

## Ninevah to Calvary: Thomas Merton and a Spiritual Geography of the Bible

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The use of scripture by Thomas Merton is a central motif in his writing, beginning with his highly acclaimed publication of *The Sign of Jonas* in 1952, extending through such works as *Bread in the Wilderness* and *The New Man*, and ending with a lesser-known introductory essay for a Time-Life edition of the Bible in 1967. Although the Time-Life project never materialized, Merton's introduction for the proposed Time-Life Bible was published posthumously in 1970 by Liturgical Press under its original title, *Opening the Bible*. In this paper, in addition to the books cited above, I will use my research on the original manuscript of Merton's Time-Life essay and an unpublished essay by Robert Daggy on *The Sign of Jonas* to explore Merton's remarkable autobiography as he is engaged by scripture. His pilgrimage begins in earnest at Ninevah and extends all the way to Calvary. The spiritual terrain covered provides us with one man's highly creative geography of biblical engagement.

### Merton and the Bible

Thomas Merton's study of the Bible began in earnest only after he had been at Gethsemani for several years. He acknowledged in *The Sign of Jonas* (1952) a lack of biblical literacy which he claimed ran throughout his early years of monastic training. 'How little scripture I used to read in the novitiate', he lamented.<sup>1</sup> But all that soon changed. As a result of his own silent conversations with writers from the ancient church, especially the desert forbears of early monasticism, Merton became increasingly aware of the centrality of the Bible for Christian

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Image Books, 1956), p. 210.

faith and practice.<sup>2</sup> He began, perhaps for the first time, reading the scriptures in a fairly systematic fashion. Merton's monastic assignments as head of scholastics, and then as novice master, required a sharpening of his biblical knowledge. Many monks at Gethsemani undoubtedly benefited from Merton's growing biblical interests.

During the remainder of the 1950s, Merton continued to search extensively for wisdom and truth in his meditative Bible readings—what might be called a quest for the deeper meaning of God's word. In the process, he discovered his own key for unlocking scripture: it was the Bible's own capacity for the spiritual nourishment of its reader. This deeper engagement of the Bible carried Merton far beyond simple facts and surface meanings. In *The Sign of Jonas*, he observed:

Merely to set down some of the communicable meanings that can be found in a passage of scripture is not to exhaust the true meaning or value of that passage. Every word that comes from the mouth of God is nourishment that feeds the soul with eternal life.<sup>3</sup>

In his much later work, *Opening the Bible*, Merton found agreement with the insights of Protestant theologian Karl Barth, 'One cannot speak of God merely by speaking of man in a loud voice.'<sup>4</sup> Merton had come to know from his own inner experience that it was God's voice and not merely humanity's which spoke to him through scripture. The Bible, he believed, included more than the inspired writings of assorted human beings. The Bible contained God's word! This was not to say that Merton rejected the work of modern Biblical scholarship which carefully examined the human side of biblical texts. However, Merton was after something else—a word other than the words of human beings.

Merton's attentive reading of the Bible awakened in him an ever-broadening and deepening spiritual life. He experienced first-hand what happens again and again when, through the Holy Spirit, the Bible breaks open for its readers. Indeed, the world itself began to look different. An entire new orientation was to be gained. According to Merton:

2. This information was gathered from an oral interview with Br Patrick Hart at Gethsemani, April 1997.

3. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 212.

4. These words are recorded in Merton's notebook used in preparation for the writing of *Opening the Bible*. Merton took the phrase from Karl Barth's *Word of God, Word of Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928, pp. 196-97).

By the reading of scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and within me. The sky seems to be a pure, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forest and the hills and the whole world is changed with the glory of God and I feel fire and music in the earth under my feet.<sup>5</sup>

These words from *The Sign of Jonas* are reminiscent of the ancient psalmist. Indeed, the psalms of ancient Israel had special meaning for Merton as he chanted them daily in community prayer. They too, as we will discover, contributed immensely to his emerging biblical perspective. Yet, Merton never settled for one part of the Bible over another. He claimed that 'Every word that comes from the mouth of God is nourishment that feeds the soul with eternal life.'<sup>6</sup> The Bible had fully taken root in Merton. He could 'feel fire and music' under his feet.

