

THE EXEGETICAL METHODS OF SOME SIXTEENTH-  
CENTURY ROMAN CATHOLIC PREACHERS IN ENGLAND:  
FISHER, PERYN, BONNER, AND WATSON  
PART I

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In earlier articles, I have explored the exegetical methods of representative Anglican and Puritan preachers and also of late medieval sermons.<sup>1</sup> This article and a subsequent one will be devoted to the exegetical methods displayed in sermons of four Roman Catholic preachers in England who flourished in the sixteenth century: John Fisher (1469-1535), William Peryn (d. 1558), Edmund Bonner (1500?-1569), and Thomas Watson (1513-1584). A major question is the extent to which the biblical exegesis and other homiletical concerns identify these preachers as being medieval or Renaissance oriented. Are they, for example, more akin to the medieval preachers or to the Anglican preachers we have dealt with in the earlier studies?

The presentation that follows will of necessity first give an overview of the careers of these four preachers, noting the historical setting in which their preaching took place. Then, attention will be given to their specific exegetical techniques and homiletical concerns.

1. *Overview of the Careers of the Preachers*

*John Fisher*

John Fisher received his first degree at Michaelhouse, Cambridge, in 1483 at the age of fourteen, was appointed master in 1497,

<sup>1</sup>"The Exegetical Methods of Some Sixteenth-Century Anglican Preachers: Latimer, Jewel, Hooker, and Andrewes," Parts I and II, *AUSS* 17 (1979): 23-38, 169-188; "The Exegetical Methods of Some Sixteenth-Century Puritan Preachers: Hooper, Cartwright, and Perkins," Parts I and II, *AUSS* 19 (1981): 21-36, 99-114; "Late-Medieval Sermons in England: An Analysis of Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Preaching," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 179-203.

and received his doctorate in theology in 1501.<sup>2</sup> As early as 1494 he had been appointed senior proctor of two annually appointed proctors, who were executive and administrative officers of the University.<sup>3</sup> The Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of King Henry VII, chose him as one of her chaplains and later as her confessor in place of Richard Fitz-James, who became Bishop of Rochester in 1497.<sup>4</sup>

Edward Surtz divides Fisher's life into three major periods, and groups his extant works accordingly: (1) the Catholic humanist (1497-1517); (2) the ecclesiastical protagonist (1517-1527); and (3) the royal antagonist (1527-1535).<sup>5</sup> The first period was marked by important promotions and significant works.<sup>6</sup> In 1503, the Lady Margaret instituted readerships in divinity at Oxford and Cambridge. Fisher was the first Lady Margaret Reader at Cambridge, as John Roper was at Oxford. In 1504, Fisher was elected chancellor of Cambridge, and served annual terms until 1514, when he was elected for life. On November 24, 1504, he was consecrated Bishop of Rochester, and two days later took his place in the Star Chamber as a member of the King's Council.

The sermons of Fisher's early period (1497-1517) were devotional and non-controversial. Throughout August and September, 1504, he preached before Lady Margaret ten sermons on the seven penitential psalms (Vulg. Pss 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, 142).<sup>7</sup> At her request, these sermons were published in 1508 under the title *Fruytful Sayings of David*, and they were reprinted some six times before 1529.<sup>8</sup> Also belonging to this early period of Fisher's career is a lengthy, undated sermon preached "vpon a good Friday," the theme of which was the crucifixion of Christ.

<sup>2</sup>See E. E. Reynolds, *Saint John Fisher* (Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire, 1955 and 1972), p. 6; *ODCC*, 1957 ed., s.v. "Fisher, St. John."

<sup>3</sup>Reynolds, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Surtz, *The Works and Days of John Fisher: An Introduction to the Position of St. John Fisher (1469-1535), Bishop of Rochester, in the English Renaissance and the Reformation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>Reynolds, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup>Reynolds, p. 18; Surtz, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>Surtz, p. 3.

When Henry VII died at Richmond on April 21, 1509, it fell to the lot of John Fisher to preach the funeral sermon at St. Paul's on May 9.<sup>9</sup> This sermon, which occupied about an hour, focused attention mainly on the king's repentance. The panegyric absorbed only a few minutes.

The Lady Margaret died June 29, 1509, and a month later Fisher preached a commemorative sermon, subsequently published under the title *A mornynge remembraunce . . . of the noble prynces Margarete . . .*<sup>10</sup> As E. E. Reynolds points out: "This sermon is almost entirely a panegyric in which the preacher likened the Lady Margaret to 'the blessed woman Martha,' basing his remarks on the gospel of the commemorative Mass said on the thirtieth day after a funeral, St. John xi, 21-27, the conversation of Martha and Jesus before the raising of Lazarus."<sup>11</sup>

