

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *Notes on Genesis and Exodus: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 2*, edited with an introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell, Foreword by Pauline A. Viviano (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), pp. lvii, 273. ISBN: 978-1-7252-5315-5 (paper) \$41.00.

Notes on Genesis and Exodus: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 2, edited by Patrick F. O’Connell, offers a rare immersion in Merton’s approach to scriptural interpretation and monastic education. This volume follows *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 1* (2020).¹ In that previous volume, O’Connell edits and introduces Merton’s teaching notes on four key themes: “biblical inspiration,” “the canon of sacred scripture,” “texts and versions of the scriptures” and “the interpretation of sacred scripture – hermeneutics” (*MISS* 27-61, 62-93, 94-110, 111-38). (O’Connell has recently edited and introduced a third volume in this series, *Liturgical Feasts and Seasons: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 3* [2022].²)

On the opening page of *Notes on Genesis and Exodus*, Merton refers to the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, as “the first act in the great drama of salvation” (1). This line gives a sense of Merton’s intention, which is to unpack the mystery of salvation as it is communicated through the opening books of the Bible, while also conveying his sense of the whole arc of salvation history, as it bends into the present. In this respect, we find Merton drawing parallels between the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, as well as the wider Christian tradition, throughout.

In his incredibly rich introduction, O’Connell painstakingly guides his readers into the context and content of Merton’s teaching notes on Genesis and Exodus. O’Connell opens by framing Merton’s notes as work that emerged during his time as master of novices at Gethsemani,

1. Thomas Merton, *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 1*, edited with an introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell, Foreword by Bonnie Bowman Thurston (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020); subsequent references will be cited as “*MISS*” parenthetically in the text.

2. Thomas Merton, *Liturgical Feasts and Seasons: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 3*, edited with an introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell, Foreword by Paul Quenon, OCSO (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022).

a position which he held for ten years, starting in October of 1955. After teaching *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture*, a text which he had originally conceived while serving as master of scholastics from 1951 to 1955 (see *MISS* xi-xiii), Merton began to offer his analysis of Genesis in the summer of 1956 (see xi). O'Connell estimates the timeline of Merton's teaching on Exodus to extend between the middle of the summer of 1957 through early in the spring of 1958 (see xii).

O'Connell's encyclopedic awareness of the broad scope of Merton's corpus, as well as his attunement to the concrete details of Merton's life and writing, emerges throughout the book. For instance, O'Connell's sensitivity to the minutely particular manifests in his dating of Merton's course on the book of Genesis to the summer of 1956 by extrapolating from a stray reference to mosquitoes "on the verso of page 9 of Merton's own typescript" (xii). A small detail like this pulls Merton's project from a purely intellectual and spiritual plane into the concretely physical context of Gethsemani. Merton is not only grappling with the spiritual significance of the burning bush, but also contending with an influx of insects.

O'Connell describes Merton's notes as consisting of both "a thorough, comprehensive course on the book of Genesis," as well as "a considerably less detailed, more diffusely organized series of classes on the book of Exodus" (xi-xii). This is very evidently the case, though one will find plenty of gems in both sets of notes. Taken together, Merton's notes on Genesis and Exodus "make up the only major surviving teaching notes on Scripture" produced by Merton while serving as master of novices (xii). These notes, then, are a rare window into Merton's interaction with scripture in the specific context of his teaching role at Gethsemani.

O'Connell helpfully contextualizes Merton's biblical commentary in relation to the larger trajectory of scriptural exegesis. He observes that Merton's work "exemplifies the transitional state of Catholic biblical studies," with Merton being both attuned to current approaches in biblical studies and open to emerging developments which would "largely transform the framework of biblical exegesis in the Catholic community in the decade to follow" (xiv). In her insightful foreword, Pauline A. Viviano similarly notes that Merton's reflections emerge "at the point of transition" between traditional methods of exegesis and the employment of literary critical and historical approaches (viii). Viviano observes that, throughout his notes, Merton is drawing on the historical and literary criticism of biblical scholars which contemporary scholars would likely find "dated" as it has been "superseded by the work of later scholars" (viii). She nonetheless emphasizes that contemporary biblical scholars can still appreciate Merton's earnest engagement with the "scholarship of his day" (viii).