### Bread in the Wilderness

According to Merton's biographer, Michael Mott, it was in the years surrounding the publication of *The Sign of Jonas* that Merton began reading the Bible 'with new insight'.<sup>7</sup> This was especially true of his reflection on the Psalms which was part of his renewed interest in the daily offices of prayer at Gethsemani. In Merton's estimation, the Psalter was '...perhaps the most significant and influential collection of religious poems ever written'. In *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953), he affirmed that the Psalms chanted by the monastic community 'bring our hearts and minds into the presence of the living God'. Merton further noted, 'They [the Psalms] fill our minds with His Truth in order to unite us with His Love'.<sup>8</sup>

Personally, the psalms for Merton, became an important spiritual compass for finding his way toward God. In terms of instruction, he had much to say about the theological and historical importance of the Psalter. In *Bread for the Wilderness*, he declared that the Psalms as a sacred book 'sum up the whole theology of the Old Testament'. Furthermore, he observed, 'They [the Psalms] still play a more important part than any other body of religious texts, in the public prayer of the Church'.<sup>9</sup>

5. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 212.

6. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 212.

7. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1984), p. 284.

8. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Direction, 1953), p. 13.

9. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 3.

The Psalms, of course, were an integral part of Merton's monastic life. He reminds readers in *Bread for the Wilderness* that Benedictine and Cistercian monks chant their way through the entire Psalter, once a week.<sup>10</sup> This engagement of the psalms was therefore a daily act of devotion for Merton. He sensed the accumulative spiritual power of the Psalms as they began to open his heart and mind to the word of God within the words of scripture.

Merton began to live the Psalms, rather than merely to recite them or to chant them. In a most revealing passage from *Bread in the Wilderness*, Merton wrote:

Those whose vocation in the Church is prayer find that they live on the Psalms—for the Psalms enter into every department of their life. Monks get up to chant Psalms in the middle of the night. They find phrases from the Psalter on their lips at Mass. They interpret their work in the fields or workshops to sing the Psalms...and practically the last words on their lips at night are verses written hundreds of years ago by one of the Psalmists.<sup>11</sup>

There can be no doubt that for Thomas Merton, the monk of Gethsemani, the Psalms granted a tantalizing taste of God—if one were willing to feed upon them. In Merton's words, 'the Psalms are the nourishment of his [the monk's] interior life and form the material of his meditations and of his own personal prayer, so that at last he comes to live them and experience them as if they were his own songs, his own prayers'.<sup>12</sup>

In short, the Psalms became Merton's bread for the wilderness—for his challenging journey through this present life. And like the Eucharist itself, this bread is 'miraculously provided by Christ, to feed those who have followed Him into the wilderness'.<sup>13</sup> Merton clearly saw evidence of Christ in the Psalms, not in an historical or archeological sense, but in terms of theological truth. He agreed with the apostles of the New Testament that the utterances of the Psalms are 'not only of David but of the future Christ'.<sup>14</sup> The Psalms themselves had a redemptive quality for Merton because ultimately they contained the voice of God—not a human voice.

In a section from *Bread in the Wilderness* entitled 'Meanings in Scriptures', Merton was able to demonstrate his own ability as an exegete.

10. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. s.

11. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 3.

12. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 3.

13. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 3.

14. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 32.

While never claiming to be a biblical scholar, he nevertheless revealed a clear understanding of the classical fourfold exegesis of scripture. Furthermore, he displayed a solid knowledge of early church writers on scripture, and he evidenced a familiarity with the history of biblical criticism. However, in all this, he would not permit himself to be distracted from his focus upon the Psalms as God's living Word—a word which charted the course of his soul's journey Godward.

Merton had little interest in addressing all the intricacies of biblical scholarship. This could be left to the experts. In Merton's assessment, 'I do not intend to enter into a technical discussion of the various senses of scripture here [in *Bread for the Wilderness*]'.<sup>15</sup> Merton believed, 'It is enough to say that there are two senses in scripture that are really vitally important for the contemplative. These are the *literal* sense of scripture, which is the meaning of the words of the text, and the *typical* sense of scripture which is the meaning of events narrated in the text.'<sup>16</sup> Without question, Merton was most interested in the *typical* sense of scripture but not at the expense of the *literal* sense. They were not to be set against each other. However, the *typical* meaning prevailed.

The contemplative person, one who wants to come fully alive, needs to move beyond the *literal* sense of scripture to the *typical* sense of scripture. For Merton, the contemplative individual must journey from what a text meant to what it means, from historical exegesis to living application. This type of movement opens the reader to a full spiritual encounter of scripture. In Merton's words, 'Ultimately, the spiritual understanding of scripture [the *typical* sense] leads to a mystical awareness of the Spirit of God himself living and working in our own souls.'<sup>17</sup> In Merton's understanding, 'The true function of scriptural interpretation is to make clear the Truths that God has revealed to us about Himself and about His action in time and in human history.'<sup>18</sup> In this mystical sense, it is Christ himself [God incarnate] who meets us in the Psalms and in every other part of the Bible, Old and New Testament.

