

In a Worm's Eye

CHAPTER ONE

Two worms were visiting the Empire State Building. The first worm had prevailed upon his friend to inch his way laboriously to the elevator and ride to the top. After some painful wriggling they got out on a window ledge.

Looking down from the height, the first worm exclaims, "Boy! What a view! Now don't say it wasn't worth the climb. Look at all those little people and things crawling around down there!"

The second worm looks over the edge dubiously and mutters, "If you want to see what's down there, what did you bring me all the way up here for?"

My husband tells me that this is a very old joke: when he first heard it the worms were on the Flatiron Building. It must be older than that. My guess is that the worms were originally on the Tower of Babel. Shortly after that the story must have been translated into all the languages of the earth, because it exemplifies perfectly the only two points of view there ever are on anything: "up there" and "down here."

I repeat this choice chestnut as my opener because this is a book about the Bible, of which I presume to present a worm's eye view. As should be self-evident, this view is the only one proper to "the son of man who is a worm," as Job remarked. We worms can take an elevator to the top of a tower and get a large inclusive view from "up there," or we can stay where we are and look around us for limited but more detailed personal observation.

Both are valid positions. I understand that even in heaven we are to retain them. Theologians call the "up there" view *matutinal*: knowledge of God and creation as a whole. The "down here" aspect is *vesperal*, and deals with particulars. We need apologize for neither. They're ours for eternity. When dealing with interpretations of Scripture, the literal, "down here" view goes under the general heading of "Antiochene School." It is very objective, and leans heavily on grammar and archaeology. The other school, the "Alexandrian," prefers to see

everything at once, from “up there.” It leans toward the mystics and the operations of one’s own soul, making it more subjective. Like man and wife, Antiochenes and Alexandrians need each other desperately precisely because they have their differences.

Our human limitations in this life being what they are, we usually try for the view “up there” first. Take Zacchaeus, for instance. Curious about the Christ, “he was trying to see Jesus, who He was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature.” In order to get what he considered a good view of the Lord, he ran on ahead and climbed into a sycamore tree to look down on God and see Him all in one piece as He passed beneath him.

People who begin to read the Bible seriously, really to catch sight of the Christ, often follow Zacchaeus’ example. It’s the natural thing to do. “On account of the crowd,” and knowing ourselves to be short of stature where the things of God are concerned, we run ahead and climb any big sycamores we can find along the way. It’s not a bad idea. To get the exhilarating view of Scripture “up there,” we have only to read Scripture through the great exegetes who tower above us, the evangelists themselves, for example; they commented on many passages of the Old Testament. Or we can read St. Paul, the fathers of the Church, or simply a good modern commentary—or the mystics.

“Stand in the multitude of ancients that are wise,” counsels Ecclesiasticus, “and join thyself from thy heart to their wisdom: that thou mayst hear every discourse of God” (6:35).

Towering above these giants is the Exegete of exegetes, Christ Himself. On the road to Emmaus, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets ... [he] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things referring to himself.” Much of His exegesis is recorded for us in the Gospels, wherein He expounded for us numerous passages from Isaias, Deuteronomy, the Psalms and other books. He explained to us the significance of Jonas, of the mysterious cornerstone rejected by the builders, of the smitten shepherd of Zaccharias, and of the voice in the desert—not to mention His own parables.

With these clues to set us on the right track, He continues to expound the Scriptures to us in the Liturgy, through the Holy Spirit. Here, incorporated into our worship of God, we find the high truths of Scripture in their most easily assimilated form; truer, if possible, because applied and distilled. In fact, St. Bernard affirms that the Church “is the Spouse who has wounded His heart, who with the eye of contemplation pierces the abyss of God’s hidden designs, and so makes an everlasting dwelling for herself in His heart and for Him in her own.”

Echoing St. Augustine, he goes on to say that,

Whenever, therefore, she changes the meaning or the application of a text of Holy Scripture, the words in the accommodated sense possess even greater authority than belongs to them in their primary signification. And perhaps the adapted meaning surpasses the original by as much as the reality excels the image; the light, the shadow; the mistress, the maidservant.¹

This makes the Liturgy a giant sycamore indeed, and from up there the Catholic's view will always be unclouded, for the Holy Spirit Himself guarantees it.