Surtz categorizes Fisher's early sermons as distinctively Catholic with "no fear of the Protestant menace, no need for caution in statement, and no retirement from possibly extreme positions."<sup>12</sup> The same cannot be said of the sermons of his second period (1517-1527), with the possible exception of *Two Fruytfull Sermons* preached, it is thought, in 1520, but not published until 1532.<sup>13</sup> Yet, even in these two sermons it is possible to detect a foreshadowing of Fisher's later conflict with Henry VIII. Alluding to the Field of Cloth of Gold, he speaks of the pleasure and pomp associated with the courts of England and France as manifested on that occasion.<sup>14</sup> But these pleasures and shows of worldly beauty are nothing to be compared with the joys of heaven. Even King Solomon, in the midst of opulence and indulgence, was obliged to relegate the things of this world to vanity, weariness, and displeasure. By contrast, heaven is a place of untrammelled joy and unexcelled beauty,

<sup>9</sup>Reynolds, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup>John Fisher, *The English Works of John Fisher*, ed. John E. B. Mayor, Early English Text Society, Extra Series, no. 27 (London, 1876), 1: 289. (Hereinafter cited as Fisher, *EW*.)

<sup>11</sup>Reynolds, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup>Surtz, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27; Reynolds, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup>John Fisher, *Two Fruytfull Sermons* (Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, STC no. 10909, 1532), sig. A3<sup>r</sup>. (Hereinafter cited as Fisher, *TFS*.)

where there is no fear of poverty, no greed or covetousness, no sickness, no fear of death, no pride, no envy, or desire for honor.<sup>15</sup>

It would seem that the obvious allusion to the worldly mindedness of both Henry VIII and Francis I could not fail to be detected. This slur could perhaps be dismissed as spiritual concern in 1520 when the sermons were first preached; but by 1532, when they were published, Henry could hardly fail to interpret it as a further evidence of Fisher's basic recalcitrance.

Meanwhile, between 1517 and 1527 Fisher was involved in theological controversy with the continental Protestant Reformers. From about 1520 onwards there was a great influx of Lutheran literature into England.<sup>16</sup> A trial before the ecclesiastical authorities could result from possession of such books, but relatively few persons were indicted. Probably the pope's bull condemning forty-one heretical ideas taken from Luther's works was known in England early in 1521, even though Henry did not permit it to be proclaimed until June.

In May, Cardinal Wolsey announced a public burning of heretical literature, on which occasion Fisher was to preach the sermon. Reynolds dates this event on May 12, 1521, the Octave of the Ascension, whereas Surtz places it on May 22.<sup>17</sup> The occasion was marked by ecclesiastical pomp and circumstance. Archbishop Warham of Canterbury and Bishop Ruthall of Durham were present. The staging, of course, was the work of Wolsey. Other bishops and high officers of state and ambassadors were present.<sup>18</sup> The central motif of Fisher's sermon was the Holy Spirit's uninterrupted guidance of the Church. Fisher presented the pope as *iure divino* head of the universal Church.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, Henry later issued a proclamation for the surrender of all copies of the sermon. Wynkyn de Worde published it shortly after it was preached, and reprinted it twice (1522?, 1527). After that, it was not published again until the reign of Mary (1554 and 1556). A Latin translation of the sermon was made by Richard Pace, who was secretary first to

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., sigs. A3<sup>r-v</sup>, B1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>16</sup>Reynolds, p. 93.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.; and Surtz, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup>Reynolds, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup>Surtz, p. 8.

Wolsey and later to Henry VIII. This translation was printed by John Siberch in Cambridge early in 1522. The pope was quick to thank Fisher for the sermon.<sup>20</sup>

In the ensuing few years Fisher published a number of polemical treatises against Luther; but for the purposes of our discussion, it is Fisher's sermons, rather than his treatises, that are especially important. His final flurry against Luther was his sermon in St. Paul's Cathedral on February 11, 1526.<sup>21</sup> Cardinal Wolsey was present with thirty-six bishops and abbots and a great number of the nobility and gentry. The occasion was the abjuration of an Augustinian friar named Robert Barnes, who on December 24, 1525, had preached at St. Edwards, Cambridge, a sermon which was judged to be Lutheran in intent. The doctrinal objections to Barnes's sermon were slight, but his forthright criticism of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of England led to a vociferous reaction. A list of twenty-five offensive opinions was taken from the sermon and condemned. Wolsey, whose wealth and pomp Barnes had attacked, arranged the abjuration. Barnes was brought before the bishops of London (Tunstall), Rochester (Fisher), Bath (Clerk), and St. Asaph's (Standish) in the presence of many others. Fisher's sermon, which had lasted for two hours, was shortly afterwards published in London by Thomas Berthelet.<sup>22</sup>

The sermons of John Fisher to which I have referred in this brief outline of his career as a preacher and controversialist are those which will be considered as we study his biblical exegesis and its significance. These sermons are especially enlightening since they cover such a large segment of Fisher's life, and since they include excellent exemplars of characteristic pastoral preaching as well as polemical discourses designed to denigrate the Reformation and counteract its influence. Fisher's use of the Bible in these sermons will throw some light on the question of his relationship to the presuppositions and procedures of humanism.