For Viviano, Merton's most significant offerings arise from his analysis of the "spiritual sense of the text" (viii). This deep sensitivity to the spiritual dimensions of Genesis and Exodus remains "well-grounded in the literal sense of the text" (ix). O'Connell similarly observes that though Merton is "interested less in objective exegesis" than in "exploring the biblical text as a resource for spiritual formation," he definitively does not abandon the angle of objective exegesis entirely (xv). Merton's primary intention, though, is to accompany the Gethsemani novices to reflect on the "personal, experiential implications" of the Bible (xv).

Throughout both O'Connell's introduction as well as the body of Merton's text, readers will sense the fact that Merton's commentary is inextricable from a broader intertextual web, consisting of his own body of writing as well as his wide and deep engagement with a range of texts and thinkers. We find Merton referring to and reflecting with thinkers from St. Ambrose to Martin Buber, St. Augustine to Pseudo-Dionysius, Erich Fromm to St. John of the Cross. The bibliography, scriptural index, general index and footnotes very helpfully guide the reader in navigating Merton's analysis of scriptural passages and themes in relation to other thinkers as well as Merton's broader corpus. In addition, footnotes which offer the full scriptural passages that Merton refers to throughout his notes enable the reader to seamlessly shift between Merton's commentary and the text itself.

In the footnotes, O'Connell helpfully illuminates the links in the intertextual web in which Merton's notes are embedded. For instance, he guides readers who might be particularly interested in Merton's analysis of patristic teaching on Genesis 1:26-27, in which humanity is created in the image and likeness of God, to the third chapter of Merton's *The New Man* (1961), where Merton substantially explores this very theme (see xiv-xv). In another instance, readers are guided to relevant passages in *The Winged Serpent: American Indian Prose and Poetry*, edited by Margot Astrov (1946) in footnotes following Merton's remarks on Native American conceptualizations of the "power of words" and names (183-84).

While *Notes on Genesis and Exodus* is replete with inspiring and thought-provoking insights, I would like to briefly highlight just a few key passages, with the intention of providing readers of this review with a taste of some of the book's rich contents. As an ecotheologian myself, this selection of excerpts will have a decidedly green theme. While each of these passages promises to have wide and deep resonance for any Mertonite, they will have a special significance for readers of Merton who are particularly drawn to his prescient and poetic ecological wisdom. The

insights of these passages might be considered alongside Merton's wider environmental vision, which has been powerfully articulated by scholars such as Monica Weis and Kathleen Deignan.³

In a particularly beautiful and illuminating reflection on the first chapter of Genesis, Merton argues that the text's "tone {is} liturgical, {with a focus on} worship, praise, adoration – 'Cosmic Liturgy'" (3). Merton connects the insights of this passage with the liturgical life of monastics. He writes, "Our liturgical life should be impregnated with this spirit – kinship with creatures and with God" (3). Merton leads us to wonder what it might mean to approach each of our liturgical practices with a spirit of kinship with the natural world. How might our liturgical practices shape the people of God into ecological citizens, attuned to the presence of God in and through the natural world and committed to relating to the natural world with intimacy and care? Insights like these might be fruitfully brought into conversation with Pope Francis's *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home* (2015), in which the Eucharist is envisioned as an "act of cosmic love" as well as "a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation."⁴

As Merton continues his interpretation of Genesis 1, he emphasizes that human beings are the "natural mediators between God and the rest of His creation," that "{This is} our key position – our dignity" and that "Love is the answer" (3). Merton's vision of human beings as mediators between God and creation who are called to embody love in relation to our wide web of kin, and his understanding that liturgy should form us in this posture, have profound ecotheological value. Merton offers, here, prescient reflections on themes which contemporary biblical scholars, religious studies scholars and theologians have grappled with in earnest for decades, especially since Lynn White Jr.'s (in)famous "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967). More than a decade before the publication of White's essay, which largely traces the roots of our ecocrisis to Western Christian interpretations of the Genesis mandate to have "dominion" over the earth (Genesis 1:26-28), we find Merton interpreting this very chapter of Genesis in an alternative, ecologically resonant light.

Merton's reflection on the fall of humanity has similar ecological implications. O'Connell identifies Merton's discussion of the fall, which

3. See Monica Weis, SSI, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature*, ed. Kathleen Deignan, CND (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003).

