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Scripture

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THE PROPHETICAL MEANING OF CELIBACY—I

When Jephthe's daughter realised that she had to die in fulfilment of her father's vow, she withdrew to the mountains 'to bewail her virginity' (Jg. 11:37-40). It is significant that what she laments over is her virginity. For herself, her father, her companions and those who recorded that tradition, what made her fate so pitiful was not the fact that she had to leave the world in the bloom of her youth: this is a romantic view which does not belong to the stern biblical times. For the Israelites the pathos of her story lies in the fact that she will not experience the joys of matrimony and motherhood. She will die a virgin, and it is a curse, a disgrace similar to the shame attached to sterility (cf. Lk. 1:25). The prophets have a similar thought in mind when, in their lamentations, they give the chosen people the title of 'Virgin of Israel': 'Listen to my lamentation, house of Israel! . . . She has fallen, she shall not rise again, the Virgin of Israel.' In this text Amos (5:2; cf. Jl. 1:8; Lam. 1:15; 2:13), by calling Israel a Virgin, wants to emphasise her misery: she will die like a virgin, without leaving any descendants. It is like an echo, at the collective level, of the laments of Jephthe's daughter.

These examples show clearly that according to the old Semitic mentality, virginity is far from being an ideal. It is a fecund matrimony which is honourable and a sign of God's blessing (Ps. 126). The same applies to men. L. Kôhler remarks that the Old Testament has no word for bachelor, so unusual is the idea.¹

Christ will change that attitude towards celibacy (Mt. 19:12). But can we not find already in the Old Testament a preparation and an anticipation of his teaching?

Towards the end of the Old Testament period at least some groups among the Essenes observed celibacy. Unfortunately the authors who mention it are very vague on the motives of that observance. Josephus (*De Bello Judaico* II, 8, 2) and Philo (quoted by Eusebius: *Praep. ev.*, VIII, 11. PG 21, 644 AB), putting themselves at

¹ *The Hebrew Man*, London 1956, p. 89

the level of their pagan readers, reduce the celibacy of the Essenes to a misogyny entirely void of any religious value: 'They beware of the impudence of women and are convinced that none of them can keep her faith to a single man,' says Josephus. Pliny (*Hist. nat.*, v, 17) describes the Essenes as philosophers, 'tired of life' (*vita fessos*), who give up the pleasures of love: Essenian celibacy would be of a Stoician type, but evidently Pliny's competency can be doubted when it comes to interpreting the motives of a Hebrew sect. The Qumran texts might have given us an explanation, but so far on this question they have not been very helpful. Though they know of a temporary continence on the occasion of the eschatological war,¹ they do not impose celibacy on the members of the Community. On the contrary, the prologue of the Manual for the future Congregation speaks explicitly of women and children,² and the discovery of female skeletons in the cemetery of the Community³ makes it clear that at Qumran as in the sect of Damascus⁴—if the two sects were distinct—matrimony was at least allowed. In short, a few groups among the Essenes present an interesting case of pre-Christian celibacy; the study of that case might throw some light on the New Testament ideal of virginity, but such a study is impaired by the lack of reliable explanation of their motives. And when we come across first-hand contemporary documentation, it happens that it concerns a sect which did not observe celibacy as a rule.

I. *Propter instantem necessitatem* : Negative aspect

Fortunately the Old Testament presents a much more ancient and clearer case of celibacy: the case of Jeremias, 'a virgin prophet and a figure of the Great Prophet who too was a Virgin and the son of a Virgin.'⁵ Jeremias was apparently the first biblical character to embrace celibacy as a state of life. At least he is the first one to whom Scripture attributes celibacy explicitly. Others before him may have abstained from marriage. Ancient Christian writers often suppose that Elias did so⁶ and make of him the Father of monastic life. But the testimony of Scripture concerning Elias is purely negative: no wife is mentioned, but the Bible does not speak of his celibacy either. Even if he remained a celibate, we have no indication as to the reasons that prompted him. Jeremias on the contrary, in his Confessions,

¹ *The War of the Children of Light* . . . vii, 3, 4

² cf. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, New York 1957, p. 307