Not that one has to be Catholic, or even Christian or Jewish, to read the Bible. Atheists and agnostics read it, but only as literature, as history, as a quaint primitive social document, or even as semitic propaganda. They admire Job as closet drama, Esther as a good short story, or the Apocalypse as an early experiment in free association; but however unbelievers read it, they must read it "as." Only the believer can just plain read it for what it is—a personal, verbal communication from God to men. And only the Catholic can read it in perfect freedom without fear of missing the point. Like the little boy who proclaimed himself, "as brave as brave can be, when my muvver is wif me!" the Catholic can run and skip through Scripture under his Mother's watchful eye in perfect security. Nobody can *dare* to read Scripture as a Catholic can, protected by the teaching authority of his Church.

"To you," said Truth made Man, "it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to the rest in parables, that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand'" (Luke 8:10).

The first pope assured Catholics:

We have the word of prophecy, surer still, to which you do well to attend, as to a limp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. This, then, you must understand first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is made by private interpretation. For not by the will of man was prophecy brought at any time; but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:19-21).

How much we absorb of this lofty view, however, depends to a large extent on how well we see down here. Surveying a panorama of cars and people from the Empire State Building is after all rather meaningless to anyone not personally acquainted with cars and people. Who can see

¹ Third Sermon for Christmas Eve.

forests who can't see trees? How well can Christ be known from the top of a sycamore?

So precious did Christ the Exegete deem our humble view down here that He “emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave,” even to the point of becoming “a worm and not a man” to see for Himself what we see and to teach us the value of the worm’s eye view. In fact, when He looks up and sees a sycamore-climber gazing down at Him from up there, what does He say?

He says what He said to Zacchaeus, “*Make haste and come down!*” If we want to see Christ truly, as He is, we must *come down*. It’s “down here” that, for us, the real exegesis begins.

Before revealing the meaning of Moses’s brazen serpent to the good Pharisee, Nicodemus, the Lords asks him, “If I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I speak to you of heavenly things?” Scripture hangs its messages on personal experiences, as well as winds, snakes, brass, and all sorts of things found only here below. “Thou art a teacher in Israel and dost not know these things?”

So what we get from St. Bernard or the Liturgy will depend very much on what our view down here happens to be. It will depend upon our humanity, our learning, our joys and sorrows, our experience of life. It will also depend upon how much we have thumbed the Bible for ourselves. For the vesperal look, no elevator, no sycamore, is necessary. It suffices to acknowledge oneself a worm and to take the worm’s eye view.

Properly speaking, a worm has no view at all, as any high school biologist can affirm. As a matter of fact, he has no eye. He “sees” by reacting all of a piece to light and dark, and by bumping into what’s around him. He does this humbly, because he’s a very low form of life. For reading Holy Writ, his is the fundamental disposition required. No one should dare approach the Word of God in any other way. Whether on top of the Empire State Building or down in the traffic, this *is* the worm’s eye view. We read Scripture by reading it and read it more by reacting to it and reading it again.

If any soul of good will can’t read it profitably, it clearly cannot be God’s Word. If it’s necessary to pore over commentaries, atlases, ancient history, Hebrew lexicons, and to inspect the diggings at Qumran before tackling the opening lines of Genesis, then God is not the Author or authors, but simply an authors’ author, writing for a rarefied public with a special vocabulary. *That*, we know, ain’t so!

“For whatever thing have been written have been written for our instruction, that through the patience and the consolation afforded by the Scriptures we may have hope!” argues St. Paul (Rom. 15:4).

Not that the scholarly approach is to be discouraged. Dear me, no! It's part and parcel of the view down here. Anyone who aims to dispense with it has no wormly humility at all. But that doesn't mean we must wait until we are sufficiently educated to start reading Scripture. That would be like waiting to be a saint before receiving Holy Communion. It is the reading of Scripture itself that makes us yearn to be more educated in order to be able to read it better. It was only after much reading and meditating on the Old Testament that the Little Flower (hardly a pedant!) longed to study Hebrew so she could get just that much closer to God's Word.

Reading Scripture in translation is always just a bit like going wading with one's socks on. St. Jerome, destined to be the father of the Vulgate, certainly thought so. He had this to say about his Hebrew studies: “What a toil it was! How difficult I found it! How often I was on the point of giving it up in despair, and yet in my eagerness took it up again!” And once more he locked horns in mortal combat with those hydra-headed Hebrew verbs.

