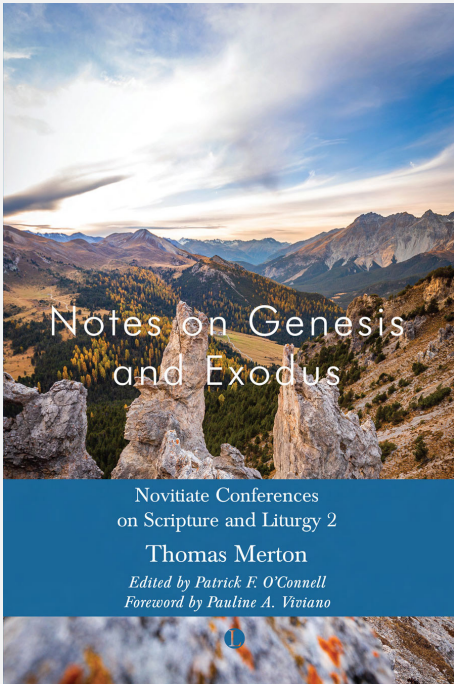


Book Review

Merton, Thomas. 2023. *Notes on Genesis and Exodus: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 2*. Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell, foreword by Pauline A. Viviano. Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press.



In 1955, Thomas Merton became a novice master and, among other classes, gave lectures to the novices entitled *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture*. His notes, according to which he spoke to the novices about the first two books of the Old Testament – Genesis and Exodus, are preserved. This book is another in a series of posthumously published books of this well-known author, a Trappist monk who spent his monastic life at the Abbey of Gethse-

mani in the USA. The volume is edited by Patrick F. O'Connell, former president of the International Thomas Merton Society, who previously edited more than ten volumes from literary remains of Thomas Merton. The book was first published in 2021 by Cascade Books.

The selected texts are made available here for the first time in a critical edition. The book includes an erudite extensive introduction as well as valuable indexes. As a Bible scholar Pauline Viviano writes in her foreword: *"This edition of Thomas Merton's class notes brings us into the workings of a great spiritual leader's mind as he reflects upon Scripture... His audience consists of the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, but all who are on a spiritual journey can gain from his insights and the lessons he draws from Scripture."* (Merton 2023, vii).

The book's publication is not intended to belatedly engage in the exegetical debates of biblical scholars. In addition to attempting to document in detail the formative monastic approaches specific to that time and making another valuable contribution to uncovering the personality of the contemplative

giant Thomas Merton, the book can be a valuable inspiration to those who also seek in Scripture a deep understanding of the human person and his spiritual quest.

Although Merton draws on contemporary insights from biblical theology, an important feature of his approach is a view of the first two books of the Old Testament that combines the biblical text with the introspective depth of his own monastic experience. Known for his profound spiritual insights inspired by traditional Christian spiritual writers as well as poetry, psychology, and Eastern religions, Merton does not disappoint when he delves into the stories of Genesis and Exodus and reveals their timeless wisdom and relevance.

His notes show that he was quite familiar with the state of biblical scholarship within the Catholic Church at the time. For example, he distinguishes the different sources as distinct layers of the text of these books (the Yahwistic, Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomistic sources).

Merton does not bypass the literary sense, but more important for him is the spiritual sense. For he is concerned with introducing novices to the spiritual life in the context of living out their vocation in the monastery. We can say that he offers an intrinsic link with later biblical passages as well as with later ecclesiastical texts and ecclesiastical practice. In this way he invites his listeners to consider the personal experiential implications of God's word. He is less interested in objective exegesis – though he does not neglect this dimension – rather he is more attentive to the biblical text as a source of spiritual formation.