³ cf. *Revue Biblique* lxxiii, 1956, pp. 569-72

⁴ *Document of Damascus* iv, 20-v, 6; vii, 6-8

⁵ Bossuet, *Méditations sur l'Évangile*, cix day

⁶ See texts in *Élie le Prophète (Études Carmélitaines 1956)* I, pp. 165, 189. But St Augustine was not convinced of the celibacy of Elias: cf. *De Genesi ad litteram* ix, 6.

speaks of his celibacy and explains it. We may owe this insight on his private life to his introspective mood, another quality that was rare in ancient Israel. Anyway he provides us with the most ancient reflection on celibacy. In it we can trace to its beginnings the biblical doctrine of virginity.

The word of the Lord came to me saying :

Do not take a wife ; have no sons and no daughters in this place. For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and daughters that are born here and concerning the mothers that bore them and concerning their fathers who begot them in this land :

They shall die miserably, without being lamented, without being buried.

They shall be as dung upon the face of the earth.

They shall perish by the sword and by famine.

Their carcasses shall be a prey for the birds of the air and the wild animals.

(Jer. 16:1-4)

Those are the terms by which Jeremias explains his celibacy. Are those verses to be understood as a positive order of God, given to the prophet when he came of age and enjoining him to abstain from matrimony? It might be said that celibacy was progressively imposed upon the prophet by the circumstances, his isolation and the persecutions that made him an outcast. Eventually he would have understood that beneath those circumstances there was a divine ordinance and, with typical Hebrew disregard for secondary causes, he would have expressed it in the literary form of an order. In any case, it is clear that Jeremias gives his celibacy a symbolical value. The loneliness of his unmarried life forebodes the desolation of Israel. Death is about to sweep over the country. Jeremias' forlorn celibacy is nothing but an enacted prophecy of the imminent doom. Calamity will be such as to make meaningless matrimony and procreation.

Jeremias' celibacy is to be understood as a prophecy in action. Symbolical actions were frequent among the prophets. Thus to announce the imminent captivity of the Egyptians, Isaias walks naked in the streets of Jerusalem (Is. 20:1-6). Jeremias breaks a pot to symbolise the destruction of the capital (Jer. 19:1-11). Ezechiel makes a plan of the siege to come, cooks impure food as the famished inhabitants of the besieged city will have to do, cuts his beard and scatters it to the four winds as the population of Juda will be scattered (Ez. 4:1-5:4). In some cases it was the whole life of a prophet which was given by God a symbolical significance: for instance Osee's matrimonial misfortunes symbolised the unhappy relations between Yahweh and His unfaithful spouse Israel (Os. 1, 3).

Jeremias' life too was symbolical. He lived in times of distress. He was to be a witness of the destruction of Sion. It was his sad duty to announce the imminent desolation: 'Every time I have to utter

the word, I must shout and proclaim : Violence and ruins !' (Jer. 20:8). Still more : it was his tragic destiny to anticipate in his existence and signify in his own life the terrible fate of the 'Virgin of Israel.'

'The Virgin of Israel' was soon to undergo the fate of Jephthe's daughter, to die childless, to disappear without hope. With his prophetic insight, Jeremias could see already the shadow of death spreading over the country. He could hear already the moaning of the land :

Teach your daughter this lamentation :
 Death has climbed in at our windows ;
 she has entered our palaces,
 destroyed the children in the street,
 the young men in the square.
 Corpses lie like dung all over the country. (Jer. 9:20-1)

This was no mere Oriental exaggeration. What Israel was about to witness and Jeremias had to announce was really the death of Israel. Israel had been living by the Covenant and now, by the sin of the people the Covenant had been broken. The two institutions in which the Covenant was embodied and through which God's graces came down upon the people, the two great signs of God's indwelling in the land of His choice, the temple and kingship would soon disappear. Only a few years more and Nabuchodonosor would invade Juda, burn the sanctuary, enslave the king and kill his children. For the Israelites this would be the end of a world, the day of the Lord, day of doom and darkness, day of return to the original chaos (Jer. 4:23-31 15:2-4). Ezechiel will explain in a dramatic way the meaning of the fall of Jerusalem : the Glory of God will leave His defiled abode and abandon the land (Ez. 8:1-11:25). Israel will die and nothing short of a resurrection will bring her back to life (Ez. 37:1-14). When the exiles leave Palestine, Rachel can sing her dirge at Rama (Jer. 31:15) : her children are no more. Israel as a people has disappeared. God's people has been dispersed. There are no more heirs of the promises and children of the Covenant unless God repeats the Exodus and creates a new people. A Testament is over. God's plan has apparently failed. Death reigns.