Merton agreed with the notion that the Psalms, as a whole, represent a marvelous range of human emotions—joy and sorrow, love and hate, triumph and despair. They are, after all, ancient poems about real life. As he prayed and lived out of the Psalms, Merton surely

15. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 29.

16. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 29.

17. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 37.

18. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 28.

knew all these dimensions of the human experience. But the Psalms, according to Merton, also carry us far beyond all this. He knew, that with God's grace, the Psalter was intended to be much more than a human litany of trials and triumphs. First and foremost, Merton professed, 'The psalms are theology'.<sup>19</sup> This meant 'that they place us in direct contact with God, through the assent of faith to His revelation'.<sup>20</sup> Merton believed, 'It is because of this theological and dynamic effort that the psalms are steps to contemplation'.<sup>21</sup> In fact, all of scripture had this potential for Merton. Each passage of the Bible contains within itself a word from God spoken directly to us—if only, we are prepared to listen.

### The Road from Ninevah

The portion of the Bible which had very special meaning for Thomas Merton was, of course, the book of Jonas. Here he found his own story. Its economy of words appealed to the contemplative Merton. But the story itself attracted him even more. Merton *was* Jonas, the one who fled from God only to find himself unable to escape God's providential grasp. He confessed, 'I know well the burnt faces of the Prophets and the Evangelists.'<sup>22</sup> However, *The Sign of Jonas* reveals to Merton's readers that living in the presence of God was not as simple as it once had appeared. By turning to the monastery, Merton, had thought at first that he might resolve issues between himself and God. But like many of us, Merton seemed to have settled matters with God only to discover that God had another agenda. At Gethsemani, Merton awakened to the fact that he *continued* to travel 'in the belly of a paradox'.<sup>23</sup>

The journey was not over. He had not reached Ninevah at all. Ninevah was once again in the opposite direction. Merton's monastic destination was only God's new point of departure. The God of the Ninevites had sent Merton to preach to those outside of the monastery whom he had thought he had left when the door of the cloister closed behind him.

19. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 14.

20. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 14.

21. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, pp. 14-15.

22. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 22.

23. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 21.

In 1958 on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in downtown Louisville, Merton heard a fresh new calling. He was in the city to see about printing a postulant's guide for Gethsemani when he had a Jonas-like encounter with God—only this time there was no flight. This epiphany turned Merton back toward the world—perhaps his true Ninevah.<sup>24</sup> Later, in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he wrote of this experience.

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.<sup>25</sup>

Here were the Ninevites—the foreigners, the strangers. But for Merton, they were no longer strangers. They all were to be loved. They all were loved by God. Merton was about to learn the greatest lesson of his life: no barriers existed between himself and others, all were united in God's love. This was *the* good news of God for Thomas Merton. If only people could fully understand the compassion and mercy of God. If only Jonas could have comprehended the limitless scope of God's love, then he might have accepted the Ninevites' unexpected transformation as his own possibility. It is never too late. Merton knew now that he was not only Jonas, he was also the Ninevites. With God there are no walls of division, no boundaries to love.

Perhaps for the very first time, Merton truly marveled at God's love for all human beings without exception. 'There is no way', he wrote, 'of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun'.<sup>26</sup> Merton could no longer neglect the world—and although he kept his vocation as a monk, his renewed commitment to people resulted in a compassionate embrace of God's world beyond the Abbey.

The book of Jonas was Merton's bridge between his monastic home and his greater home with all humanity. The journey itself took on a new topography. The old terrain had been transformed. The geography looked more like the new heaven and the new earth of Revelation. The road ahead was now discernible, but much longer and far more complex. It led across 'the hidden ground of love', all the way to

24. In this insight, I am indebted to Robert Daggy for sharing his views from an unpublished paper on Merton and the story of Jonas entitled 'Not Since Ninevah'.

25. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1966), p. 156.

26. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 157.

Calvary.<sup>27</sup> The journey was infinitely challenging—but also far more rewarding for Merton.

### The Road to Calvary

We see evidence of this regenerated journey in Merton's essay on *Opening the Bible*, which he completed shortly before his death. For all his grumbling to Abraham Heschel about 'big fancy projects organized by the mass media', Merton took this writing assignment quite seriously.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps Merton saw in this work an opportunity to once again rearrange his own spiritual geography with an orientation which would be both more biblical and more universal.