### *William Peryn*

William Peryn was a Dominican, educated at Oxford. He later went to London, where he vigorously opposed the Protestants. For

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Reynolds, pp. 114-116.

<sup>22</sup>Surtz, p. 13.

a period of time he was the chaplain of Sir John Port. When the royal supremacy was declared in 1534, he went abroad, but he returned to England in 1543, when the Catholic reaction set in. Early in the reign of Edward VI he recanted his Catholic position (June 19, 1547) in the church of St. Mary Undershaft. It was not long, however, before he again fled England. On the accession of Mary (1553) he returned and was made prior of the Dominican house of St. Bartholomew in Smithfield, "the first of Mary's religious establishments."<sup>23</sup> The sermons to which reference will be made in this article were "preached in the hospitall of Saynt Antony in London," possibly in 1545. They were published in 1546 and again in 1548 under the title *Thre godlye and notable sermons, of the moost honorable and blessed sacrament of the aulter*.<sup>24</sup> These sermons are significant in that they were preached later in the reign of Henry VIII by a lesser light for whom no claims have been made regarding leanings toward humanism.

### *Edmund Bonner*

Edmund Bonner is remembered more for his contribution to the Catholic reaction in the reign of Mary than for his excursions into the realm of homiletics. Nevertheless, his extant homilies are a valuable indication of the kind of scriptural exegesis which in the mid-sixteenth century was respected by Roman Catholic preachers, and recognized to be consistent with the restoration of the old order undertaken by Mary and her bishops. His wide experience in the English and papal courts rendered him thoroughly conversant with the best sixteenth-century Roman Catholic thought. As early as 1519 he graduated from Pembroke College, Oxford, with degrees in canon and civil law.<sup>25</sup> On July 12, 1525, he was admitted doctor of civil law. In 1529 and 1530 he was employed as chaplain to Cardinal Wolsey. Hence he had early contact also with Henry VIII and his secretary, Gardiner. Bonner spent the year 1532 in Rome, having

<sup>23</sup>For these details, see *Dictionary of National Biography* (hereinafter *DNB*), 1917 ed., s.v. "Peryn, William."

<sup>24</sup>William Peryn, *Thre godlye and notable sermons* (Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, STC no. 19789, 1548), sig. A1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>25</sup>Bonner's subsequent training in Roman law is mentioned in Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England* (New York, 1950 and 1963), 1:25.

been sent there by Henry to protest Henry's being cited to the papal court to answer for his divorce of Catherine. By March 6, 1533, he was in Bologna, where Pope Clement VII had gone to meet Emperor Charles V. Bonner followed the pope into France towards the end of the year, and the next year was back in England. About 1536 he was sent to Hamburg, Germany, to establish an understanding between Henry and the Protestants of northern Germany and Denmark; and the year 1538 took him again to the Continent, first to the imperial court and later to the French court as English ambassador.

Having held various ecclesiastical posts earlier, Bonner was consecrated Bishop of London on April 4, 1540. In that same year he was placed on a commission to study doctrine, and the next year he opened a session at the Guildhall to try heretics.<sup>26</sup> From this point on, he successfully established a considerable reputation as a persecutor of Protestants.

Bonner had no difficulty in accepting the doctrine of Royal Supremacy so long as this involved no denial of the pope's primacy over the whole church of Christ.<sup>27</sup> This explains his cooperation with Henry VIII and his fall from influence in the reign of Edward VI. Yet, there is good evidence that Bonner maintained an anti-papal stance for a time during Henry's reign, not out of conviction, but out of fear. At the trial of William Tims on March 28, 1556, Bonner admitted that during Henry's reign he had written the anti-papal preface to Gardiner's book, *De vera obedientia*, out of fear of death.<sup>28</sup>

Early in the reign of Edward VI Bonner was imprisoned for his acceptance of Edward's injunctions only "if they be not contrary to God's law and the statutes and ordinances of the church."<sup>29</sup> In 1549 he was again imprisoned, in Marshalsea prison, for failing to cooperate fully with the council in religious matters.<sup>30</sup> There he

<sup>26</sup>These details may be noted in *DNB*, 1917 ed., s.v. "Bonner or Boner, Edmund."

<sup>27</sup>Hughes, 1:206.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:297-298.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*; cf. A. F. Pollard, *The History of England from the Accession of Edward VI. to the Death of Elizabeth (1547-1603)* (New York, 1969), p. 15; A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York, 1964), pp. 43, 203.

<sup>30</sup>Dickens, pp. 227-228.

remained till the accession of Queen Mary in 1553,<sup>31</sup> at which time he was restored to his see.