Prophetically Jeremias sees all that beforehand. He experiences it proleptically in his flesh. Excluded from the Temple (Jer. 36:5), excommunicated so to say from his village (Jer. 11:8 ; 12:6 ; 11:19-23) and from the community (Jer. 20:2 ; 36:25), he will experience before the exile what it means to live estranged from one's country, away from the Temple of the Lord. Before the Israelites he knows the bitter taste of a life which has no hope left on earth. 'Never could I

sit joyful in the company of those who were happy ; forlorn I was under the power of thy hand for thou hadst filled me with wrath ' (Jer. 15:17).

Thus was Jeremias' life an anticipation of the imminent doom. His celibacy too. When Death already casts her shadow over the land, is it a time to marry ? ' For thus says Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of Israel : Behold I will put an end, in this place, under your very eyes and in your very days, to the shouts of gladness and of mirth, to the songs of the bride and of the bridegroom ' (Jer. 16:9). An end of joy, life, marriage : the country turns into a sheol : there is no marriage and no begetting in the sheol. The command of the Lord to ' increase and multiply ' (Gen. 1:28) assumed that the world was good (Gen. 1:4, 10, etc.). But now that man's sin has roused death, the Lord reverses His command : ' Do not take a wife ; have no sons and no daughters in this place.' Jeremias' life of solitude announces the reign of death and anticipates the end of the world he lived in. His celibacy is in line with his message of doom. It is part of those trials by which ' the most suffering of the prophets,' as St Isidorus of Pelusia puts it,¹ anticipates God's judgment. It is part of the sufferings which point to the cross, the final expression of God's judgment. The solitude of the lonely prophet of Anathoth announces the dereliction of the crucified victim of Calvary. It has the same significance : it signifies the end of an economy in which God's promises and graces were entrusted to Israel *secundum carnem* and communicated by way of generation. This order disappears. When God will raise a new Israel, it will be an Israel *secundum spiritum* in which one will have access not by right of birth but by direct reception of the Spirit (Jer. 31:31-5). In such a people the fecundity of the flesh will have lost its value.

Replying to a question of the Corinthians concerning virgins, St Paul's advice is to leave them in that state. But the explanation he gives is not very clear. ' I consider that it is better to be so on account of the present necessity ' (1 Cor. 7:26). What is that ' present necessity ' that justifies celibacy ?

Catholic commentators (Cornely, Lemonnier, Allo, Callan, W. Rees, Osty, etc.) see in that ' necessity,' as Osty puts it, ' the thousand worries of married life,'² or else the imminent persecutions ' which an unmarried person is better able to bear.'³ The standpoint of the Apostle would be purely individual, psychological or ascetical. On him who is married the burden of the world is more heavy. The

¹ PG 78, 356

² *Épîtres aux Corinthiens (Bible de Jérusalem)*, Paris 1949, p. 40

³ W. Rees in *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, Edinburgh 1953, p. 1090

celibate, on the contrary, can devote himself fully to the service of God.

Such a thought is certainly not foreign to St Paul's mind: he expresses it in vv. 32-5 of the same chapter. Yet this does not seem to be for him a primary consideration. The immediate explanation he gives of his preference for celibacy follows another line: 'The time is short . . . The world in its present form is passing away' (vv. 29-31). This shows that his outlook is mainly collective and eschatological: the end of the world is drawing near: let us adapt our attitude to these new circumstances; it is time to detach ourselves from a doomed world. 'Even those who have a wife, let them live as if they had none . . . and those who have to deal with the world as if they had not.' Individual considerations are only an application of this view on the divine economy. It is because the times we are living in are the times of the end that it is better not to be burdened with matrimonial obligations, so as to be able to give one's undivided attention to God.

