law. The first is that of the prophets and real teachers like Esdras and the others. They purified their hearts of all self-love and of all human searching . . . and constantly asked God to teach them. In this way they acquired a facility for a holy study of the Law . . . and for understanding its hidden meaning.”⁸

⁶ Quoted by J. B. Pitra, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

⁷ “Scrutinize:” in hebrew “darash,” a verb for which the substantive is “midrash.”

⁸ *Commentaire de Saint Jean*, pp. 209-210.

This description recalls the authentic midrashic tradition and is opposed to a deviationist attitude "that of the teachers of a later time and of the pharisees, a purely human method."⁹ These latter "scrutinized the Scriptures, weighing and examining every word, every letter, in the hope of drawing something subtle from it."

In a word, the true midrashic tradition known by the Venerable Father seeks to attain, beyond the text, to the living God in His relation with us today. Precisely because of this desire to relate to a specific period of time, these commentaries have something about them which is obsolescent and limited.

Let us see the techniques with which method is put into practice.

3. *Some Midrashic Techniques*

1. Focussing upon the community of the day, the commentator usually refrains from giving a definitive interpretation. He juxta-poses several opinions, as does the *Talmud*, which some see as an impenetrable tangle, whereas it is a matter of keeping the thought open and moving forward. In the same way, the Commentary on St. John sometimes proposes several possible explanations for the same verse according to the point of view from which the reader may be looking at it: the linguistic aspect, the historical aspect, the context, or the pastoral experience of our own day.¹⁰

2. The search for a living God guiding His people today leads the Commentator to look upon *Scripture as a whole*, because Revelation is one and unique. Thus he will bring together texts which for us have no relationship; or else he will try to find in a verse a summary of the history of salvation. Let us consider an example of this type in Father Lib-

⁹ *Commentaire de Saint Jean*, p. 211; *ibid.* for the second quotation in the paragraph.

¹⁰ For example, the two-fold meaning of "Credidi" in John 11:27. *Commentaire*, pp. 612-614.

ermann. The pool where the paralytic was cured had five porticoes:

"The five porticoes represent the five different revelations which make up the Old Law and which one had to observe in order to be saved: 1) that of Adam, which the Jews called the Revelation of Noah; 2) that of Abraham; 3) that of Moses; 4) the explanations of the Law revealed to the prophets; 5) the oral tradition which was a real unwritten revelation.¹¹ By these five porticoes or means of entering upon the way of salvation . . . there were very few who were saved, because there were very few who observed these revelations."¹²

One could find other allegories. It is a method that surprises us! An yet, don't we also try by other methods to bring out the unity of the history of salvation? Listen to Father Balthasar:

"The ancients who contemplated the Scriptures possessed just the art needed to distinguish the outline of the whole from the details and highlight it . . . That presupposes that the idea of the whole is spiritual and not literary or philosophical, that one is obedient to faith in taking the decisive step which leads from the letter to the spirit, from the earthly reality to the reality of resurrection . . . , the Christ Himself, universalized in the Spirit, and as He appears in Scripture."¹³

3. In order to make the word of God a practical guide, the midrashic tradition likes to "type" personages by means of simple models. The New Testament shows evidence of this procedure when the *Epistle to the Hebrews* and the *First Epistle of John* make Abel and Cain the types respectively of the just man who suffers martyrdom and the impious man whose deeds are evil. This "technique of masks" is em-

¹¹ The *Spoken Law* (Torah shé be'al peh), according to the Jewish tradition, had been given to Moses on Sinai at the same time as the Written Law. For this question, cf. A. Paul, *Cahier* "Evangile" no. 14, *Intertestament*, Paris, 1975.

¹² *Commentaire*, pp. 172-173.

¹³ H. U. von Balthasar, *La Gloire et la Croix*, I. "Apparition," Paris, 1965, p. 465.

ployed by the Commentator on St. John to show the types of Christian life: Nathanael is the apostle who knows how to overcome his prejudices, be open to others and allow himself to be challenged by events; Nicodemus, who has in him all the elements of faith but is closed up in his way of formulating problems. Martha and Mary represent Action and Contemplation, – the former is oriented towards the external, but is led by her encounter with others to discover interior love; the latter, motivated by the love which is in her, has to pour out upon others her over-flowing charity.

4. The midrashic tradition is directed towards practical conduct. In commenting upon John 11:9, Father Libermann writes:

*“‘Walking’ means nothing more than the conduct and the general and particular activity of our soul directing itself towards an object or an end in view. The object and end of all our actions and all our conduct must be God alone.”*¹⁴

Following this general principle, the Commentator gives various points of pastoral advice and thus links up with the deeper intention of the midrashic procedure called “halakah”¹⁵ without ever descending to minute and useless prescriptions.