He played a prominent role in the Marian reaction, having been prepared well for such a role by his previous experience as a bishop and ecclesiastical statesman. In September 1554, he revived processions, restored crucifixes and images, and published for use by the clergy a book of "profitable and necessary doctrine." At that time he also provided a set of homilies.<sup>32</sup> The next year, the book of doctrines and the homilies were published together, and in a foreword dated July 1, he indicated that the reason for the printing and distribution of these sermons was the present dearth of preachers and the inability in discharging the office of preaching. "Therfore desyryng to have something done onward, til God of his goodnes provide something better, I have laboured with my chaplaynes, and frends, to have these Homilies printed, that he maye have somewhat to instruct, and teach your flocke withall. . . ."<sup>33</sup> Thoroughly conversant as he was with papal concepts regarding doctrine, Christian practice, and ecclesiastical procedure, Bonner was eminently qualified to write and issue homilies which were specifically designed to reconcile the layman to the Church of Queen Mary.

Early in the reign of Elizabeth, Bonner was again in trouble for his staunch Catholic loyalty. On May 30, 1559, he was imprisoned in Marshalsea for refusing to take Elizabeth's oath of supremacy, dying there a decade later, on September 5, 1569.<sup>34</sup>

### *Thomas Watson*

Thomas Watson is the fourth sixteenth-century preacher whose sermons will be noted below. Educated at St. John's College, Cambridge, Watson was elected a fellow about 1535 and functioned for several years as dean and preacher. He was a careful—even fastidious—scholar, with background in the humanistic learning which at that time was being set forth at Cambridge. His having this sort of background confronts us with some intriguing questions: Might we expect certain of the philological and literary

<sup>31</sup>Pollard, pp. 41, 43, 51, 94, 124; Dickens, p. 259.

<sup>32</sup>Hughes, 2:243-245.

<sup>33</sup>Edmund Bonner, *A Profitable and Necessary Doctrine* (Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, STC no. 3283, 1555), fol. 2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>34</sup>*DNB*, "Bonner"; Pollard, pp. 194, 208, 218.



interests of the humanists to emerge in his sermons? To what extent, if any, was his biblical exegesis influenced by humanistic scholarship? To such questions we will return later in the course of our discussion.

After receiving the Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1543, Watson was appointed to various clerical positions. During the reign of Edward VI he distinguished himself as an enthusiastic supporter of Gardiner's opposition to the religious changes being made by the council. He was imprisoned in 1551. Upon Mary's accession, he became one of the leading Catholic controversialists, as well as a noted preacher. On August 20, 1553, he was chosen to preach at Paul's Cross, and on May 10, 1554, his *Two notable Sermons made the thirde and fyste Fridays in Lent last past before the Quenes highnes concerninge the reall presence of Christes body and blood in the Blessed Sacramente* were published in London by John Cawood.<sup>35</sup> In 1558 he revised the sermons he had preached at court in 1556 and published them under the title *Holsome and Catholyke doctryne concerninge the Seuen Sacramentes of Chrystes Church, expedient to be knowen of all men, set forth in maner of Shorte Sermons to bee made to the people*.<sup>36</sup>

In the meantime, he had been very active in other ways. In convocation on October 23, 1553, he defended the Roman Catholic doctrine of the real presence in opposition to James Haddon and others. He disputed with Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer at Oxford in April, 1554, the year in which he was also awarded the doctor of divinity degree. He also took part in the legal proceedings against Hooper and Rogers. Cardinal Pole had appointed Watson one of the delegates to visit Cambridge University in 1556-7, a visitation which resulted in the posthumous trial and condemnation of Bucer and Fagius, whose bodies were exhumed and burned. In 1557 Watson became Bishop of Lincoln.<sup>37</sup>

Since he refused to take the new oath of supremacy early in Elizabeth's reign, Watson was committed to the Tower in 1560.<sup>38</sup> In

<sup>35</sup>These details are noted in *DNB*, 1917 ed., s.v. "Watson, Thomas."

<sup>36</sup>Thomas Watson, *Holsome and Catholyke doctryne concerninge the Seuen Sacramentes* (Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, STC no. 25112, 1558); Hughes, 2:245.

<sup>37</sup>See *DNB*, "Watson"; Hughes, 2:330.

<sup>38</sup>See Pollard, pp. 206-207; Hughes, 3:36, 246, 259, 304, 414-415, 417.

and out of prison after that time, Watson was finally committed to Wisbech Castle in 1580, where he died on September 27, 1584. His importance in Mary's reign has been described as follows: "Watson was perhaps, after Tunstall and Pole, the greatest of Queen Mary's bishops. De Feria described him in 1559 as 'more spirited and learned than all the rest.' . . . Ascham spoke warmly of Watson's friendship for him, and bore high testimony to his scholarship."<sup>39</sup>

### *Summary Concerning the Four Preachers*

We have in Fisher, Peryn, Bonner, and Watson four very representative Roman Catholic preachers of the sixteenth century. Fisher is a fine example of a leading pastor, bishop, and controversialist during the reign of Henry VIII. Peryn represents the level of opinion held by the small-time preachers who opposed the Reformation. Bonner and Watson were leading bishops in Mary's reign, both of whom ultimately fell victim to the Elizabethan Settlement. The sermons of Fisher and Watson can be considered for any possible leanings towards the methods and mores of the humanists, those of Bonner as the product of an ecclesiastical statesman committed to the forcible extirpation of heresy, and those of Peryn as reflecting the opinions of the average committed Roman Catholic priest of the mid-sixteenth century.

