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## The Prophetical Meaning of Celibacy

When Jephthe's daughter realized 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).<sup>1</sup> 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 (see 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; see Jl 1:8; Lam 1:15; 2:13), by calling Israel a Virgin, wants to emphasize 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 honorable and a sign of God's blessings (Ps 126). The same applies to men. L. Köhler remarks that the Old Testament has no word for bachelor, so unusual is the idea.<sup>2</sup>

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. Un-

fortunately the authors who mention it are very vague on the motives of that observance. Josephus (*The Jewish War*, II, 8, 2) and Philo (quoted by Eusebius in *Preparation for the Gospel*, VIII, 2; *Patrologia Graeca*, 21, 644 AB), putting themselves at 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 (*Natural History*, 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 Stoic 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,<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> and the discovery of female skeletons in the cemetery of the community<sup>5</sup> makes it clear that at Qumran as in the sect of Damascus<sup>6</sup>—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.

### *Jeremiah, the First Celibate*

Fortunately the Old Testament presents a much more ancient and clearer case of celibacy: the case of Jeremiah, "a virgin prophet and a figure of the Great Prophet who too was a Virgin and the son of a Virgin."<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah 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 Elijah did so<sup>8</sup> and make of him

<sup>1</sup> *The War of the Children of Light*, VII, 3, 4.

<sup>2</sup> See Theodore Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), p. 307.

<sup>3</sup> See *Revue biblique*, 63 (1956), pp. 569-72.

<sup>4</sup> *Document of Damascus*, IV, 20-V, 6; VII, 6-8.

<sup>5</sup> Bossuet, *Méditations sur l'évangile*, 109th day.

<sup>6</sup> See the texts in *Elie le prophète* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1956), V, 1, pp. 165 and 189. But St. Augustine was not convinced of the celibacy of Elias: *De Genesi ad litteram*, IX, 6.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is reprinted with permission from *Scripture*, October, 1960, pp. 97-105, and January, 1961, pp. 12-20.

<sup>2</sup> *Hebrew Man* (London: S.C.M., 1956), p. 89.

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the father of monastic life. But the testimony of Scripture concerning Elijah 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. Jeremiah, on the contrary, in his confessions 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 Jeremiah 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 Jeremiah 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. Jeremiah's forlorn celibacy is nothing but an enacted prophecy of the imminent doom. Calamity will be such as to make meaningless matrimony and procreation.

Jeremiah's 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, Isaiah walks naked in the streets of Jerusalem (Is 20:1-6). Jeremiah breaks a pot to symbolize the destruction of the capital (Jer 19:1-11). Ezekiel 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 Judah 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, Hosea's matrimonial misfortunes symbolized the unhappy

relations between Yahweh and His unfaithful spouse Israel (Hos 1:3).

Jeremiah's 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, Jeremiah 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 9:20-21).

This was no mere Oriental exaggeration. What Israel was about to witness and Jeremiah 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 the kingship, would soon disappear. Only a few years more and Nabuchodonosor would invade Judah, burn the sanctuary, enslave the king and kill his children. For the Israelites this would be the end of the 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). Ezekiel 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 Jeremiah 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

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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 Jeremiah's 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). But now that man's sin has aroused death, the Lord reverses His command: "Do not take a wife; have no sons and no daughters in this place." Jeremiah's 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,<sup>9</sup> 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 according to the flesh and communicated by way of generation. This order disappears. When God will raise a new Israel, it will be an Israel according to the spirit in which one will have access not by right of birth but by direct reception of the Spirit (Jer 31:31-35). In such a people the fecundity of the flesh will have lost its value.

*The Negative Aspect of Celibacy: "On Account of the Present Necessity"*

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, and others) see in that "necessity," as Osty puts it, "the thousand worries of married life,"<sup>10</sup>

or else the imminent persecutions "which an unmarried person is better able to bear."<sup>11</sup> 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 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 verses 32 to 35 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 Thes 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; Ap 1:9; 7:14; 2 Thes 1:6). Similarly the term used for "time" in verse 29 (*kairos*) "is about a technical term for the period before the Advent"<sup>12</sup> (see 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 Jeremiah 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 ex-

<sup>11</sup> W. Rees in *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1953), p. 1090.