We have purposely insisted upon the Jewish roots of the Commentary on St. John, something ordinarily too little stressed. It is easy to believe that Father Libermann’s attraction to St. John is due, at least from one point of view, to the following fact: St. John, the most Jewish of the evangelists, follows the procedures we have just been describing, particularly with reference to the unity of the Scriptures; he carries this to the point where many a Johannine verse seems like a microcosm which summarizes all that is virtually contained in Revelation. The Jewish convert, by reason of his training, had acquired a skill which was most appropriate for explaining the fourth Gospel.

¹⁴ *Commentaire*, pp. 570-571.

¹⁵ One can find the Jewish tradition behind the formulation of the preceding quotation: “To walk” (Hebrew: “halak”) means nothing more than “conduct” (hebrew: “halakah”). . . .

To pursue the matter further, why is it that the organ music of St. John is played so perfectly by the Venerable Father's fingers? It is because there are resonances of the same drama in the hearts of the Evangelist and his Commentator. John writes at the moment when the Christians, like the man born blind, were being put out of the synagogues. The whole life of Jesus appeared in "flash-back" to the evangelist as a long lawsuit with the Jews over a testimony which they refused to accept, and it now seemed certain to him that, until the end of time, this lawsuit will continue between Christians who witness to Christ and the world they live in. For the convert who will see his father die a Jew, the drama is the same. When he speaks of the Pharisees in the Gospel, he often adds something like "and it's the same today." Also, when he refers to the Pharisees, does he envision Palestine in the first century or the world he is living in himself? But, when we reach this point, we are already speaking of Father Libermann's experience in the Church.

B. Reading the Gospel from within the Church

1. Father Libermann does not try to give an original interpretation of the Gospel. He reads it *in* the Church of his own day, aided by the theology of the time. To deny the same privilege to those working today is to reject the method of the Venerable Father and of all those who look upon the Gospel as a living Word. Following his personal leanings and the spirituality of the time, the Commentator is very interested in the direction of individual souls and his attitude of mind is based upon a continual contemplation of the Good Shepherd (John 10):

"We very often see shepherds who defend religion, but with unusual sharpness and roughness. All too often it is their own passions that they are defending. How hard it is to be a shepherd! This is because it is difficult to be emptied of oneself and filled with Our Lord, the Shepherd of the shepherds and of the sheep.

"... A good shepherd, especially when dealing with a weak person, has all sorts of consideration for human feel-

*ings and would rather suffer himself than do anything which would risk the loss of a soul.”*¹⁶

At the same time, however, every event in the Gospel provides the Venerable Father with an occasion to contemplate the Church, either as the institution of salvation which prolongs Christ's incarnation, or as the mystery of a new kind of relationship among men. There are many examples. If Father Libermann tries to find the theology of his day in the Gospel, it is not in order to reduce the Gospel to that theology. It is rather so that that theology, often abstract and uninvolved with real life, may take on the Flesh and Blood of the living Christ as met with in the Gospel scenes. In Father Libermann we can speak of “maintaining the priority of the Scriptural way of speaking,” to use the expression of Father Sesbouë, who also adds:

“... Denzinger could never be contemplated as an object in which the Faith abides as it does in the Scriptures.”¹⁷

2. If there is some originality in the Commentary, it arises from the fact that between the eyes of the author and the pages of the Gospel there intervene the spectacles of his *pastoral experience* gained in his relations with others carried on amidst the vicissitudes of his own life. There are the persons whom the Venerable Father has helped to break out of slavery to an unfortunate habit, – and here he sees the portrait of the Paralytic. There are those he saw to be ready to follow the action of the Spirit but failing to respond to “If anyone is thirsty . . .”, – had they been badly advised? Were they lacking in courage? In any case, the reader of S. John draws the consequences:

*“... the director is afraid of compromising his reputation as a good and wise director. He is afraid of being criticized if things do not turn out well. The one being directed is still too full of self-love and does not want to be imperfect. He wants to be prudent. It is very dangerous to try to have the virtue of prudence . . . Prudence is not the virtue for beginners; we must never speak to them about it.”*¹⁸

¹⁶ *Commentaire*, p. 494, on John 10:10.

¹⁷ B. Sesbouë, *L'Évangile dans L'Église*, Paris, 1975, p. 79.

¹⁸ *Commentaire*, pp. 330-331 on John 7:39.

The person who cannot find Nicodemus, Martha or Mary in the encounters of daily life will never find them in the Gospel either. His reading of the Gospel will never come alive.