My plan is to examine the exegetical method of these preachers, in relationship to their use of allegory, typology, literal expositions, and redaction; the appeal they made to church fathers; and their attitude toward antiquity. The first of these—allegory, which was such a favorite technique of the exegetical procedure in the late medieval sermons noted in an earlier study<sup>40</sup>—deserves special consideration here, as we ask whether these sixteenth-century preachers are distinctively medieval or Renaissance representatives. Hence, the remainder of this article will deal with this topic. The continuation article will treat the other concerns indicated above.

Throughout the entire discussion in both articles, it is important, of course, to keep in mind the basic question as to whether the biblical exegesis of these preachers categorizes them as belonging to the old order of late medieval preachers, or to the new order

<sup>39</sup>*DNB*, "Watson"; cf. Pollard, p. 124.

<sup>40</sup>Gane, "Late-Medieval Sermons in England," pp. 181-188.

for whom a new set of literary and linguistic tools has come into play. Just where do they stand in relation to the Renaissance in general and to the humanist movement in particular?

## 2. *Allegory*

Regarding the use of the allegorical interpretation of scriptural material, we shall note that this is very prevalent in the early sermons of Fisher and in the sermons of Peryn, but less so in Fisher's later sermons and in the homilies of Bonner and Watson. After first noticing the "exegetical style" of the preachers in this matter, we will raise the question of why the divergence.

### *Fisher*

As our first example of Fisher's early use of allegory we may note his sermon on the first penitential psalm (Ps 6): In exegeting it, he refers to Christ's sleeping in the boat during the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Matt 8:23-27), and looks upon the stormy sea as signifying "the trouble of the soule whan almyghty god tourneth away his face from the synner. . . ." Just as Christ awoke and rebuked the storm, so "the vexacyon of the soule shall not be mytygate & done away vnto the tyme our mercyfull lorde god tourne hymselfe vnto the synner."<sup>41</sup> This sort of spiritual application of that particular pericope is one, of course, that is quite common to preachers both ancient and modern.

Preaching on the third penitential psalm, Fisher likens Mary the mother of Jesus to the morning that comes after the darkness of the night and before the brightness of the day. Also, just as the "wyse man" teaches that God caused light to shine out of darkness (cf. Ps 112:4), so, declares Fisher, Mary was born free from sin after mankind had been subject to it for centuries.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, when the sun rises, the morning becomes brighter and brighter, "so cryst Ihesu borne of this vyrgyn defyled her not with ony maner spotte of synne but endued and replete her with moche more lyght and grace than she had before."<sup>43</sup> All of this could simply be regarded as an

<sup>41</sup>Fisher, *EW*, 1:12-13.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 48.

extended sermon illustration, except that Fisher proceeds to provide scriptural backing for the analogy.

Referring to Gen 1, Fisher points out that God made heaven and earth; then on the first day of creation, weak light was made; and on the fourth day, the sun was created. Heaven and earth, he declares, may signify to us "man & woman," the light created on the first day symbolizes Mary, and the sun created on the fourth day signifies Jesus Christ. He adds: "Take hede how conveniently it agreeth with holy scripture this virgyn to be called a mornynge."<sup>44</sup> Thus, by an allegorical application of the creation story, Fisher has endeavored to provide biblical support for his concept.

Commenting on Ps 51, Fisher likens the beings who dwell in hell, who are waiting to devour careless Christians, to the wild beasts, birds, and serpents which Moses predicted would come upon Israel if they were unfaithful. He cites Eccl 12:1, 6: "Haue mynde on they creatour & maker in the tyme of thy yonge aege, or euer the potte be broken vpon the fountayne"; then he interprets the pot to be man's weak, frail body, which when broken falls into the well, "that is to saye in to the depenese of hell."<sup>45</sup> The silver cord, also mentioned in Eccl 12:6, becomes to Fisher the life of man which holds up the soul of man within the pot, or body: "For as a lytell corde or lyne is made or wouen of a fewe thredes, so is the lyfe of man knytte togyder by foure humours, that as longe as they be knytte togyder in a ryght ordre so longe is mannes lyfe hole and sounde."<sup>46</sup>

To prove that this cord is held by the hand and power of God, Fisher quotes Job, and then goes on to say that if the life-line to God is broken, the pot (the body) is broken and the soul "flyppeth downe into the pytte of hell," there to be torn in pieces by "those moost cruell hell houndes."<sup>47</sup>

No doubt the language of Eccl 12 is intended to be metaphorical, but Fisher has read into it allegorical applications which fit nicely with the theme of his sermon. Obviously, the context was not important to Fisher. The verse immediately after the one on

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., pp. 91-92.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 92-93.

which he bases his allegory teaches that at death "shall the dust [body] return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7, KJV). The passage says nothing of a soul being contained in a pot until the pot is broken, at which time the soul descends to hell.