<sup>12</sup> A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1911), p. 152.

<sup>9</sup> In *Patrologia graeca*, 78, 356.

<sup>10</sup> *Épîtres aux Corinthiens (Bible de Jérusalem)* (Paris: Cerf, 1949), p. 40.

planation of celibacy without rallying to the consequent eschatology of A. Schweitzer?<sup>13</sup>

Prat, followed by Huby and Spicq, does not think the objection decisive. He accepts as possible the eschatological explanation of virginity. Quoting 1 Corinthians 7:26-31, he explains: "Is it possible that 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."<sup>14</sup> This interpretation can be defended, provided we attribute to Paul not a positive teaching concerning the imminence of an event, the day and hour of which none can know, but an opinion, a desire, a hope without certitude.<sup>15</sup> 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 naive 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 verses 32 to 34.

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 Jeremiah. Is not the "present necessity" of 1 Corinthians 7:26 parallel with the explanation Jeremiah 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

+<sup>13</sup> See the decree of the Biblical Commission of June 18, 1915 in *Enchiridion Biblicum*, 2nd ed. (Naples: D'Auria, 1954), nn. 419-21.

+<sup>14</sup> *The Theology of St. Paul* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washburne, 1926), V. 1, 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.

+<sup>15</sup> J. Huby, *Epîtres aux Corinthiens* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1946); W. Rees also (*op. cit.*) accepts an eschatological influence on St. Paul's thought on virginity.

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 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. In Cullmann's terms, what is the connection of the present period of history (the times of the Church) with the past (death and resurrection of Christ) and the future (final resurrection)?<sup>16</sup> 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 (Acts 2:16 ff). The last hour has begun with the death of the Lord (1 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" (1 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 fore-running signs of the consummation, and St. Paul explains that the individual tribulations of the Christians are their share of the Messianic woes (Cor 1:24).<sup>17</sup>

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 color 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

+<sup>16</sup> O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950).

+<sup>17</sup> In Col 1:24 "tribulationes Christi" should be translated "the messianic woes" and not "the sufferings of Christ" (it is *thlipsis* and not *pathēma*). 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.

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 Jeremiah. Jeremiah 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 the kingship would break like empty 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 the 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 (see 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 Jeremiah announced to the Chosen People the end of the old covenant, the celibate, new Jeremiah, 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.

+ *The Positive Aspect of Celibacy: "On Account of the Kingdom of Heaven"*  
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What has been said so far has shown that, according to the Bible, and according to Jeremiah and St. Paul especially, celibate life is a prophecy in action, a foreboding of the end, a public proclamation of the fleeting character of this world.

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It goes without saying that this is only one aspect of the mystery. There is another one. The last days are not only days of doom: they are also days of resurrection. Jeremiah was not only the prophet of the fall of Jerusalem: he was also the prophet of the new covenant (Jer 31:31-35). Similarly for St. Paul the last days are only secondarily days of woe: primarily, they are the days of the Parousia when Christ will come and hand over to the Father the world revived by the Spirit (1 Cor 15). The Apocalypse ends its enumeration of the eschatological calamities by the resplendent description of the heavenly Jerusalem where everything is made new (Ap 21). Christ's death on Calvary was only the beginning of his exaltation (Jn 3:14-15; 12:32-33). The full prophetic meaning of virginity is to be understood in reference to the whole mystery of death and life contained in Christ. Celibacy is not only an enacted prophecy of the imminent doom: it announces also and anticipates the life to come, the life of the new world in the Spirit.

Jeremiah, who had announced the new covenant, might have understood that virginity would be the typical state in that new life which was no longer to be granted by the power of the flesh but by the Spirit. But in fact he does not seem to have realized these implications of his prophetic teaching. Or if he did, he had no occasion to express it. We have to come to the Gospels to find this doctrine expounded.