The vocabulary used by St Paul in this section confirms this eschatological interpretation of his views on celibacy. The words he uses clearly belong to the vocabulary of apocalyptic literature. The 'necessity' (*anagkē*) was the technical term used to describe the crisis of the last times (Lk. 21:23; 1 Thess. 3:7; Ps. Sal. 5:8; Test. Jos. 2:4); in that sense it is akin to 'tribulation' (*thlipsis*) used here also to describe the present condition (v. 28) and which has also an apocalyptic value (Mt. 25:9-28; Apoc. 1:9; 7:14; 2 Thess. 1:6). Similarly the term used for 'time' in v. 29 (*kairos*) 'is about a technical term for the period before the Advent'¹ (cf. Rom. 13:11; Heb. 9:9; 1 Pet. 1:5, 11). It is true that these terms are not always taken in their technical eschatological sense. But their convergence and the context make it clear that St Paul sets virginity against an eschatological background. With Jeremias he considers celibacy as a testimony that the last times have come, an attitude that presages the end.

The difficulty of this interpretation—and what makes Catholic commentators to shrink from it—is that it seems to suppose in St Paul the erroneous belief that the end of the world was imminent. Can we accept such an explanation of celibacy without rallying to the consequent eschatology of A. Schweitzer?²

Prat, followed by Huby and Spicq, does not think the objection decisive. He accepts as possible the eschatological explanation of virginity. Quoting 1 Cor. 7:26-31, he explains: 'Is it possible that

¹ Robertson and Plummer: *I Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC), Edinburgh 1911, p. 152

² cf. decree of the Biblical Commission of 18 June 1915; EB (2nd ed.) 419-21

Paul was haunted by the near prospect of the Parousia? We must not deny this *a priori*. . . . Lacking certain knowledge, he might have formed an opinion based upon probabilities and conjectures. . . . It is at least possible that he guided his conduct and his counsels by such probabilities.¹ This interpretation can be defended, provided we attribute to Paul not a positive teaching concerning the imminence of an event, the day and the hour of which none can know, but an opinion, a desire, a hope without certitude.² This is surely sufficient to safeguard biblical inerrancy and remain within the limits fixed by the Biblical Commission. Yet this exegesis is not fully satisfactory, for it leaves the impression that the eschatological explanation of celibacy should not be taken too seriously. It would be one of those views that reflect more the prejudices of the time than the Apostle's personal thought, like the arguments by which Paul tries to justify the imposition of the veil on women in the assembly (1 Cor. 11:2-16) or the midrashic allusion to the rock following the Jews in the desert (1 Cor. 10:4). Thus St Paul would have used the naïve expectation of an imminent Parousia to insist on virginity, but that would be a mere *argumentum ad hominem* that should not be pressed too much. The real and solid ground for celibacy would remain the personal and ascetical considerations sketched in vv. 32-4.

Accepting Prat's eschatological interpretation of Paul's arguments for virginity, it may be possible to go deeper by comparing the thought of the Apostle with that of Jeremias. Is not the 'present necessity' of 1 Cor. 7:26 parallel with the explanation Jeremias gave of his celibacy? If so, can we not find in Paul's eschatological justification of virginity a lasting value, something much deeper than a pious illusion?

It all amounts to a proper evaluation of his eschatological hope. Was it a delusion which he had, but which he avoided expressing firmly? Or was it on the contrary a central element of his faith and of his spiritual outlook? O. Cullmann, for the early Church in general, and L. Cerfaux, for St Paul in particular, have shown that it is the second view which is true. There is much more than a question of knowing whether Paul or the early Church expected or not an imminent Parousia. For them and for us, the heart of the matter is not the date of the Parousia but its significance. What is the impact of the Parousia on our present life? In Cullmann's terms, what is the connection of the present period of history (the times of the Church)

¹ *Theology of St Paul*, London 1926, I, p. 112. Prat explained his mind still more clearly in a few pages of his final chapter on 'The Last Things' which he suppressed to satisfy an over-zealous censor. These pages have been published in Prat's biography by J. Calès, p. 99.