Fisher also read a great deal into the reference to the pelican, the owl, and the sparrow in the fifth penitential psalm (Ps 102). The passage reads, "I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert. I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top" (vss. 6-7, KJV). In context, the three similes are designed to illustrate the psalmist's state of mental and spiritual destitution. He stands alone and depressed because God has allowed his enemies to reproach him. The message is spiritual rather than doctrinal, but Fisher uses the passage as a major reference to the sacrament of penance: The pelican represents contrition, the first part of penance; the "nyght crowe" (or owl) signifies confession; and the sparrow represents satisfaction.<sup>48</sup>

Fisher quotes Jerome as his authority for the habits of the pelican, which by nature lives in a desolate place.<sup>49</sup> When the pelican finds her young slain by a snake, she mourns, and flays herself upon the sides; similarly, when those who are genuinely contrite find their children—that is, their good works—destroyed by deadly sin, "they mourne & wayle sore, they smyte themselfe vpon the breste with the byll of bytter sorowe" so that "the corrupte blode of synne may flowe out."<sup>50</sup> Jerome did precisely this, according to Fisher. Afraid lest his sorrow for sin was not adequate, "he smote vpon his brest with an harde flynte stone." If the sinner will smite himself inwardly in view of his sins, his past good deeds will be revived and he will be delivered from eternal death. "So that euery contryte persone may saye *Similis factus sum pellicano solitudinis*. I am made lyke to the pellycane by contrycyon."<sup>51</sup> We notice that Fisher mistranslates "*solitudinis*" so as to render the verse applicable to the sacrament of penance.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., pp. 151-152.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

The "nyght crowe" or owl dwells in the daytime in walls and secret corners of buildings. Only at night does it come out, and then "with a mournynge crye & myserable, & sorowful lamentacyon." In like manner, those who were once baptized, but afterward fall into deadly sin, are divested of light and are covered with the darkness of sin.<sup>52</sup> Then they go to the priest and confess their sins and the sun of righteousness shines upon them again. After confession, it is necessary for them to be like the sparrow; they must avoid "the deuylls snares" just as the sparrow avoids "the baytes & trappes of byrde takers that be aboute to catche her."<sup>53</sup> The person who is engaged in making satisfaction for sin must be as vigilant as the sparrow so that he can avoid his spiritual enemies.<sup>54</sup>

In this discourse, Fisher has taken two verses of Ps 102 and, with little respect for their context, has applied them allegorically to teach the importance of the three aspects of the sacrament of penance. This was, of course, the customary approach to Scripture in late medieval sermons. The ecclesiastical and doctrinal understandings of the Church were tenuously supported by the technique of discovering meanings which were not immediately apparent in the text. In his early sermons, Fisher makes extensive use of this exegetical method.<sup>55</sup>

While Fisher's later sermons do not make such a large use of allegory, the technique is not entirely lacking. In his *Two Fruytfull Sermons*, which were probably preached in 1520, but not published until 1532, he speaks, for instance, of three kinds of fruit in Paradise (Garden of Eden)—that of the tree of life, that of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that of the regular trees of the garden—and then allegorizes the fruit as betokening "unto us pleasure, because that fruyt is pleasant for to taste." The three kinds of fruit, he goes on to say, represent three types of pleasures "whiche be offred unto us in this lyfe."<sup>56</sup> The fruit of the tree of life represents the pleasures of life which emanate from Christ. The fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil symbolizes

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., pp. 152-153.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., pp. 200-208, 289-293, 388, 394-397, 407-428.

<sup>56</sup>Fisher, *TFS*, sig. E4<sup>r</sup>.

those pleasures which bring our souls to everlasting death. The regular trees of the Garden betoken those pleasures which are things indifferent, "so that neyther we shall haue greate rewarde for theym, ne yet great punysshment."<sup>57</sup> These "indifferent" pleasures include such activities as eating, drinking, sleeping, walking, speaking, and taking recreation. Without any indication in biblical literature that the trees of Eden were to be regarded symbolically, Fisher has treated them as allegorical representations of aspects of human life.<sup>58</sup>

Fisher's 1521 *Sermon Made Agayn the Pernicyous Doctryn of Martin Luther* is substantially lacking in biblical allegory. A number of suggestions may be offered in explanation of this fact. Perhaps by now the influence of humanism on Fisher was such as to engender greater respect for the literary and philological methods of the Renaissance. On the other hand, the fact that his 1520 sermons, which made such considerable use of allegory, were published in 1532, presumably with the knowledge and consent of Fisher himself, would indicate that there was no dramatic change in Fisher's exegetical methodology during the final fifteen years of his life. Rather, it would seem that the absence of biblical allegory from the sermon against Luther is to be explained by the nature of the subject matter and the nature of the audience.