4. Francis, encyclical letter *Laudato si', On Care for Our Common Home* (May 24, 2015) §236; accessed at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclical-laudato-si.html.

leads to “a loss of authentic relationship with God, with creation, and with one’s own genuine self” as “probably the most powerful section in this entire set of notes” (xvii). For Merton, after the fall, “*Creation is no longer a place in which to meet God, but a place in which to hide from Him*” (16). Through the gravity of the Fall, “Nothing has changed but man, who now sees only creatures, mirrors of his own desires and interior states, instead of going through their transparency to see the infinite reality of God” (16). In his commentary on Exodus 3, in which God reveals God’s self to Moses in the burning bush, Merton revisits the obscuring influence of the fall by drawing on St. Gregory of Nyssa. He writes, “to see the divine light we must put off the garments of skins with which we were clothed after original sin” (140).

We see in passages like these the seeds of insights that Merton later articulates in his January 12, 1963 letter to Rachel Carson.⁵ Merton composed this letter while reading Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962).⁶ In this letter, Merton argues that creation can and should be viewed as a “transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a ‘paradise’ of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them” (*WF* 71). For Merton, “Man’s vocation was to be in this cosmic creation, so to speak, as the eye in the body” (*WF* 71). He argues, though, that “man has lost his ‘sight’ and is blundering around aimlessly in the midst of the wonderful works of God” (*WF* 71).

Merton’s profound reflection on the mystical significance of Noah’s ark is similarly replete with ecotheological inspiration. O’Connell helpfully highlights Merton’s interpretation as a “‘contemplative’ reading of the scene in the ark as a kind of cosmic dark-night experience” (xix). In Merton’s interpretation of the famous scene, Noah “makes provision for himself and for all life, in darkness, in which he allows himself to be enclosed with them by God” (31). Merton compellingly applies insights from this biblical story to the present. It is humanity’s “Abandonment to the mercy and providence of God” that serves as “an essential part of our penance, our transformation,” as “God is the One Who must transform all” (31). For Merton, this scene teaches that the human function is to “rest in the night of faith with ‘all life,’ gathered in the mystery of life into which we withdraw, leaving God to work what we do not know” (31). As he has it, “We are content to ‘be’ and God works,” and ultimately this contemplative movement results in “Greater fertility” (31).

5. January 12, 1963 letter to Rachel Carson, in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 70-72; subsequent references will be cited as “*WF*” parenthetically in the text.

6. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

One can imagine Merton's vivid illustration of the story of Noah's ark serving as fertile ground for an Ignatian "composition of place" contemplation. One might imaginatively enter into the scene described by Merton, perhaps with the prayerful attention of attuning to the suffering of the animal kingdom in the present moment. What might it feel like to enter into an ark of contemplation with hens kept in battery cages, pigs confined to gestation crates, and endangered species such as monarch butterflies and bonobos? We might meditatively rest, with our more-than-human kin, in "Abandonment to the mercy and providence of God." This kind of contemplation might lead us into a deepening kinship with and commitment to the flourishing of the more-than-human world. It might move us to align our energies with the will of God in order to bring about "Greater fertility" rather than ecological devastation, degradation, and death.

As Viviano has it in her Foreword, "There is much in these notes to meditate upon and much that can be used to guide us on our own spiritual journey" (x). Furthermore, Viviano suggests that "Merton's notes stand as a challenge to biblical scholars to remember that the Bible is a living text; it is a sacred text" (x). For Viviano, Merton reminds biblical scholars that they "have a responsibility to make their research accessible to the 'people in the pew' and meaningful for their lives" (x). My hope is that this review has served to suggest some of the many ways in which Merton's teaching notes can indeed be a generative guide for our own work of reflecting on, praying with and embodying biblical wisdom. *Notes on Genesis and Exodus: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 2* is a rich resource that invites both a contemplative and a scholarly read.

Jim Robinson

O'CONNELL, Patrick F., ed., *Merton & Confucianism: Rites, Righteousness and Integral Humanity* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2021), pp. xxx, 335. ISBN 978-1-941610-84-8 (paper) \$27.95.

This penultimate eighth volume in the Fons Vitae Series on Thomas Merton's engagement with the world's religions is a necessary and important contribution to the whole project. Though Merton's interest in Confucianism was not as pronounced as it was in the other two East Asian traditions, Taoism and Zen/Chan Buddhism, the picture of his interreligious exploration would have been woefully incomplete without the publication of this book. In some ways it may even be fortuitous that Merton's attention to Confucianism has been overshadowed by his engagement with Tao and Zen and only has recently received a spotlight through this work.