Jesus lived a celibate life. We can not say that his case was unique. By the beginnings of the Christian era, the ideal of virginity seems to have been cultivated at least in some restricted circles of Judaism. We have seen the rather mysterious case of the Essenes. John the Baptist also must have observed celibacy. This movement might explain the purpose of virginity expressed by Mary in Luke 1:34.<sup>18</sup> Jesus assumed that ideal and by His very life fulfilled the latent aspirations it contained.

Yet there is very little in the Gospels about virginity. This is not surprising. The Gospels are only factual summaries. There is little in them for introspection and self-analysis. They have little to say about Jesus' personal life. They do not tell us how he felt when praying, when working miracles, when undergoing the trials of His Passion. It is no wonder, therefore, that they would be almost completely silent concerning Jesus' celibacy. This silence gives more value to the one statement of the Gospels in which Christ explained how he understood His virginity.

It was on an occasion in which he had emphasized once more the law of indissolubility of matrimony. The dis-

<sup>18</sup> See R. Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I-II* (Paris: Gabalda, 1957).

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ciples could hardly understand the intransigence of the Master. As usual, Jesus tried to bring light to the discussion by taking it to a higher level. The heart of the matter is not the convenience of men but the requirements of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God does make exacting demands upon its members. See the case of those to whom it has been given to realize fully the implications of the coming of the Kingdom: they can be compared to eunuchs! "There are eunuchs who were born so from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made so by men; and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so in view of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 19:12).

Though this pericope appears in Matthew only, there is no reason to deny its authenticity. In his book on the synoptic Gospels, L. Vaganay insists several times that Matthew 19:10-12, along with several other passages, though appearing in one Gospel only, belongs to the oldest layer of the Gospel formation, and to the most ancient tradition common to the three Synoptic Gospels.<sup>19</sup> If the text figures in Matthew only, it is not because it was added afterwards to the final edition of Matthew: it is not a case of addition by Matthew but of omission by Mark and Luke. The pericope on the eunuchs has an archaic ring that would have been shocking to Gentile ears. It is the kind of coarse Semitic paradox, frequent in the Bible, quite appealing to the rough peasants of Palestine accustomed to the loud and often brutal eloquence of the prophets. It could hardly be exported to Greece or even to Asia Minor, Syria, or Egypt. It is not surprising that Mark and Luke preferred to drop it. Yet "its very paradoxical aspect guarantees its authenticity."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the parallel text of Mark seems to leave traces of the amputation. In Mark 10:10, after the discussion with the Pharisees on matrimony, Jesus returns home together with His disciples. There is a change of place and of audience: Jesus is now in the intimate circle of His disciples. Usually when He retires together with them, it is to teach a deeper doctrine (Mk 4:10, 34; 7:17; 9:30; 10:32). One would expect here, "at home," further explanations on the views He has just exposed. Yet, according to Mark 10:10-12, Jesus merely repeats the elementary explanations which, according to Matthew 19:9; 5:32 and Luke 16:18, He would as well give to the crowds. Does not this mean that in the source Mark used, there was "at home" some other deeper teaching imparted to the disciples? But what other teaching was there except the logion on the

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<sup>19</sup> L. Vaganay, *Le problème synoptique* (Tournai: Desclée, 1954), pp. 167, 211, 216, and elsewhere.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

eunuchs recorded by Matthew? Mark removed this saying, but the operation has left a scar in the text.

If the pericope does belong to the origins of the Gospel composition, there is no reason to doubt that it was really an utterance of Jesus and this decides the question of its exact bearing.

