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## LETTER OF THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION

In reply to questions asked about the date of the documents of the Pentateuch and the literary form of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the Biblical Commission has addressed a letter to His Eminence Cardinal Suhard, Archbishop of Paris, containing the following points.

The Commission<sup>1</sup> first expresses a desire to promote Biblical studies assuring to the student the most complete liberty within the limits of the traditional teaching of the Church; and in this respect, a passage is quoted from *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the Encyclical Letter of Pius XII on Biblical Studies. The replies of the Commission already published on the historical character of the Pentateuch, are next referred to—replies concerning the historical books in general (1905), the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (1906) and the historical character of Genesis, chs. i-iii (1909). The Commission says that these replies in no way preclude further study of the questions in the light of the knowledge gained during the last forty years and hence does not consider it necessary, at least for the present, to issue any new decrees on the subject.

(1) As regards the composition of the Pentateuch—after reminding the reader of the reply of 1906, namely, that one may hold that Moses

<sup>1</sup>The full text of the Letter appears in the official *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1948, pp. 45-48.

used written documents and oral traditions in composing his work, and that there have been alterations and additions made after the time of Moses, the Commission goes on to say "Nobody nowadays doubts the existence of these sources or denies that there has been a progressive development or growth (*accroissement progressif*) of the Mosaic laws as a consequence of the social and religious conditions of later ages—a progress which may be seen also in the historical narratives." However, as there remains the greatest division of opinion as to the character and dates of the documents contained in the Pentateuch, and as some scholars totally reject the "documentary hypothesis" and attempt a solution along different lines, the Commission invites Catholic scholars to further unbiased study of these questions in the assurance that such examination will doubtless bring into greater relief the large part played by Moses and his profound influence as author and legislator.

(2) The question of the literary forms of Genesis chs. i–xi is, the Commission declares, a much more obscure and complex one. These literary forms are quite unlike those of classical or modern literature. Hence one cannot deny or affirm the historical character, *en bloc*, of these chapters, without forcing them into categories to which they do not belong. We may concede that they do not contain history in the classical or modern sense, but the state of our knowledge at present is not such as to allow us to give a positive solution to the problems they set. Further study is necessary.

To state simply that these narratives do not contain history as we know it, might easily give the impression that they do not contain history in any sense—whereas they do in fact relate in simple and figurative language adapted to uncultured minds the fundamental truths that underlie the "economy of salvation" and give a popular description of the origins of the human race and the Chosen People.

The letter, written in French, is signed by Fr. James M. Vosté, O.P., Secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and dated 16th January, 1948.

#### COMMENT

This document follows the same line as the Encyclical Letter *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in urging scholars to pursue their studies vigorously, secure in the confidence that truth can never contradict itself and taking as their guide the traditional teaching of the Church. Forty years ago when the exaggerations of "Higher criticism" appeared to be accepted as proved outside the Church and even by some Catholics, the policy was rather one of caution. Today, when non-Catholic scholars are so much more moderate in their views we may be thankful that Catholics were restrained from following the exaggerated opinions of yesterday.

As regards the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch—whereas in 1906 the Biblical Commission stated that it should be "substantially"

held, now it urges to further study so that "the large part and deep influence of Moses as author and lawgiver" may be brought out clearly. The Commission thus considers Moses as author of a "large part" of the Pentateuch and while admitting the view that there have been later additions and changes, nevertheless asserts that even such additions have been subject to the influence of Moses, so that they can be considered as applications of the ancient legislation to the new social and religious conditions.

The interesting point about the second part of the Letter is that the Commission does not restrict its remarks to the first three chapters of Genesis but includes the first eleven. The great advance made in secular knowledge made this necessary. Thus, for example, it is even held by some that the period of time that man has been on the earth must be measured in millions of years; and the span of human life does not appear to have been greater in the palaeolithic age than it is now. The culture which appears to be supposed in the early chapters of Genesis is the neolithic which was of course much more recent than the palaeolithic.

The principle to be invoked in order to preserve the inerrancy of Scripture was enunciated by Pope Leo XIII in the Encyclical Letter *Providentissimus Deus* and repeated in the Reply of the Biblical Commission on Genesis chs. i-iii namely, that "it was not the intention of the sacred writer to teach in scientific fashion the inner constitution of things and the complete order of their creation, but rather to convey to his own people a popular account in the language of the day and adapted to their understanding." The Biblical Commission applies this principle to the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Since these chapters contain history, at least in large part, it is necessary to find out exactly how this history is to be understood according to the mind of the author and the customs of his time. It is agreed that we have to look, not at classical or modern history but at ancient Oriental literature, and see what is contained there under the title of history. We find indeed that annals, legends, and popular oral traditions are all preserved and transmitted. At the same time we must recognize that even sources like these contain much valuable historical material. In a similar way we have to approach the study of the primitive history in Genesis, though always with full consideration of its inspired character. As the Pope says in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*: Literary forms and hence the mind of the author must not be decided *a priori* but should be reached by a careful investigation of the literatures of the Ancient East.

It must be admitted that here we are but at the beginning. We may compare the account of Paradise with various Sumerian traditions, or the genealogy of the Sethites with the Sumerian king-lists. Traces of floods in Babylonia have their relevance for the Biblical account of the Flood. Much work remains to be done in the study of comparative

philology and of the ways of thought of the Ancient East, which are so different from our own.

It is therefore with reason that the Commission declares that the time has not yet come for a final judgment to be passed on the early chapters of Genesis.

The above comments have been condensed from an article on this subject in *Verbum Domini* (1948, pp. 68-70).

## THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST

IT will come to everyone's mind that the present Holy Father has lately issued an encyclical upon this subject (*Mystici Corporis Christi*: 29 June 1943), which I have before me in the Latin text, together with an excellent little summary in English published by the Grail (*This is Unity*: 9d). The encyclical itself showed the growing importance and implications of the subject, and the Grail pamphlet should do much to bring the main thoughts within the compass of every Catholic. The present article is part of an attempt to lay a solid foundation for such an understanding, by expounding the mind of St. Paul upon the subject, first with regard to the collective aspect, and later (if the Lord so will) with regard to its implications for the individual. But each article, so far as is possible, will be made complete in itself. By this method of approach a more profound view, it is to be hoped, will ultimately be gained of the whole doctrine; it seems to be the most promising start for that study and meditation upon it which the Holy Father undoubtedly desires to set on foot. It is also the best introduction to study and meditation upon St. Paul's own teaching, of which it is the complete synthesis. This was his own peculiar way of looking upon the whole significance of the Incarnation; and it was in this way that he taught it to his Christians.

This may appear at first sight somewhat surprising, that we should have to go back to St. Paul rather than to Christ Himself for a full understanding of the Saviour's work. It is indeed part of our Lord's marvellous humility, that He left it to His apostles, not only to do greater work than He had done (John xiv, 12): for one thing their mission to the gentiles was to be on the whole a marvellous success, whereas His own mission to the Jews had been on the whole a failure: but also to be taught by the Holy Spirit all truth (John xvi, 13), so that they should be able to go beyond what they had actually heard from Himself. This of course has led to the foolish contention that Paul is the real founder of Christianity, and other such notions, which cannot be discussed seriously here. It must be enough to point out that early in the ministry, according to all three Synoptic gospels, when it is objected to our Lord that only God can forgive sins, His only answer is to work