I will give at least one example of his approach in more detail. *The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* (Merton 2023, 9–11) is of deep significance for Merton in connection with his understanding of the distinction between true and false self, as the author of the Introduction points out (Merton 2023, xvi). Following St. Bernard, Merton sees the fruit of the tree of knowledge as a source of division that destroys the unifying knowledge of good by providing experiential knowledge of evil, thus

causing the loss of intuitive awareness of reality through love, introducing the illusion of autonomy and a false perception of self as the independent arbiter of right and wrong, and leading man to actually become his own (false) god, as the serpent insidiously promised. In his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, for example, one can see right at the beginning of the book his profound understanding of the impact that this internal division has on our human attempts at contemplative prayer. The false self is there said to be a disguise, a mask, masquerading as someone else, namely our true self. But it isn't. It is fleeting and ephemeral, doomed to disappear like smoke from a chimney. Conversely, the true, deep Self awakens only in contemplation. It is eternal and spiritual. It cannot be directly observed, captured as an object; it is hidden. It has much to say, but not about itself.

Merton's approach to these ancient texts is characterized by a harmonious blend of scientific analysis and spiritual reflection. He explores the complexity of these biblical stories with a fine eye for detail. His astute observations on topics such as creation, human nature,

faith, freedom, divine providence, and the relationship between man and God offer readers a fresh perspective on these familiar and often-read stories.

Merton's exploration of the Book of Genesis begins with the concept of creation as an expression of God's love and creativity. He discusses the symbolic meanings of the seven days of creation, emphasizing the harmony and purpose underlying the universe. Merton emphasizes that understanding the creation story lies not in naturalistic information, but in knowing the profound truths it conveys about the relationship between God, humanity, and the world.

Merton delves further into the story of Adam and Eve, reflecting on their innocence, the nature of sin, and the consequences of their disobedience. He presents the story of Adam and Eve as a universal human experience, touching on the struggles of temptation, guilt, and the yearning for reconciliation with God.

The narrative of Cain and Abel introduces themes of jealousy, violence, and the ethical dimensions of human

behavior. Merton discusses the paradox of free will and the potential for both good and evil in each person. He reflects on the responsibility that lies in the decision to choose what is right and to confront destructive impulses that can lead to suffering and alienation.

Merton's insights reach as far as the story of Noah and the Great Flood, where he meditates on the significance of the ark as a symbol of salvation and the covenant between God and humanity. He draws parallels between the floodwaters of chaos and the waters of baptism, emphasizing the transforming power of God's mercy to cleanse and renew.

Reflecting on the Book of Exodus, Merton sees the figure of Moses as the central figure of liberation and leadership. He reveals the richness of the scene when Moses spots the burning bush, emphasizing the sacredness of ordinary experiences and understanding them as a call to respond to God's invitation openly and humbly.

The liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt becomes central to his perspective, with Merton emphasizing

the themes of trust, faith, and the challenges of the journey towards freedom. He points out the connections between the Israelites' desert wanderings and the spiritual journey of individuals seeking a deeper connection with God.

Merton's reflections on the Ten Commandments shed light on the moral and ethical framework they provide for human life. He emphasizes the importance of the commandments in promoting a just and harmonious society, as well as their role in guiding personal relationships and spiritual growth.

The book concludes with Merton's reflections on the construction of the Tabernacle, a symbol of God's presence among the Israelites. He discusses the profound symbolism of the elements of the tabernacle and their representation of various aspects of the spiritual life, from prayer and sacrifice to the inner sanctuary of the heart.

Like most of Merton's works, this book encourages a deeper exploration of the relationship between man and God and the transformative power of encountering sacred stories. The Benedictine tradition has perhaps been the place

in history through which the richness of the *lectio divina* approach has come down from antiquity to us and remains a constant inspiration.

What makes these notes exceptional is Merton's ability to bridge the gap between the ancient world and the modern reader. He seamlessly links the historical context of the texts with the struggles and new insights of contemporary life. He looks at the moral dilemmas faced by the patriarchs or the parallel between the Israelite exodus and a personal journey to spiritual liberation in a way that makes his insights inspiring for contemporary people.

The book is a testament to Thomas Merton's enduring legacy as a spiritual guide and thinker. His ability to breathe new life into old texts and make them relevant to the modern seeker is commendable. This book offers a wide range of interested readers a valuable opportunity to penetrate in a new way two fundamental narratives that have shaped human thought for millennia.

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