Of necessity, Fisher's sermon against Luther's doctrine dealt with those Lutheran interpretations which undermined the doctrinal formulations of the papal church. His response consisted of a direct statement of his own concept of authority in religious matters; of counterinterpretations of scriptural passages used by Luther, employing similar methods as those used by the Reformer; and of the attempt to discredit Luther as a thoroughly insincere Christian and an heretical persecutor. In his effort to persuade those who had already strayed into Lutheranism, it would seem to be a matter of diplomatic necessity to speak their language. They were less likely to have been swayed by the kind of allegory characterizing Fisher's earlier sermons than by the approach to Scripture which was respected and used by the Reformers. Thus, the evidence would seem to suggest that Fisher excluded allegory from his 1521

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, sig. G1<sup>v</sup>-G4<sup>v</sup>.

sermon, not because he had basically altered his hermeneutic, but because of the demands of the situation.

Such an interpretation of the 1521 sermon is reinforced by the reappearance of a degree of biblical allegory in Fisher's 1526 sermon against the heretics at the abjuration of Robert Barnes. Allegory as used in this sermon is still relatively slight in comparison with Fisher's early sermons. The motivation for the lack is probably to be explained as similar to that for the omission of allegory from his 1521 sermon, but it appears that he was not entirely able to exclude a method of interpretation which, over a period of years, had become an integral part of his homiletical technique.

At the abjuration of Barnes, Fisher applied the story of blind Bartimaeus to the problem of the Lutheran heresy. Of the multitude that was walking along the road with Jesus just before the healing of Bartimaeus, those who went ahead of him, Fisher said, betoken "the fathers and the people of the olde testament."<sup>59</sup> Those who followed him signify Christian believers after the birth of Christ. Those who went before rebuked Bartimaeus for calling out for Christ, because they symbolized OT people who were under the dreadful, rigorous law of Moses. Those who followed Christ were more merciful toward Bartimaeus, for they typify Christians who today enjoy a dispensation of grace and mercy.<sup>60</sup>

Fisher pointed out that Bartimaeus was a symbol of the heretics. First, he was "singular by hym self."<sup>61</sup> Just so, the heretics, motivated by pride, study to be singular in their opinions. Unfortunately for Fisher's application, however, the Matthean account of the story has *two* blind men sitting by the roadside (Matt 20:29-34). Fisher goes on to say, in the second place, that just as Bartimaeus was blind literally, so the heretics are blind theologically and spiritually. Third, the fact that the blind man was sitting by the way-side and not walking betokens that the heretics are sitting outside of the right way instead of journeying toward heaven. Fourth, the

<sup>59</sup>John Fisher, *A sermon had at Paulis by the commandment of the most reuerend father in god my lorde legate, and sayd by John the bysshop of Rochester, upon quinquagesom sonday concernynge certayne heretikes, whiche than were abiured for holdynge the heresies of Martyn Luther* (Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, STC no. 10892, 1525), sig. B1<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., sig. Bii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., sig. Bii<sup>v</sup>.



blind man was separated from those following Christ, as the heretics are separated from the Church.<sup>62</sup> Just as the blind man was given sight, so must the heretics "be restored unto the true faith"; as the blind man cried for mercy, so must the heretics do; as Christ commanded that the blind man be brought to him, so the heretics must "be reduced unto the wayes of the Church."<sup>63</sup> Before receiving his sight, the blind man assented to the will of Christ, and so must heretics "fully assent unto the doctrine of Christus Church."<sup>64</sup>

It could be argued that Fisher's use of the story of Bartimaeus was merely a homiletical device, rather than a genuine example of his exegetical method. He must have known all too well, for instance, that in the primary setting of the Bible story, as told by the Gospel writers, there was no suggestion of the applications he was making. Perhaps so; but, as we have seen, this kind of interpretation is so characteristic of his sermons, especially in his early period, that it reveals an unconcern for a hermeneutic based on language, context, and *Sitz im Leben*. Fisher's method perhaps seems somewhat more innocuous when used as a means of illustrating situations in the world of his day than it does when used as a means of substantiating the doctrinal positions of his Church. Either way, however, meanings are "found" in the Bible which have no relation to the thought content of the biblical literature itself.

### *Peryn*

Allegorical interpretation of biblical material is a pervading method in William Peryn's *Thre godlye and notable sermons* (1548). A few striking examples will be given. By eating of the forbidden fruit of the tree, Adam procured and ministered death to all his posterity, whereas it was the fruit of another tree that gives life to Adam's posterity: "Certainly, there is none other frute, that mynystereth and restoreth lyfe agayne, unto the posteritie of Adam, but onely the frute that honge on the tree of the crosse, (which is Jesus CHRISTE) the blessed frute, of the immaculate wombe of

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., sig. Biii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., sig. Biv<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., sig. Biv<sup>v</sup>-Bv<sup>r</sup>.

