

## PERE LAGRANGE

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**P**ROPOSERS of new ideas are always at a disadvantage. They strive to buck the almost overwhelming tide pushing to leave things alone. Old ideas do not die easily, and their defenders often fight savagely to preserve them. As a result whoever would dare to spread new ideas must indeed be a man of courage.

Such a man must know his field. He cannot afford to make mistakes. His ideas must truly help to solve some problem, and therefore he must also needs have an awareness of the work to be done. The solution he proposes must be capable of being brought about in the practical order. He must be able to take the severest criticism and not back down but continue to go ahead.

Provisionally such men appear on the scene when most needed. Nowhere perhaps is there a more evident example than Fr. M. J. Lagrange, O.P., often referred to simply as Pere Lagrange. In the field of biblical studies Fr. Lagrange dared to try to change things. He saw the need of a change, knew what he was doing and forged ahead. The attacks on him and on his ideas were blistering, but in the end he gained the victory for himself and for truth.

### *The Man*

Albert Marie Henri Lagrange was born at Bourg-en-Bresse in France on March 7, 1855, the feast day of St. Thomas Aquinas. His elementary schooling completed, Albert went to a minor seminary at Autun, where, oddly enough, he was permitted to study at his good pleasure. Languages in general, and Greek especially, became his preference. At Autun he acquired the useful tools, for his later life, of German, English and Italian. Though he had already expressed the wish to enter the Dominican Order, Albert was next sent to Paris to study law. He graduated in 1878 and, at twenty-three, was admitted to practice.

Albert Lagrange's vocation persisted and, after a preparatory year in the secular seminary at Issy, he became, on October 5th, 1879, Bro. Marie-Joseph Lagrange, a Dominican novice at the convent of

St. Maximin in the Province of Toulouse. The day after his profession the Order was expelled from France and Bro. Marie-Joseph took up his priestly studies at Salamanca in Spain. There he showed an interest in Scripture studies, and was encouraged by his superiors. There also he was ordained a priest, December 22nd, 1883.

In 1885 the Dominicans returned to France, and, by the special intervention of the Father Provincial, Fr. Lagrange was diverted from a teaching role to continue his Scripture studies. He went to Vienna for the study of Oriental Languages: Assyrian, Egyptian, Arabic and Hebrew, to which was added a course in Rabbinical Literature. After a year the Provincial sent him to Jerusalem to found the *Ecole Biblique*.

Fr. Lagrange arrived in Jerusalem on March 10th, 1890, and the *Ecole Biblique*, St. Stephen's in Jerusalem, was opened on November 15th of that year. The *Revue Biblique* was begun in 1892 and the series of *Etudes Bibliques* inaugurated in 1900. More will be said about these two organs of the Jerusalem school later on.

Fr. Lagrange was made a Master of Sacred Theology in 1901, and his work went on peacefully enough as long as Pope Leo XIII reigned. But from 1904, after Leo's death, until 1914 ultraconservatives made life miserable for Fr. Lagrange. Further on we will give some of the details of these controversies, but for now it is sufficient to note that by the end of World War I Fr. Lagrange had been vindicated and could go on with his marvelous work. This was Fr. Lagrange's most productive period.

During the last fifteen years of his life Fr. Lagrange suffered recurrent heart attacks. In 1935 he was recalled to France by his superiors, for reasons of health, and assigned again to St. Maximin. There he died a holy death on March 10th, 1938. He was eighty-four years old.

### **The Task**

At the very outset of his biblical studies Pere Lagrange met up with a problem the solution of which became central to his long and fruitful career. "Liberal" and "rationalist" exegetes, many of them German, were saying that God did not author the Bible. "The Book of Books contains errors. But God cannot make a mistake. Therefore He could not have written the Bible. What foolishness to say that He did!"

The mid-nineteenth century saw a tremendous upsurge of study and findings in archeology, ancient languages, ancient literature, and so on. This new information brought the ancient world to life again. Previous to the new discoveries the Bible had given men most of the

information they had regarding this long dead world. Now the results of scientific investigations seemed to contradict the information found in the Bible. The enemies of religion used the new knowledge to destroy the faith of the people in God's written Word. This so called "divine" book they said was really written by fallible men and was less worthy of credence than books by scientists! Such a conclusion was evidently catastrophic.

These rationalist conclusions served as a call to arms for the Church as the guardian of the Bible and the never ceasing defender of its divine character. The Church's members saw the evil days which had fallen upon the Bible. They felt the sting of the violent attacks upon the sacred books. Their zeal for the Faith fired them to do battle. First, and rightly so, they condemned those who used the new knowledge against the Scriptures, then, and here was their mistake, they *condemned the new knowledge itself*, its discoverers and its methods. Always on the defensive, Catholics, and especially Catholic biblical scholars, labeled the new discoveries lies and those connected with them liars.