“But they that are learned,” consoles Daniel, “shall shine as the brightness of the firmament!” (Dan. 12:3).

Well, I just invested in a Hebrew grammar book, so here's hoping. St. Jerome never got over a holy envy of his friend St. Paula, whom he pronounced as having “learned it, and so well she could chant the Psalms in Hebrew, and could speak it, too, without any trace of a Latin accent!” That's one accomplishment I can be sure of. If I ever chant Hebrew, I can guarantee it will be absolutely free of any Latin accent.

But that's just a beginning. St. Jerome also insists,

A man will understand the Bible better if he has seen Judea with his own eyes and discovered its ancient cities and sites either under the old names or newer ones. In company with some learned Hebrews I went through the entire land.

You see what went into the translation of the Vulgate. He was rather short with those who “think that to be without culture and to be holy are the same thing ... as though they were holy simply because ignorant!”

St. Jerome, pray for us.

The scholarly approach will, unfortunately, not suffice of itself. There is more than scholarship and personal experience to the view down here.

“You search the Scriptures,” our Lord tells the Pharisees, who could expound more texts than the devil, “because in them you think that you have life everlasting ...” but “you have not God’s Word abiding in you, since you do not believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn. 5:38-39).

Aha! Didn’t our Lord make this clear to Zacchaeus too? When He told him to come down from that sycamore, He told him why: “I must stay in thy house today.” That’s where the real Bible-reading begins, with Christ *in our house*.

Scripture is a vision of God, not a problem in semantics or archaeology. It is a vision accorded to everyone who makes contact with it in faith. As in a true vision, some intermediate species is used by God to establish contact between Himself and the psyche of His creature. In the case of Scripture, the species is simply language, but it is a vision for all that. To borrow Father Tanquerey’s definition, visions give us “supernatural perceptions of some object naturally invisible to man.” Scholarship can’t help us here, except by way of preparation.

Again as in a true vision, contact with Scripture is efficacious. Scripture itself is very clear on this point:

And as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return no more thither, but soak the earth and water it, and make it to spring and give seed to the sower and bread to the eater: So shall my word be, which shall go forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me void, but it shall do whatsoever I please and shall prosper in the things for which I sent it (Isa. 55:10-11).

“For the word of God is living and efficient and keener than any two-edged sword,” echoes St. Paul, “and extending even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints also and of marrow, and a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12), probing deeper than any depth psychology.

“Receive the ingrafted word, which is able to save your souls,” advises St. James, for contact with Scripture changes the reader in some mysterious way when he cooperates with its words—the more the cooperation, the greater the acceleration, drawing him closer and closer to the mind of the Author. This sort of change is sanctification. Scripture—the vision of God—makes saints.

Saints are not mass produced. God fashions them individually, lovingly, and with much care. That is why under the broad horizons “up there” will always lie the little fields down here. The Holy Spirit chooses to speak to souls personally, a meme, as the French say, nakedly. Christ unfolds His greatest exegesis within our own souls, constantly

explaining Himself more and more fully. In us, the Word is made Flesh. When disputing with the Pharisees, didn't He ask, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods' ... to whom the word of God is addressed?"

Speaking of the gift of understanding, through which the Holy Spirit of Christ normally expounds His mysteries in us, Dom Marmion explains:

Not that this gift diminishes the incomprehensibility of the mysteries or does away with faith; but it goes further into the mystery than the simple acquiescence of faith; it bears upon the appropriateness or the greatness of the mysteries, upon their relations with each other or with our supernatural life. It has also for its object the truths contained in the Sacred Books, and it is this gift which seems to have been granted in a special measure to those in the Church who have shone by the depth of their doctrine, those whom we call "Doctors of the Church"; but every baptised soul possesses within itself this precious gift. You read a text of Holy Scripture; you have read and reread it many times without having been struck by it; but one day, a sudden light flashes, illuminating to its depths, so to speak, the truth set forth in this text; this truth then becomes altogether clear to you and often a principle of supernatural life and action. Is it by your reflexions that you have arrived at this result? No, it is an illumination, an intuition of the Holy Spirit who, by the gift of understanding, makes you penetrate further into the inmost and deep meaning of the revealed truths so that you may hold them the more firmly. (*Christ the Life of the Soul*, Ch. 6.)