² J. Huby, *Épîtres aux Corinthiens (Verbum Salutis)*: in h.l. W. Rees also (op. cit.) accepts an eschatological influence on St Paul's thought on virginity.

with the past (death and resurrection of Christ) and the future (final resurrection)?¹ The problem is not chronological but theological. St Paul may or may not have been under the impression that Christ was to return soon. This is rather immaterial and irrelevant. What matters is that, for him, and for the early Christians, ours are the last days (Ac. 2:16ff). The last hour has begun with the death of the Lord (I Jn. 2:18). How long will it be? Nobody knows, but it is clear that now, in Christ, history has reached its end and what we witness now in the world is the consummation of the end: 'The world goes disappearing' (I Jn. 2:17). The Apocalypses of St John and of the Synoptic Gospels show in a veiled language that the trials the Church has to undergo are the forerunning signs of the consummation, and St Paul explains that the individual tribulations of the Christians are their share of the Messianic woes (Col. 1:24).²

The present period may be short or long; after all, 'with the Lord, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day' (2 Pet. 3:8). In any case Christian life is thoroughly eschatological in character. Whatever may be the actual date of the Parousia, we live after the end of history has been reached. We are just waiting for the consummation of the end, we turn towards it and we prepare it. Parousia hangs so to say over our life: even if chronologically it may be still distant, it is theologically imminent: it is the only development of the history of salvation that we can expect, and it gives its colour to our outlook on things. Seen in the light of faith, the history we live in and our personal fate appear as signs of the end. Celibacy is one of those signs: it shows that the last times have come. It proclaims that the world is disappearing. The end has come. Man's primary duty is no more to continue the human species. It is on the contrary to free himself from a fleeting world which has already lost its substance. This is not an attitude of panic before a threatening disaster. It is rather an act of faith in the significance of the Lord's death, beginning of the end.

Thus Paul understood virginity exactly as Jeremias. Jeremias did not know the date of the destruction of Jerusalem: it is not the role nor the charisma of the prophets to give a chronology of the future. But one thing he knew for certain: on account of the infidelity of the people, the former Covenant had become void. Consequently the old institutions like the Temple and kingship would break like empty

¹ O. Cullmann, *Christ et le Temps*, Neuchatel 1947, pp. 102-23

² In Col. 1:24 'tribulationes Christi' should be translated 'the messianic woes' and not 'the sufferings of Christ' (it is *thlipsis* and not *pathema*). The phrase does not refer to the sufferings of Our Lord but, according to a terminology common in Judaism, to the trials God's people had to undergo to reach the messianic times, the birth pangs of the new world.

shells and Israel, abandoned by God, would collapse. He knew that his was a time of death. The nuptial songs would be replaced by lamentations. Marriage and procreation had lost their meaning. The prophet showed it by his own life: his celibacy was an enacted lamentation.

Similarly, St Paul did not know the date of the end. But he knew for certain that the world had condemned itself by condemning Christ and that the worldly Powers had been nailed down on the Cross. It was God's plan to leave some interval before the actual end of all, time to allow the mystery of iniquity to reach its climax and the Church to spread all over the world. During that time life was to continue and marriage was still legitimate. Yet even married people had to understand that they were no longer of the world they were in. Still using this world, they had to be detached from it. Even in marriage they had to bring an attitude of freedom, a tension towards a higher form of love, the love of Christ towards his bride the Church (cf. Eph. 5:25-33). And it is quite fitting that to remind men of the freedom they should keep towards a fleeting world there should be, in the Church, a special charisma (1 Cor. 7:7) of virginity, akin to the charisma of prophecy. The celibate's life is an enacted prophecy. His whole life shouts to the world that it is passing away. As Jeremias announced to the Chosen People the end of the Old Covenant, the celibate, new Jeremias, announces the end of the old world. He embodies the teachings of the Apocalypses. He stands as a witness of the Day of the Lord, the Day of Wrath and of Death which began on that Friday of Nisan when the Lamb was slaughtered on Mount Calvary.

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(to be concluded)