In the Middle Ages St. Thomas had encountered a similar state of affairs. He too found a new knowledge, or rather, to put it more exactly, he purified something old and brought forth something new. Aristotle had come into the medieval world via the Arabs who had corrupted him to suit their own purposes. St. Thomas saw the truth there, pulled it from its false setting and made it serve the Christian Church. His new knowledge brought condemnation from the "orthodox," but its inherent worth brought it ascendancy later on.

The newly discovered facts about the ancient world also had their degree of truth. The sciences making the discoveries were still young and still groping but they had uncovered much that was worthwhile. But those who applied the new facts against the Bible were the ones who were really in error. They were prejudiced to start with and generally were not scientists. The hodgepodge of truth and error that they proposed had to be attacked. The truth had to be salvaged and the falsity discarded. Pere Lagrange, like St. Thomas, would be the man to do this.

But who or what was to guide Pere Lagrange? After all, he also was only a fallible man. He could make mistakes just as those who had used the new knowledge against the Bible had made mistakes. The infallible Church would guide him. The Church spoke to the 1890's through Leo XIII, especially in his *Providentissimus Deus*. Later on Benedict XV would speak in *Spiritus Paraclitus*, and in the meantime the Biblical Commission served as another safeguard

against error in Scriptural developments. With humble submission no Catholic Scholar could go wrong on the Bible. And Pere Lagrange always submitted wholeheartedly.

Fr. Lagrange had made up his mind. He would develop the scientific and critical approach to the Bible in a Catholic way. He would make use of all the new sources of information and would himself make new additions to them. This was where Pere Lagrange differed from his contemporaries: they condemned the new knowledge itself; he made use of it. Fr. Lagrange would suffer for his novelty. His views would rock the foundations of the current Catholic position. He was on the offensive. Churchmen of the day were on the defensive.

### *The Opposition*

In 1892 Pere Lagrange published his first article in the first *Revue Biblique*. It concerned the proper location of the city of David; almost prophetically, it caused a slight tremor in Catholic biblical circles. The article's radicalness prompted some to urge citing its author before a Roman Commission. "The Sources of the Pentateuch," a reexamination of Moses' part in the composition of the first five books of the Bible, caused an even greater furor. Once again some denounced the bold priest to Rome, but Rome paid no attention to the protests. Leo XIII was Rome at the time, and he had no intention of thwarting new ideas just because they were new. But Leo died on July 20, 1903, and then things began to happen.

Modernism had reared its ugly head and was wreaking havoc in the Church. One of its great proponents of the time, Alfred Loisy, a priest and a recognized Scripture scholar, played the part of a wolf in sheep's clothing. When the Church commanded his submission on a point, he readily complied but saved his own position by clever and concealed distinctions. The Church finally caught up with him, however, and condemned his work outright. In return he apostatized. His many deceptions and sly answers, nevertheless, brought suspicion on all Scripture scholars with new ideas. Pere Lagrange had already shown disfavor with Loisy's position, but that was not enough to satisfy those who now found ear with the new Pope, St. Pius X.

Upon the publication of the second edition of Fr. Lagrange's *The Historical Method*, in 1904, the storm broke. An eminent Catholic "scholar" attacked the book, and Pere Lagrange felt constrained to write a defense of his position (which, incidentally, never saw print). Later in the same year the proposed new Biblical school in Rome severed its relations with him. 1905 witnessed the publication of two responses from the lately founded Biblical Commission seemingly

aimed at destroying two principles employed by Pere Lagrange. They did not condemn the principles but merely cautioned against their misuse.

Another apparently anti-Lagrange response issued from the Commission in 1906 on the Mosaic authenticity of the Pentateuch. The exact meaning of the response still arouses much discussion and since then has received some clarification and broadening in other official documents concerning the same matter. It meant to guard against rash statements by Catholic scholars. In the process it brought to a halt, temporarily, the program of Leo XIII. Ultraconservatives insisted on a strict interpretation of the response. Others could not see any good in Pere Lagrange's work but they could see in it dangers to Christianity. Modernists claimed that the noted Dominican scholar really belonged to their camp, but, being a coward, would not admit it. Even some of his brothers in religion spoke ill of him. In answer to this rash of opposition Pere Lagrange maintained a calm silence. He well knew the uselessness of reply and continued his work. Still, the response of 1906 did put an end to his studies on the Pentateuch. The official statement could have had an interpretation favorable to the beleaguered scholar but not at the time.

In 1907 the decree *Lamentabili* and the encyclical *Pascendi* came forth from the Holy See. Both dealt the death blow to Modernism. Pere Lagrange immediately submitted his adherence to the two documents. His enemies termed this action hypocritical. Such attacks gave him the thought that perhaps his work was doing more harm than good, and in 1908 he petitioned the Master General for permission to withdraw from Scripture studies. Fr. Cormier, the General at the time, refused and told him to apply himself instead to the New Testament.