In the concrete context of Jesus' celibate life, it is easy to find out to whom the third category of eunuchs refers. When the disciples heard that saying, they could but think of Jesus Himself and possibly also of John the Baptist. It is clear that Jesus here speaks of His own case and explains it. He does not advocate self-mutilation; He sets up His own example. He observed virginity and He did it consciously "in view of God's Kingdom." John the Baptist had done it before Him; others would follow. Thus Jesus presents Himself as the leader in a line of men who, thinking of God's Kingdom, will live like eunuchs, giving up the use of their sexual powers.<sup>21</sup>

But what is exactly the relation between virginity and God's Kingdom? Why should one remain a celibate *propter regnum caelorum* (in view of the Kingdom of God)? What is the precise value of that *propter* (*dia* in Greek)? In biblical Greek, *dia* with the accusative denotes causality or finality (out of, for the sake of, in view of). It is obvious that, in this context, the meaning must be of finality. But this is still very vague, too vague to base on it an explanation of virginity. We can not build a theology on the strength of a preposition.

If the preposition is vague, the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven," on the contrary, is clear enough. The Kingdom of Heaven—or the Kingdom of God, since both phrases

<sup>21</sup> This evidently settles the problem, discussed from the time of Origen onwards, of whether the saying should be understood in a realistic or in a symbolic sense. In Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (TWNT), V. 1, p. 590, Schmidt favors the realistic interpretation: the saying would allude to people who actually castrated themselves; it would invite the disciples not to imitate them but, at least, to reflect on their earnestness. Origen himself is a proof that there were such cases in the early Church. But was it so during Jesus' own life time? It is rather doubtful and still more doubtful that Jesus would have set as an example this hypothetical aberrant behavior. In the same TWNT of Kittel (2, p. 765), J. Schneider maintains the traditional interpretation.

The problem could be viewed also from the angle of Form Criticism. What are the concrete circumstances in the life of the early Church which led to a reminiscence of these words of the Master? What is the concrete problem to which they were given as an answer. It was most evidently the problem of the virgins, an acute problem as we know from 1 Corinthians 7, and possibly also, together with it, the problem of the widows "who are truly widows" (1 Tim 5:3; see 1 Cor 7:8). According to J. Dupont, *Mariage et divorce dans l'évangile* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959), the saying would refer to the case of husbands separated from their wives. This is a rather far-fetched *Sitz im Leben*; moreover it overlooks completely the reference to Jesus' own example.

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have the same significance<sup>22</sup>—appears as a key concept of the synoptic Gospels. It stands at the center of Jesus' preaching. If not exactly in Judaism, at least in Jesus' mouth, it is "a comprehensive term for the blessings of salvation,"<sup>23</sup> having practically the same meaning as "the age to come" or "the life of the age to come."<sup>24</sup> It is essentially an eschatological entity. What the Jews had longed for, the prophets had promised, and the apocalyptic writers had described, the new life coming from above, the new world, the new covenant imparted by God, the new Israel, the gift of the Spirit, Resurrection and Re-creation: it is all that which is contained in God's Kingdom.

But—and this is the novelty of Jesus' teaching—with His coming, the eschatological world, the world to come has become present, though it remains unfulfilled. With the coming of Jesus the Kingdom of God offers the paradoxical character of being at the same time future and present. Jesus assures us that it is already present among us (Mt 12:28; see Lk 12:21), but He also invites us to pray for its coming (Mt 6:10). Exegetes have tried to rationalize this mystery by reducing Jesus' preaching to one or the other aspect. The "consequent eschatology" of A. Schweitzer retained only the future aspect: the life of Jesus was mere expectation of an imminent advent of the Kingdom, expectation which was deceived by the event. On the contrary, the "realized eschatology" of C. H. Dodd retains only the present element: with Jesus, the Kingdom is present and there is nothing to expect from the future; eschatological elements should be dismissed as mere apocalyptic phraseology. Both views are only partial. Kümmel<sup>25</sup> and Cullmann,<sup>26</sup> among others, have shown that the integral teaching of Christ combines both aspects. In Jesus the powers of the coming aeon are already active and the future Kingdom of God is already at work in the present. The Spirit is given. Yet He works only like a seed: present in Jesus and in those who will follow Him, He has still to extend His influence to the whole world till His life-giving activity covers and transforms the whole creation. Such is the meaning of the "parables of the

<sup>22</sup> "The Heaven" is a term used by the Jews as a substitute for God to avoid pronouncing the divine name..