Merton worked hard at this manuscript during the fall of 1967. His draft, completed by Advent, had been 'heavily corrected' and included 'inserts and additions in hand'.<sup>29</sup> What has fascinated me about these changes is that they press the reader toward a more personal encounter with scripture. Merton's handwritten corrections to the original draft often call for the reader's own response to the Bible which he identified as a 'dangerous book'.<sup>30</sup> Using Barth's words, Merton reminds us that it is the Bible that ultimately questions us far more than we question it.

Merton was challenging us to enter the Bible's spiritual geography. He wanted us to place ourselves within its magnetic pull! Merton was convinced that the Spirit of God witnessed to in scripture is the same Spirit which witnesses to us today. It is this witness of the Spirit that draws everything together. It has a unitive purpose rather than a scattering and dislocating effect. In short, our own spiritual map is made more complete through our biblical encounters. This point is conveyed in a key handwritten addition to Merton's original text.

To accept the Bible in its *wholeness* is not easy. We are much more inclined to narrow it down to a one-track interpretation which actually embraces only a very limited aspect of it. And we dignify that one-track view with the term 'faith'. Actually, it is the opposite of faith: it is an escape from the mature responsibility of faith which plunges into the many-dimensional, the paradoxical, the conflicting elements of this

27. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (ed. William Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), pp. ix, 115.

28. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), p. 7.

29. Merton, *Opening the Bible*, p. 7.

30. Merton, *Opening the Bible*, p. 8.

Bible as well as those of life itself, and finds unity not by excluding all it does not understand but by *embracing* and *accepting* things in their often disconcerting reality.<sup>31</sup>

This is the quintessential Merton—the mature responsibility of faith, the many-dimensional, the paradoxical, the conflicting elements, all embraced in an all encompassing unity.

In the most heavily revised section of this biblical essay, and certainly its defining section, Merton rewrote a crucial sentence. Originally typed by Merton, it read: 'The great question of the New Testament, the question which includes all others, is then *how* one is to share in this event, and enter into the Christ-life, the existence of the Son of Man?' In Merton's handwritten revision, and as now published, the sentence reads 'The great question of the New Testament, the question includes all others, is *who* is Christ and what does it mean to encounter him?'<sup>32</sup>

The *how* was transformed into a *who*. From this, all else followed for Merton. Christ is the unifying one who leads us into a life of discipleship, of suffering, of joy, of reconciliation, of peace and justice. This is the true magnetic north, and this is where Merton's spiritual geography ultimately led—from Ninevah to Calvary. In the end, it was the one true map of God which Merton could understand and follow because it was imprinted in his own experience.

Often overlooked, the little book on *Opening the Bible* serves as a reminder toward the end of Merton's life just how Christ-centered his theology and spiritually was. Several years earlier, in *The New Man* (1961), which is filled with Pauline themes, Merton had insisted 'All creatures, spiritual and material are created in, through and by Christ, the Word of God'.<sup>33</sup>

Our entire existence is linked to Christ—in life and in death. Merton noted that the path which Jesus took to Calvary was a 'strange journey' indeed. Who could have suspected that God's love is so deep? In speaking of the life of Jesus, and our own, Merton affirmed his enduring faith. In *The New Man* he writes of the pilgrimage of the soul in faith, 'It is the journey from man to God—which is our destiny'.<sup>34</sup> And for Merton, this is accomplished through Christ who will bring us to

31. Merton, *Opening the Bible*, pp. 68-69.

32. Merton, *Opening the Bible*, p. 79.

33. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), p. 137.

34. Merton, *The New Man*, pp. 171-72.

yet another Calvary. In his Christ-centered mysticism, Merton posed the ultimate question: 'Where is this place? It is not a place, it is God.'<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

Merton certainly knew of many paths on his journey, especially as seen in his Asian journal. But as is evidenced in *Opening the Bible*, and much earlier in *The Sign of Jonas*, *Bread for the Wilderness*, and *The New Man*, there exists a Christ-centeredness that consistently magnetized Merton's spirituality—biblically based, but constantly open to an ever-changing and ever-expanding world view. Merton's spiritual geography continued to change throughout his life, as does ours. But his theological and spiritual center remained in Christ just as his true home remained at Gethsemani—whether we speak of his temporal abode at the Trappist abbey or the 'place of the skull' on which the Cross of Christ is eternally found.

From Ninevah to Calvary, from Jonah to Christ...this was the geography of Merton's spiritual existence both in scripture and in life. As a result of his biblical encounters Thomas Merton, who set out to become a saint, or something like that, became a more complete and whole human being. He had made his own (remarkable) pilgrimage from Ninevah to Calvary and beyond. Resurrection was the final destination for Merton, as it is for us all.

35. Merton, *The New Man*, p. 172.