Four years later the rumor spread that the Holy See had condemned *The Historical Method*. Actually, on June 29, 1912, the Sacred Congregation of the Consistory—which had authority over all Italian seminaries and claimed it, though the claim was hotly disputed, over all others—issued a decree banning from seminarians' use a book by a certain Fr. Holzhey because of its rationalistic and modernistic tendencies. The words of the decree go on to extend the ban to all such books and then close: "*cei plura scripta Lagrange.*" Since the document did not emanate from the Holy Office, to speak of condemnation was absurd. And at any rate professors in the seminaries still had free access to Pere Lagrange's works. However, because of the lack of specific references, no way of defense remained open to the straitened priest. Once more he immediately sent his submission to Rome

and asked to be relieved of his duties. A cablegram from Fr. Cormier, on September 4th, 1912, ordered him to quit the *Ecole Biblique* and to cease all Scriptural activity. He obeyed without question and returned to Paris where he took up the active ministry. Just as suddenly, a year later, a new order sent him back to Jerusalem where he again took up his biblical work. No one ever found out exactly what happened. World War I intervened and cleared the air. With its conclusion Pere Lagrange again worked under a full head of steam and had clear sailing to the end of his life. The Consistorial decree was eventually revoked and Pius XI gave his blessing to the activities of the industrious scholar, thus removing the slightest suspicion from Fr. Lagrange's name.

### *The Accomplishment*

The story of St. Stephen's in Jerusalem, and thus of the *Ecole Biblique*, does not really begin with Pere Lagrange, but with a certain Fr. Matthias Lecomte, O.P. The year was 1882, and Fr. Lecomte had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Remembering the strong Dominican tradition in the Holy Land, he dreamed of a new foundation for the Order there. He conceived it as a quiet retreat where priests visiting Jerusalem could rest and pray. After the necessary arrangements he purchased the present site of St. Stephen's. Leo XIII was enthusiastic over the project and hoped that the new house would also become a center of ecclesiastical studies, especially biblical. Fr. Lecomte began the work of establishment but in a short time his health failed and he had to give up the undertaking.

It was then that Fr. Lagrange was called in, and, as we have seen, he arrived in Jerusalem on March 10th, 1890. At St. Stephen's there were neither books, nor pupils, nor professors, nor resources. The community was very small and very old. The library consisted of a Bible and a guidebook to the Holy Land, both belonging to Pere Lagrange.

The meagreness of resources was not the only drawback, but none the less the school did open November 15th, 1890. Before members of the French Consulate and neighboring religious superiors, Pere Lagrange delivered a very appropriate opening address. Among other things he said, "We have a table, a blackboard and a map of Palestine: but we also have the help of Our Lady and St. Stephen, and we believe it is the will of God." In mentioning the few things they had, Fr. Lagrange failed to mention that the school building consisted of one room in an old slaughterhouse still fitted for slaughtering. Things could only get better.

Officially the school had the title, *Ecole pratique d'etudes bibliques*, but it has always been popularly known as the *Ecole Biblique*, or St. Stephen's. The community included but four priests and three novices. Three of the priests were professors: Fr. Heidet, a priest of the Latin Patriarchate, who taught Geography of the Bible, Fr. Sejourne, who concerned himself with the New Testament and conducted archeological expeditions, and Fr. Lagrange, who taught General Introduction, History of the Ancient Orient, Biblical Archeology and Exegesis of the Historical Books. Later on, as intended by its founder, the school developed specialists in the various biblical and connected fields. Frs. Abel (Palestinian Geography), Savignac (Semitism), Jaussen (Arabic Customs) and Vincent (Palestinian Archeology) represent the earliest products of the school, and their worldwide renown bears witness to the excellence of the doctrine taught there. Two outstanding modern products of St. Stephen's are Fr. De Vaux, of Qumran fame, and Fr. Beniot, a recognized authority on the New Testament.

Pere Lagrange outlined an ambitious program for St. Stephen's. First and foremost it would attempt to establish original texts. Catholic exegesis of the time limited itself to the Vulgate, which, although guaranteed by the Council of Trent in matters of faith and morals, did not give an exegetically reliable text. Here Pere Lagrange emulated the non-Catholic biblical scientists. Secondly, the school aimed to maintain consistency with the long tradition of Catholic exegesis dating from Apostolic times. This meant searching out the true tradition and distinguishing it from the false. In the third place the *Ecole Biblique* would seek to establish the circumstances of time and place surrounding the composition and historical content of the biblical books. Knowledge of ancient history, both political and religious, and of the customs and geography of biblical lands would serve this end. Better understanding of the human author's part in the composition of the Bible *demanded* such knowledge. Necessarily, in connection with this end, the students needed a familiarity with the latest archeological discoveries. In Pere Lagrange's mind the school ought to make a few discoveries of its own. The idea resulted in frequent expeditions, by both professors and students, to different sites of archeological interest. As the fourth point in the new school's program Pere Lagrange offered that of working for and with theology. Theology, after all, systematized the Bible's doctrines. Such close cooperation with theology served as another healthy limitation on the conclusions reached by the school. Lastly, and most importantly, the *Ecole Biblique* was to submit absolutely to the judgment of the Church. This very basic

stipulation, in the long run, gained Pere Lagrange his final victory, as we have seen.