3. Because of this bond with real life, a reading of the Gospel within the Church presents the reader with a threat and an ultimatum: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (I Cor. 9:16). The Venerable Father understands this too in the light of his personal experience: his conversion from Judaism to Christianity. In the midst of his serious crises in 1826, Jacob Libermann wrote:

*"We say that God had chosen the people of Israel . . . I wish somebody would explain that choice to me! Would it not be unjust on God's part to choose just one people . . . and let all the others wallow in ignorance and idolatry?"*¹⁹

Now the convert can answer his old question: it was through His mercy, and in order to communicate Himself to all peoples, that God had chosen Israel. God wished to communicate Himself by way of the Jews. The Saviour "did not want to take away the bread from the children and give it to the dogs, that is, to the Gentiles. . . . The latter should receive the bread of life but only from the hands of the children."²⁰

Israel's failure becomes a lesson for those who have received knowledge of the Gospel:

*"These reflections should focus the attention of chosen people upon the evangelization and sanctification of peoples. Holiness is manifested and communicated to them under the form of mercy, but an immense mercy both for them and for the multitude."*²¹

The Gospel goes on from gift to gift: Jacob Libermann has freely received; Francis Libermann must freely give, or else he will repeat in his flesh the failure of Judaism. That's the only challenge: to live is to preach the Gospel. Such an out-

¹⁹ Letter of January 7, 1826, quoted by Pitra, *op. cit.*, p. 25; also *N.D.*, I, p. 53.

²⁰ *Commentaire*, p. 692.

²¹ *Commentaire*, p. 693.

look does not concern itself about whether the pagans might be able to be saved without an explicit preaching of the Gospel. It will be worthwhile to quote Father de Lubac here:

*“May not the relative indulgence we profess with regard to infidels be a cover-up for a more dangerous indulgence with regard to the Christian himself, tempting him to live in false security and to be satisfied with a poor quality of Christianity.”*²²

4. “To read the Gospel and St. Paul simply out of curiosity would be to prostitute such holy things,” writes the Venerable Father.²³ You cannot read the Gospel as an external observer. As soon as I open the book of the Gospels, I become an “I” face to face with a “Thou” who challenges me. That is why the Commentary on St. John so often turns into a prayer. Just like theology, the study of the Gospel “can succeed only if based upon and nourished by personal contemplation.”²⁴

To the degree that the Gospel, as a text, occupies a central place in our pastoral activity, Father Libermann’s reading of St. John can be of some help to us in finding important directions to take.

The Jewish background of the Commentary on St. John is worth our attention for several reasons:

1) In the area of knowledge of Jewish customs and culture, there are useful tools, such as the works of Professor J. Jeremias, to name only one. This cultural approach aids in achieving a more living acquaintance with a Gospel situated in its historical setting. Even more so, this approach is indispensable for the missionary faced with the problem of the relation between customs and the Gospel and who cannot afford not to refer to the attitude of the Jesus of the Gospels as He met with the customs of His own environment: isn’t this

²² H. de Lubac, *Le Fondement Théologique des Missions*, Paris, 1946, p. 36.

²³ *Lettres Spirituelles*, Vol. II, p. 185.

²⁴ H. U. von Balthasar, *La Gloire et les Croix*, p. 470.

one of the fundamental issues at stake in the Sermon on the Mount?

2) In the area of the "midrashic tradition," it is not so much the techniques as the essential aims of the method that we need to grasp. In the first place, it is a question of an *actualization of Scripture* and that is why the ancient midrashic commentaries are full of allusions to contemporary history. We foreign missionaries must go further: acquire the analytical techniques (from sociology, economics, etc) which will permit us to make a better relationship between Gospel texts and today's local situations. In the second place, those who followed this method had a sharp sense of the *unity of the whole biblical Revelation*. From this point of view, the pastor has to make a synthesis of the texts of Revelation, knowing all the while that the riches of the Bible are beyond any synthesis. Still, to speak in caricature, the missionary who would take as the unifying theme of his apostolic preaching the antithesis "hell/heaven," would bring the Gospel message down far below the level of the ancestral religions; he who would center his preaching around the theme "Covenant/Liberation" would come closer to the meaning of the Gospel and the needs of our time. Finally, let us stress the fact that the midrashic tradition at its best has remained in the way people think. We should especially take seriously its way of typing biblical personages in order to use them as speaking models in our catechetical and homiletic preaching.

Libermann's *Reading of the Gospel in the Church* can also help us:

1) Several missionaries, especially older ones, find it hard to "digest" the new orientations in theology. It is not by harping upon the formulas learned in the formation of former times that we will succeed in "making the link," but rather, following the Venerable Father's example, by confronting the theology of *our day* with a constant re-reading of the text of the Gospels.

2) Convinced with St. Paul and the Venerable Father that preaching the Gospel is a necessary duty for us, we must recognize in our reading of the Gospel both the faces we meet every day and our own experience. Without this, the Gospel will be relegated to the antiquities shelf.

3) Our Christian communities often are thirsting for prayer. This is an appeal to us not to disassociate reading, study and prayer in connection with the Gospel. That's why each one of us should be able to translate this prayer of the Venerable Father in terms of our own individual temperament: (the prayer is based upon John 6:61).

“O Jesus, make my mind and my heart . . . always be disposed to listen to You and to receive with joy and love all Your divine words, so that they may become the life of my soul.”

(Commentaire, p. 285).

Libreville, February 2, 1977

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