No one can read the Bible for anyone else. Because man is existential, in a sense he creates himself progressively, constantly absorbing his particular experience into himself. Like Tennyson's Ulysses, he is always "a part of all that I have met." (Don't you love Tennyson? He has a platitude for every occasion!) A plumber would never read Numbers as an accountant reads it, or a choreographer, or a lawyer. A happy plumber who reads Kipling can't read it the same way as an unhappy plumber who sails a boat on weekends. A man doesn't read it as a woman does. A married man doesn't read it as a priest does. To all these people the Bible has the same great things to say and also different things to say. All are true, universal, and yet special. Obviously, only God could have written such a book! Indeed, "They shall all be taught of God," as Isaias prophesied.

Asks St. Augustine:

Do you know how we have to read the holy Scriptures? Like someone who reads letters which have come to him from his native land; to see what

news we have from Heaven and what they tell us of our fatherland, where we have our parents and brethren and friends and acquaintances, and where we are wishing and longing to go.

This is in line with the spiritual adage: When we pray we speak to God; when we read we listen to Him.

How many great saints received their vocations through reading some passage of Scripture which suddenly became luminous and irresistible, and which they felt was directed specifically to them? St. Francis of Assisi, hearing in the Gospel, “Do not keep gold, or silver, or money in your girdles, no wallet for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staff” (Mt. 10 :9), took the words to himself. Giving away money and clothes, he settled for one old coat tied around the middle with a length of rope, and became the founder of a multitudinous order of poor men.

Citing St. Anthony of the desert, whose call from God came in the words “Go, sell what thou hast ... and come, follow me,” St. Augustine relates his own similar experience in his *Confessions*. Hearing a little child from a nearby house sing-singing, “*Tolle, lege, tolle, lege*—take up and read,” he was moved to look into St. Paul’s Epistle lying close at hand. His eyes fell on “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh and its concupiscences” (Rom. 13:13). “I had no wish to read further and no need,” writes the saint. His conversion was immediate and entire, the Word of God having extended well into his joints and marrow.

“*Tolle, lege, take up and read!*” he admonishes us in turn, now a doctor of the Church.

We’re fools not to.

Speaking of the delights of the contemplative life, the fourteenth-century English mystic Walter Hilton assures us,

It sometimes happens that grace causes a soul to leave vocal prayer and moves it to see God in another way. It sees Him first in the Scriptures, for God, who is Truth, is hidden there under the beauty of the words as under a soft silk.

Then he cautions, “He can only be recognized by the pure of heart, because truth will not reveal itself to those who are hostile, but only to those who love it and seek it with humility.” (Believe it or not, the name Zacchaeus means “pure” in Hebrew!)

For truth and humility are sisters joined by love, and there is no divergence in their counsels. Humility relies on truth and not at all on itself, and truth trusts in humility, and so they agree well together. The soul of one who loves and desires God sees Him in proportion to the degree in which it is made humble by the infusion of grace and the opening of the spiritual eyes, and insofar as it understands that it is nothing of itself but is entirely dependent on the mercy and goodness of God, and that it is upheld only by His favor.

It sees the truth of the Scriptures wonderfully revealed to it in a way that it could not do by study and its own natural intelligence, and this is a kind of experience or perception of God, for God is the source of wisdom, and by imparting a little of His wisdom to a pure soul He can enable it to understand the whole of Scripture. He does not impart this knowledge all at once in a single act of enlightenment, but through His grace the soul receives a new habitual ability to understand the texts which come to its mind.

“This light and clearness in the intelligence is produced by the presence of God,” Hilton continues, citing what God’s presence did for the disciples going to Emmaus.

In the same way the indwelling of God illumines the intelligence of those who love and ardently desire Him, and brings to their minds by the ministry of angels [Ah!] the words and the texts of Scripture without their searching for them or thinking about them, and it makes their meaning clear however difficult or obscure they may be in themselves. The more difficult they are and the less able to be understood by the ordinary light of reason, the more delightful is their exposition when it comes from God.