<sup>23</sup> G. Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902), p. 135. Dalman shows that Jesus somewhat altered the meaning of the phrase by giving it a specifically eschatological value in connection with Daniel 7:27. So, though in Judaism the phrase should be translated "the kinship of God," it becomes, in Jesus' teachings, synonymous with eschatological salvation.

<sup>24</sup> Hence the equivalence with the Johannine theme of "eternal life."

<sup>25</sup> *Promise and Fulfilment* (Naperville: Allenson, 1957).

<sup>26</sup> *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950).

Kingdom" (Mk 4 and parallels). We are still waiting for the end: the period we live in is at the same time "promise and fulfilment."

This appears especially in the "signs" of the Kingdom. According to the biblical conception, a "sign" is not a pure symbol, faint image of a distant reality. It is the reality itself in its initial manifestation. In the biblical sign the coming reality is already contained, yet still hidden.<sup>27</sup> Kümmel has shown how in that sense Jesus' victory over the devils and his miracles are signs of that kind.<sup>28</sup> They show already "the coming consummation of salvation breaking in on the present."<sup>29</sup> Cullmann has added to those signs the main ecclesiastical functions: the missionary preaching of the Gospel,<sup>30</sup> the cult and the sacraments for, in them also, in the Spirit, and "through the merits of Christ, everything is fulfilled which was accomplished in the past history of salvation and which will be achieved in the future."<sup>31</sup>

In the light of Matthew 19:12 we can add virginity to those signs. Like the miracles and the sacraments virginity is a "sign of the Kingdom," an anticipated realization of the final transformation, the glory of the world to come breaking in on the present condition. Such is the meaning of *propter regnum caelorum*. Jesus and many of those who follow Him refrain from sexual activity "in view of the Kingdom," that is, to live already now the life of the world to come. Eschatological life has begun to stir in them and that life will be, and can already be now, a life which has gone beyond the necessity and the urge of procreation. As with their preaching and miracles, Jesus and His disciples by their celibacy proclaim the advent of the Kingdom. They exemplify already in this world the future condition of men in the next aeon.

As Jesus explained to the Sadducees (Mt 22:30 and parallels), in the world of Resurrection, "one shall neither marry nor be married, one will be like the angels in heaven." This does not mean that man in the Kingdom of God will be asexual, losing his human nature to become a pure spirit in the philosophical sense of the term. Such a philosophical consideration would be quite alien to the biblical mentality. Man was not made as a pure spirit neither in this world nor in the other, and consequently celibacy can not consist in trying to ape the angels. St. Luke explains the exact meaning of this analogy between the risen man and the angels in his rendering of the

<sup>27</sup> See J. Pedersen, *Israel its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), V. 1, pp. 168 ff.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.* (note 25), pp. 105-21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>30</sup> O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*.

<sup>31</sup> O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), p. 35.

logion: "They shall neither marry nor be married for they are no more liable to die: for they are equal to the angels and they are sons of God, being sons of Resurrection" (Lk 20:35-36). The point of resemblance with the angels is not their spiritual nature but their immortality. It is on account of his immortality that the risen man need no longer procreate. Life of Resurrection is no more a life "in the flesh," in a body doomed to death. It is a life in God, a life of a son of God, life "in the Spirit," in a body transformed by the divine Glory. Hence the functions of the flesh become useless: procreation loses its meaning which was to make up for the ravages of death.

The celibate shows by his condition that such life has already started. His celibacy testifies to what O. Cullmann has called "the proleptic deliverance of the body."<sup>32</sup> It proclaims that, in Christ, despite the appearances, man escapes the clutches of death and lives in the Spirit.

