Engaging the Scriptures with Humor and Humanity

Review of
Notes on Genesis and Exodus:
Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 2
By Thomas Merton
Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell
Foreword by Pauline A. Viviano
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Reviewed by **Emma McDonald**

While Thomas Merton is best known for his spiritual autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* and his writings on contemplation, Patrick F. O'Connell's edited collection of Thomas Merton's notes on Genesis and Exodus features Merton as Biblical scholar and teacher. During much of his decade-long tenure as novice master at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton prepared weekly conferences for the novices on Scripture. The present volume features detailed commentary from his conferences on the Book of Genesis from 1956-1957 and a sparser collection of notes on Exodus from 1957-1958. As O'Connell explains in the introduction to the volume, "Merton's teaching notes on Genesis and Exodus provide the only extended purview of how he introduced his novices to the contents of specific biblical books and to the intellectual, and particularly the spiritual, contexts in which they should be read, understood, and appreciated" (xiii).

O'Connell introduces the text with an overview of Merton's notes, tracing how he proceeds from brief summaries of each of the five books of the Pentateuch to consider Genesis in more detail. The introduction proves helpful in situating Merton's project in the context of his responsibilities as novice master. With O'Connell's thorough notes and archival work, the volume offers a compelling picture of Merton as a dedicated novice master and teacher and interpreter of Scripture, although, as O'Connell points out, we don't know the extent to which the notes correspond to the actual conferences themselves because they were never recorded. O'Connell's text flows well and makes skillful use of footnotes to expand on references made in his introduction and to excerpt Biblical passages highlighted by Merton in his own notes.

In the volume's foreword, Biblical scholar Pauline A. Viviano helpfully contextualizes Merton within the landscape of the evolution of historical-critical scholarship and Catholic perspectives on

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Emma McDonald is currently a doctoral candidate at Boston College, where she studies the convergence of bioethics and social ethics, Catholic moral theology and women's health, with a particular focus on the role of sociological research in informing Catholic reproductive ethics. She holds a Master of Arts in Religion degree from Yale Divinity School. A Daggy Scholar in 2017, she presented a paper at the 2019 ITMS General Meeting on Merton, Robert Lax and Fanny Howe. While at Yale, she coordinated a monthly Thomas Merton Reading Group. She currently serves on the Board of Directors of the International Thomas Merton Society.

the Bible. As she explains, Merton was clearly "conversant" with the historical and literary Biblical criticism of his time. One might wonder, given that many of these scholarly insights have been updated and superseded in the ensuing decades, what benefit might come from reading Merton's Biblical interpretation. Though the historical-critical aspects of Merton's commentary may seem outdated, his spiritual interpretation of Genesis and Exodus grounded in the literal meaning of the text, is, according to Viviano, "where Merton excels" (viii). Those more familiar with Merton will recognize themes he favored as they emerge in relation to the texts he treats here.

For instance, the significance of waiting surfaces in Merton's discussion of the Genesis flood narrative. Here, he emphasizes how Noah waits for God to "transform all" (31). Merton sees our penance reflected in Noah's "abandonment to the mercy and providence of God." He unearths from this story the importance of waiting for God in patience, silence and hope, "gathered in the mystery of life into which we withdraw, leaving God to work what we do not know" (31). His notes on the Genesis flood narrative both show and tell his primary commitment beyond "establishing the broad outlines of the fact" of each narrative: to approach the text as the revealed word of God. By reading it closely, he can help his novices "to find out the truth God is really trying to tell us" (30).

Merton further links his readings of Genesis and Exodus to the broader American cultural context. Readers of Merton's other works will not be surprised to find him critiquing American superficiality and selfishness; here, he does so while considering the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel. He finds that "There is something very American about the Tower of Babel – an underlying false optimism based on a very fragile unity, an appearance of having one mind and one heart." This sense of cohesion is "only an appearance. Men {are} united by pride and self-interest; they hold together as long as there is prosperity" (35).

Merton also takes up themes especially relevant for Trappists committed to a life of silence and penance: he draws on other passages from Scripture, patristic sources and conventions of liturgy and worship to relate the text to personal experience and the spiritual formation of his novices. For instance, when he discusses the creation narratives, he relates Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2 to the "mystery of language" and his own monastic context, remarking, "Trappists above all should have respect for the value of words" (12). He spends considerable time on the narrative of Abraham and Isaac, suggesting that Abraham's obedience to God's will makes him a suitable model for the religious life of interior poverty.

As O'Connell notes, Merton's discussion of Exodus is much more abbreviated; rather than being typed for distribution to the novices, his Exodus notes are handwritten. Further, the Exodus notes take on a different scope and tone: they contain almost no references to exegetical resources and seem to focus on topics and themes to discuss related to Biblical texts more so than the Scriptural material itself. O'Connell entertains a few possibilities as to why Merton proceeds this way: it could be that his notes on Exodus served a different purpose, functioning more as an outline and memory aid rather than lecture transcripts, or it could be that Merton realized he needed to speed up because otherwise it would take many years to make it through just the Pentateuch. O'Connell helpfully provides evidence to suggest that Merton might have been overextended at the time he prepared the lectures on Exodus, which could explain why his notes do not consider some of the most significant events and chapters in Exodus, including 24 and 32-34.

Though Merton's Exodus notes lack the comprehensiveness of his Genesis reflections, they offer

a window into an earlier stage of development of the monastic conferences, showing connections Merton identified between themes in Exodus and patristic theology, liturgy and the spiritual life. This meticulously edited volume thus offers insights into both the texts it covers and Merton himself, as Merton's humanity shines through the text, even in unexpected places. O'Connell's comment in the introduction regarding punctuation and pagination humanize Merton's scholarly habits: "No effort is made to reproduce Merton's rather inconsistent punctuation, paragraphing, abbreviations, and typographical features" (lvi). We can recognize in the text a dedicated and contemplative monk and teacher, invested in serious engagement with the text. We can also see his sense of humor, as Merton dwells on the laughter of Abraham and Sarah in response to God's "'impossible' promise." Merton encourages his novices, and through this volume, his readers beyond the monastery walls, to laugh: "The only way out of the contradiction is laughter – a supreme affirmation of a belief that goes beyond the contrary terms of a dilemma – the laughter of a mystical liberation!" (57).