The interpretation is literal, moral, mystical, and heavenly, if the matter allows of it. By the literal interpretation, the natural intelligence of man is fortified; by the moral sense of Scripture the soul is instructed about vices and virtues, how to distinguish one from the other. By the mystical sense it is illumined to see the operation of God in the Church, to apply the words of Scripture to Christ our Head, and to the Church, His mystical Body. The fourth, the heavenly sense, is concerned only with the operation of love, and it consists in applying to love all the truth of Scripture. Since that comes nearest to the experience of heaven, I call it heavenly.

Ah, dear reader, why are you reading Hertz when you could be reading Hilton?

Speaking from experience, he says:

To a pure soul, whose palate is cleansed from the defilement of sensual love, Holy Scripture is a life-giving and refreshing food whose flavor is very agreeable to the mind which ruminates it well, because there is hidden

in it the spirit that informs all the powers of the soul and fills them with heavenly and spiritual delight. He has need of good teeth who will eat this bread, for lovers of the flesh and [formal] heretics cannot reach its inner nature. Their teeth are unclean and so they cannot taste it ... They can never do more than gnaw on the outer bark, and whatever their claims, they never taste the inner flavor. They are not humble and pure, or friends of God, and therefore He does not reveal His secrets to them.

The secret of Scripture is kept sealed with the signet of God's finger, which is the Holy Ghost, and so without His love and His leave no man may obtain it ... And He is Himself the key, and He lets in whom He will through the inspiration of His grace, and does not break the seal. That is what God does to those who love Him. He does not do it to all in the same measure. He does it especially for those who are inspired to seek truth in the Scriptures and who, *having applied themselves to serious study, give themselves up to fervent prayer*. These may find the truth when God is pleased to reveal it to them.

See, then, how grace opens the eyes of the spirit and enlightens the intelligence beyond the weakness of corrupt nature. Whether the soul reads Scripture, or hears it, or reflects on it, it receives, as I said before, a new ability to understand it and appreciate its truth. And it gets, too, the ability to find a spiritual sense in what is said literally. And that is not surprising, for it is the same spirit, namely the Holy Ghost, who interprets it for the consolation of a pure soul and who originally inspired it.

And through this grace the uneducated can, and in fact, do, grasp the substance, the real truth and the spiritual flavor of Scripture, as well as the educated. Admittedly they may not understand so many details, but that is not necessary....

And only by experience can a soul know what consolation and spiritual joy, what savor and sweetness, these illuminations may bring—interior perceptions, secret knowledge, and sudden touches of the Holy Ghost. And I believe that a man receiving these will not fall into error, if spiritual pride and over-great subtlety of intellect do not cloud his interior senses.

Echoing St. Augustine, he notes,

And indeed the light that grace throws on Holy Scripture and other inspired books is nothing else than a series of delightful letters which pass between God the true lover and the souls which He loves.... A very slight taste of this knowledge of Scripture will make a soul that enjoys it set little value on all the seven liberal arts or all worldly knowledge. For the end of this knowledge is the salvation of the soul in everlasting life.²

² *Scales of Perfection*, Bk. II, Ch. 43

Peace on earth to men of good teeth! Everyone is invited to savor Scripture. At this banquet God has prepared for us, there is bread for every taste. It is a diet for saints and, please forgive me, also a diet for worms. There is, however, one piece of advice our Lord gives to anybody who accepts dinner invitations.

“When thou art invited,” He suggests gently, so as not to hurt our feelings about our ignorance of etiquette, “go, recline at the last place.” Come down here, Zacchaeus.

“That when he who invited thee comes in,” He continues, “he may say to thee, ‘Friend, go up higher!’” I guess that’s “up there.”

“Then wilt thou be honored in the presence of all who are at table with thee.” That means Daniel, St. James, St. Francis, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Paula, Walter Hilton ... Think of the conversation, let alone the fare!

Dashing for this advantageous last place before somebody beats me to it, I have written a book “down here” about the Bible, brazenly advertising my ignorance and lack of virtue to anyone who flicks these pages. That, I am afraid, is the point of the whole endeavor. I’m not an exegete. I’ve never been to Judea, nor can I chant Psalms in Hebrew, with or without a Latin accent. This is just my view of Scripture down here at the foot of the sycamore, where I happened to reach the publisher before you did. What was true of Zacchaeus is also true of me. Christ “has gone to be the guest of a sinner,” as anyone with half an eye can see, now as then.

But of course you know the kind of Man the Christ is.