



Teaching and transmitting love of the Bible

A conversation with Father Jean-Jacques Pérennès, director of the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem



Father Pérennès, could you summarize in few words the great history of the Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Française (French Bible and Archaeological School) of Jerusalem (EBAF), beginning with its foundation by Father Lagrange in 1890?

The Ecole Biblique was founded by Father Marie-Joseph Lagrange at a time when the progress of modern sciences (history, archaeology, linguistics) seemed to threaten the credibility of the Bible. Eminent scholars such as Ernest Renan and Alfred Loisy left the Catholic Church in a brutal manner, suggesting that it was not able to accept the challenge of a critical reading of the Bible.

At the end of a rigorous Thomist formation in Salamanca and of Oriental studies in Vienna, Father Lagrange arrived in Jerusalem, convinced that the Christian faith had nothing to fear from this comparison with reason. He established a passionate group of young religious, specialized in the various disciplines that help to understand the sacred texts: ancient languages, history of the Near East, geography of the Holy Land, archaeology, epigraphy, etc. He elaborated a method of reading, the historical method, for which he was suspected of modernism, an accusation he particularly suffered. However, he always remained obedient to the Church, even to the point of agreeing not to publish his own Commentary on Genesis (ready in 1905) and to focus on the less problematic New Testament.

Nowadays, the elements of the historical method (presence of literary genres, editorial layers, etc.) are applied by all researchers and by the Catholic Church at the highest levels (see the encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu* of Pius XII, 1943). Intellectual rigor, love for the Holy Land and fidelity to the Church characterize the founding work of Father Lagrange, who one day should be beatified.

What concrete service does the EBAF guarantee in the context of universal studies of the Bible?

Since its foundation, the Ecole Biblique has applied a precise method: the study of the Bible in the lands of the Bible, according to Lagrange, brings “the document closer to the monument.” Its professors have travelled far and wide throughout the biblical regions, from Syria to northern Arabia, from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean. They have led their students on rigorous field studies, regularly described in the Revue Biblique, which has been published four times a year since 1892. The seriousness of the research carried out meant that in 1920 the Ecole was recognized by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres as a French archaeological school. The Ecole Biblique has also trained generations of specialists in Biblical science. On the other hand, it is one of the rare Catholic institutes authorized to issue the PhD title in this area.

Finally, it makes available to the faithful the fruit of its research, thanks above all to the Jerusalem Bible, which the Dominicans of Jerusalem have been publishing for the past half century. Currently, an innovative project is bringing this to the Internet: “the Bible in its Traditions”.

The Order of the Holy Sepulchre collaborates with the EBAF, in particular through the library which has 160,000 works. Could you describe the function and wide-ranging influence of this world renowned library?

This library is one of a kind, as it is the result of 130 years of acquiring books and magazines, selected by experts in exegesis, history and archaeology. The collection is therefore exceptional. The catalogue is computerized and allows access through ‘biblical pericope’, which is very rare. In addition, the library includes numerous works concerning Qumran and the Dead Sea manuscripts, given the role played by Father Roland de Vaux, director of the EBAF from 1945 to 1965, who was in charge of those excavations and prestigious archaeological finds. Finally, it is open 24 hours a day for the students and researchers who stay and work at the Ecole Biblique ... An extraordinary facility!

The EBAF is located on the premises of the monastery of Saint Stephen where the community of Dominican friars, to which you belong, lives and works. Can it be said that this community represents the soul of the Ecole Biblique? What roles do the Dominicans play in the many activities that are offered?

It is an essential dimension of the Ecole Biblique: the research is carried out by religious who lead a community life and whose main apostolate consists in studying, teaching and transmitting passion for the Bible. The friars are essentially professors and magazine editors. Students are welcomed by this community, with whom they can pray, live and visit the country. The affection of our former students show that such a dimension has given them a great deal.

How is the EBAF funded and do you feel threatened by a proposal Israeli authorities are considering to tax religious communities? If so, who will come to your defence?

We live with precarious resources, consisting of modest contributions from the Dominican Order and from the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, as well as from Catholic aid organizations to the Holy Land, such as the Order of the Holy Sepulchre and the Oeuvre d’Orient. We survive by the fact that our professors are religious who do not receive a real salary. Obviously a tax would threaten our existence, like that of many educational and charitable works of the Holy Land that are non-profits,

but must rely on Providence. The Consulate General of France has come to our defence, but it is a battle with unequal arms.

More generally, how do you see the future of the Catholic Church in the Holy City? Based on your experience, what are the reasons to hope for an eventual resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict around Jerusalem?

Christians now represent a small minority in Palestine, less than 1% of the population according to the last census. Our mission naturally consists in making the Holy Places accessible, helping the faithful to come and pray. But “the little remnant” that we are currently also has another mission: to encourage the inhabitants of the country not to despair, to believe that only nonviolence and dialogue will contribute to building a lasting peace.

How does the field of biblical studies favour exchange with the Jewish-Israeli world?

The Bible is greatly studied by Jewish intellectuals, religious and secular. We have much to gain by collaborating with them, although our reading must remain Catholic, since, for us, the Bible is first and foremost an inspired text.

Interview by François Vayne

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