The year 1920 saw the *Ecole Biblique* appointed as the archeological representative of the French government in Palestine. An official statement making the announcement ran as follows: "The *Ecole Biblique* of St. Stephen's is by its location, scientific organization, and authority, wholly qualified to constitute the *Ecole francaise archeologique de Jerusalem*."

Now the school needed a voice, a publication which would advertise its conclusions and express its opinions on the findings of others. The *Revue Biblique* was the organ Fr. Lagrange devised to supply this voice. The *Revue* made its first appearance in January of 1892 and still comes out regularly. Leo XIII immediately gave the project his encouragement and blessing. Many noteworthy scholars, besides those of the *Ecole Biblique*, have made contributions to its pages.

The *Revue* aimed at advancing Catholic learning in the biblical field. It sifted and evaluated the new discoveries and adapted them to the Catholic viewpoint. Its entries brought out the good and bad points of both Catholic and non-Catholic works. Frankness dominated the pages of the *Revue*, and it never became a member of a mutual admiration club. Such candor, of course, raised much opposition to the ideas of the *Revue*.

Within a short time after the founding of the Biblical Commission in 1902 Pope Leo made the *Revue Biblique* the official organ of the new Commission. He even thought of removing the *Revue* to Rome but nothing ever came of it. The first issue of the New Series appeared in 1904. Its official position ended, however, with the first printing of the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*. During the World War Pere Lagrange, by his own efforts alone, kept the *Revue* coming out regularly.

The "voice" served its purpose but it could not serve as a lasting monument to the work of the school. Nor could it serve as a place where all the findings of the *Ecole* on any one subject could be found in a unified whole. Only something akin to an encyclopedia could serve such a purpose. Accordingly, in the 1900 edition of the *Revue Biblique* the announcement appeared of an intended "complete scriptural commentary designed to meet the needs of our times." This encyclopedic series, called the *Etudes Bibliques*, was to include "scientific works based upon good translations of sound critical texts" and "the best conclusions of historical, geographical and theological studies." The first of the series, naturally enough, came from the pen of Pere Lagrange and bore the title *Le Livre des Juges*. It appeared in 1903.



Twelve more volumes of the same series followed from the industrious Fr. Lagrange.

These three monuments to the organizational genius of Fr. Lagrange—the *Ecole Biblique*, *Revue Biblique*, *Etudes Bibliques*—provided excellent weapons in the struggle to change the face of Catholic Scripture studies, and their author used all of them well. He kept the school loyal to its aims and brought it recognition in the highest circles of scholarship, Catholic and Protestant. The *Revue Biblique* received a contribution from its founder for every issue. And for many years Pere Lagrange was the *Etudes Bibliques*. His writings (1,786 items) constituted only a part of his work. He travelled all over the length and breadth of Palestine and the surrounding areas searching for and making numerous archeological discoveries. The lecture platform gave him another outlet for his tremendous energies. Two of his most important and highly controversial works owed their origin to series of lectures: the article, "The Sources of the Pentateuch," and the book, *The Historical Method*. Fittingly, after forty years of ceaseless work in the interests of biblical research, Fr. Lagrange died pen in hand, working on an article for the *Revue Biblique* which the new editors published a month after his death.

### Conclusion

In a letter commemorating the passing of this truly great Dominican, Fr. Gillet, then Master General of the Order, referred to Fr. Lagrange, not only as an "incomparable exegete," but also as a "savant of rare culture and an indefatigable worker." The preceding pages have shown beyond doubt the truth of these assertions. But the Master General went on to say that Pere Lagrange had been "a very holy religious."

A few words on this point are not out of place in this article, for the source of the greatness that was in Fr. Lagrange was his unflinching devotion to the demands of religious life, and his devotion to the ideal of the Dominican Order, truth. Daily Fr. Lagrange attended the Divine Office in choir, never taking advantage of the dispensations allowed him for purposes of study. We have seen over and over again how obedient he was to the Order and to the Church in times of greatest adversity. His simple devotion to the Blessed Virgin is often pointed out as another sign of his holiness. In short, Fr. Marie-Joseph Lagrange was not merely a great exegete and scholar, he was also a great priest and a great Dominican; he was, in simplest terms, an all-round great man!