Marye.”<sup>65</sup> The purpose of the analogy is to bolster Peryn’s argument that the eating and drinking of Christ’s actual body and blood in the sacrament of the altar is the means of eternal life.<sup>66</sup>

Throughout his three sermons, Peryn uses similar allegorical applications of scriptural passages in support of the doctrine of transubstantiation. In his third sermon, he likens the heretics to the foxes which Samson tied together by their tails. The heretics are “tayd together to one ende and purpose, that is the distruction, and subversion of the pure and syncere corn, of the catholyke faith of Christe.”<sup>67</sup>

Against the notion that Christ is literally sitting on the right hand of the Father in heaven, Peryn argues that the Father does not have a right hand or a left, or bodily members at all. God is a Spirit. Hence, when the Bible speaks of the bodily members of God, it signifies to us the invisible attributes of God, such as his power, knowledge, majesty, and glory. The eyes and ears of God refer to his knowledge of all things, and the hands and arms of God speak of his omnipotence.<sup>68</sup>

Peryn’s point is vital to his argument in answer to those who reject transubstantiation: “Then Christe to syt on the ryghte hande of the fater, is none other, then that Christe (concernyng his divinitie) is (euery point) of equall power, maiestie, and glorie, with the fater.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore there is no reason why Christ cannot be actually in the sacrament, “though he be syttyng in heaven on the ryght hande of the fater.”<sup>70</sup> Peryn has skillfully employed an allegorical application of Heb 8:1 as a means of answering the argument from that text used by the Reformers.

### *Bonner and Watson*

Bonner’s *Homilies*, published in 1555, are a dramatic departure, in terms of exegetical method, from the sermons of Fisher and

<sup>65</sup>Peryn, sig. Kvii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., sig. Kviii<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., sig. Qi<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., sig. Qvii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., sig. Qvii<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., sig. Qviii<sup>r</sup>.

Peryn.<sup>71</sup> They contain practically no allegorical interpretation. Their purpose is clearly apologetic. Certain major doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church are supported by a sprinkling of proof texts. Scripture figures quite largely in these sermons, but without any attempt at genuine exegesis involving recognition of context, language, and historical setting of the material. There is no more evidence of the suppositions and methods of humanism in Bonner's sermons than there is in Fisher's or Peryn's.

The same may be said for the sermons of Thomas Watson as for those of Bonner. They are distinctly apologetic in nature. His *Two notable sermons* of 1554 were especially designed to exonerate "the reall presence of Christes body and bloude in the blessed Sacrament."<sup>72</sup> His 1558 sermons dealt with all seven sacraments, hence their title, *Holsome and Catholyke doctrine concerninge the Seuen Sacramentes*.<sup>73</sup> But in neither collection of sermons does Watson resort to the frequent use of allegorical interpretation, as does Peryn in his support of transubstantiation. Yet, judging from his sermons, I would suggest that Watson is clearly no humanist whose basic hermeneutic has been modified by the new historical, literary, and philological procedures.

J. W. Blench's comments regarding the sermons of Bonner and Watson are an accurate evaluation of their use of Scripture:

Following from this position, it is not surprising to find that in the two sets of dogmatic homilies of the reign, Bonner's and Watson's, Scripture is not so much expounded for itself, as used as an arsenal of illustrative texts to illuminate and confirm Catholic doctrine. In these sermons "the Faith" is preached with occasional reference to the Bible; there is no attempt at general exegesis of any portions of Scripture.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup>Edmund Bonner, *A Profitable and Necessary Doctrine* (Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, STC no. 3283, 1555).

<sup>72</sup>Thomas Watson, *Two notable sermons made . . . before the Quenes highnes . . .* (Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, STC no. 25115, 1554), sig. Ai<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>73</sup>Thomas Watson, *Holsome and Catholyke doctryne concerninge the Seuen Sacramentes* (Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, STC no. 25112, 1558).

<sup>74</sup>J. W. Blench, *Preaching in England in the Late Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (New York, 1964), p. 52.

Blench finds the interpretation used by the preachers of Mary's reign to be "frequently allegoric" in manner, but without the extremes of late medieval sermons.<sup>75</sup> Yet, allegory is by no means frequent in the homilies of Bonner and Watson. Their particular application of scriptural texts may be open to question, but not usually in view of their identification of "hidden meanings."

### *Analysis of the Change in Approach*

The question now confronts us: Why the change in approach from the time of Fisher and Peryn to that of Bonner and Watson? We noticed that in his defensive sermons even Fisher used far less allegory. Peryn was not so discriminating. Bonner and Watson forsook it almost entirely.

The reason for this change in approach by Bonner and Watson seems to be found in the fact that they were living at a time when the attempt was being made to restore England to the dogmas and mores of the medieval papacy, after Protestantism had made very large inroads during the reign of Edward VI. Homiletical emphases and apologetic methods tend to vary with the theological and religious orientation of audiences. The exegetical methods and arguments which were likely to be influential with the majority of Englishmen during and at the end of Henry VIII's reign were most unlikely to be so effective after the leavening effect of Protestantism during Edward VI's reign.

Although Bonner and Watson make little attempt to exegete passages of Scripture, they are wise enough to recognize that the old allegorism has been effectively undermined by the widely accepted "literal" interpretations of the Reformers. Bonner and Watson have not moved an iota from the doctrinal formulations respected by Fisher and Peryn, but they have modified the vehicle of their expression.

*(To Be Continued)*

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 53.