A passage of the Apocalypse echoes that teaching. Apocalypse 14:1-5 describes the glory of the Lamb in the heavenly Sion. There His throne is surrounded by a hundred and forty-four thousand men, all those who "were redeemed from the earth." They represent the perfect number of all those who, saved by the Lamb, will constitute His retinue in the world to come; namely, all the elect. Their main characteristic consists in that "they are virgins" (v 4). Virginité must be understood metaphorically: it means primarily fidelity to God by opposition to idolatry, often described in Scripture as a "prostitution." Yet considering the realistic value of Hebrew symbolism, the concrete sense of virginité should not be altogether dismissed: "They have not defiled themselves with women" (v 4).<sup>33</sup> This does not mean that the author would make of virginité a necessary condition for entering the Kingdom. This passage must be understood in parallelism with Chapter 7, which also describes a hundred and forty-four thousand men leading an innumerable multitude which surrounds the throne of the Lamb. While in Chapter 14 they are all virgins, in Chapter 7 they are all martyrs. This should not be understood as meaning only martyrdom can lead to salvation. But it does mean that one has no access to the Kingdom unless "he washes his

<sup>32</sup> O. Cullmann, *The Early Church* (London: S.C.M., 1956), pp. 165-76. In his article Cullmann does not extend his conclusions to the question of celibacy. He shows only that marriage has a special theological value since it "corresponds to the relation between Christ and His Church" (p. 173; see Eph 5:29). This view is quite true but should be completed by an awareness that the love between Christ and the Church is of an eschatological—hence virginal—type. The Spouse is a Virgin (see 2 Cor 11:2). Similarly, even conjugal love will have eventually to turn into the eschatological virginal *agape* of which celibacy is a prophetic type.

<sup>33</sup> See L. Cerfaux and J. Cambier, *L'Apocalypse de saint Jean lue x Chrétiens* (Paris: Cerf, 1955), pp. 124 ff.

robe and makes himself white in the blood of the Lamb" (Ap 7:14). The martyr is the typical Christian for he shares the most closely in the cross of his Master. One can not be a Christian unless he shares in some way in the fate of the martyrs, in the cross of Christ. The same interpretation can be extended to the fourteenth chapter. "As martyrdom, virginité is eminently representative of Christian life. Even as one can not be saved without participating in the dignity of martyrdom, one can not be saved without participating in the dignity of virginité. Virginité is a heavenly perfection, an anticipation, for those who are called to it, of what will be the final destiny of all in the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>34</sup> In the world to come all are virgins. Even those who are married must keep their eyes on that ideal and know that their love has to turn into virginal charity. Those who remain celibate "in view of the Kingdom of Heaven" belong to the virginal retinue of their heavenly King the Lamb. As St. Gregory of Nyssa says:

Virginal life is an image of the happiness that will obtain in the world to come; for it contains in itself many signs of the good things which in hope are laid before us. . . . For when one brings in himself the life according to the flesh to an end, as far as it depends on him, he can expect "the blessed hope and the coming of the great God," curtailing the interval of the intervening generations between himself and God's advent. Then he can enjoy in the present life the choicest of the good things afforded by the Resurrection.<sup>35</sup>

Thus the mystery of virginité, as any mystery of Christian life, has a double aspect. It has a negative aspect: it represents the death of Christ and, through it, looks towards the complement of that death, the end of all, the apocalyptic consummation. It has also a positive aspect: it shows forth the new life in the Spirit, initiated by the Resurrection of Christ, to be fulfilled at the Parousia.

This doctrine is best embodied in the Lukan account of the virgin birth of Christ. Mary is a virgin (Lk 1:34) and, in her virginité, through the operation of the Spirit, she gave birth to Christ, the "first born" of the new world. Thus, in her virginal fecundity, she anticipated and even originated the re-creation of the world through the Spirit.

In that account it must be first noticed that Luke—and Mary—following the Hebrew mentality, do not extol virginité for its own sake. In the Magnificat Mary describes her condition of virgin as a condition of *humilitas*; that is, a low condition (Lk 1:48). This was exactly the term used by Anna in I Samuel 1:11 to qualify her disgrace of having

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>35</sup> *De virginitate* (*Patrologia graeca*, 46, col. 381 ff.). The theme of celibacy as heavenly life or angelic life is frequent in patristic literature. See L. Bouyer, *The Meaning of Monastic Life* (New York: Kenedy, 1955), pp. 23-40.