Introduction

"Le progrès des études sur Pascal et son temps," Jean Mesnard writes in the preface to his long-awaited study of the Pensées, "a obligé à modifier, par tout un apport nouveau, les positions de la critique." This study seeks to contribute to this reassessment of the meaning of the Pensées by examining a context that has heretofore received little attention: scriptural exegesis as practiced by the neo-Augustinian theologians of Port-Royal.

Modern critical approaches to the Pensées often have been profoundly, though perhaps unconsciously, influenced by an interpretive principle inherited from the Enlightenment. According to this idea, Pascal's notes for his projected Apology for Christianity may be conveniently divided into two categories: the "pensées philosophiques" and the "pensées religieuses." This distinction, whose origins might be traced to Voltaire's Remarques sur les Pensées de Pascal (1734) and to Condorcet's edition of the Pensées (1776), has had a twofold influence on both modern critics and readers. On the one hand, this artificial dichotomy has obscured the apologetic character of the work by inviting critics to elucidate its purely "philosophical" meaning. At the same time, the distinction has engendered a kind of neglect on the part of readers of the Pensées of those passages that the critics deem as but of "theological" interest.

By examining the role of the Bible in Pascal's overall argument, this study seeks to point up the significance and interest of parts of the Pensées away from which modern readers and critics have seemed so willingly to turn. It is perhaps easy enough to understand why the typical reader of the Pensées has hesitated to make his way through an often difficult maze of historical and theological arguments. The kinds of proofs envisaged by Pascal run very much against the grain of the modern religious sensibility. They appear to violate the sacred modern idea that religious ideas are not subject to rational proofs. They are founded upon a view of history that has long since been transcended and presuppose a system of biblical science that has left but few traces in the modern imagination.

A series of influential critics have, for a somewhat different reason, rele-
gated the theological and historical arguments of the *Pensées* to a place of secondary importance. They have not done so because they questioned the importance Pascal himself attributed to such arguments. Rather, assuming that the specifically Christian context of the *Pensées* has been exhausted as a means of reaching a deeper level of meaning in the work, they seek to transcend the drudgery of historical research and penetrate Pascal’s deeper vision of things. Lucien Goldmann, for instance, argued that the unfinished state of the *Pensées* reflects an existential dimension inherent in Pascal’s thought: “La seule forme adequate au contenu des *Pensées* est le fragment.”2 Goldmann did not mean to deny the fact that Pascal’s death prevented him from organizing the *Pensées* into a finished *Apology*. Rather, he sought to transcend a historical or biographical understanding of Pascal’s use of the fragment form:

Chercher le “vrai” plan des *Pensées* nous paraît ainsi une entreprise antipascalienne par excellence . . . il n’y a, pour une oeuvre tragique, qu’une seule forme d’ordre valable, celui du fragment, qui est recherche d’ordre, mais recherche qui n’a pas réussi, et ne peut pas réussir, à l’approcher.3

Goldmann’s search for a “vision tragique” lying beneath the surface of the *Pensées* has influenced a whole generation of readers of Pascal. Goldmann’s statement of what he is looking for in the *Pensées* helps us understand the spirit that has animated the modern attempt to find in the work a “philosophical” level of meaning that transcends the specifically Christian vision of things:

Partant du principe fondamental de la pensée dialectique, que la connaissance des faits empiriques reste abstraite et superficielle, tant qu’elle n’a pas été concrétisée par son intégration à l’ensemble qui seule permet de dépasser le phénomène partiel et abstrait pour arriver à son essence concrète, et implicitement à sa signification, nous ne croyons pas que la pensée et l’oeuvre d’un auteur puissent se comprendre par elles-mêmes en restant sur le plan des écrits et même sur celui des lectures et des influences.4

The aim of this study is a good deal more modest. Because I am attempting to reconstitute Pascal’s vision of sacred history and account for the importance of biblical exegesis in his *Apology*, my search is very much limited to what Goldmann calls “le plan des écrits . . . des lectures et des influences.” I examine scriptural exegesis as practiced at Port-Royal in order to point up how very alien Pascal’s vision of the infallibility of the Bible is likely to be to the modern reader of the *Pensées*. There is a danger in this approach. Historical research can fall into the same narrowness of vision as a purely literal reading of Scripture.

In seeking to understand the meaning of the *Pensées*, it may be well to keep in mind Pascal’s own admonition to the student of the Bible: “Deux erreurs: 1. Prendre tout littéralement. 2. Prendre tout spirituellement”
(284/252). In attempting to penetrate and clarify Pascal's own vision of things, we should not imagine that we are really able to transport ourselves to the Port-Royal of 1658 and enter totally into a historical and religious point of view that is not our own. On the other hand, historical research can serve to prevent us from constructing private interpretations that deform the whole character of Pascal's justly celebrated defense of Christianity.

What might be called the sens littéral of the Pensées has troubled more than one modern critic. The work is a difficult one to read dispassionately. The reader who feels unable to participate personally in the dialogue between the religious and secular points of view finds himself in the position of having to construct a scenario that permits him to find a seat in the audience. Henri Lefebvre, for instance, solves the problem by confusing Pascal himself with the unbeliever to whom the Pensées are addressed:

Pascal . . . s'engage dans un vaste dialogue avec lui-même . . . dialogue qui est en même temps un monologue intérieur . . . lui-même devient le théâtre et la pièce et l'acteur principal de la tragédie dans laquelle se déploie la conscience tragique.5

The unfinished state in which Pascal left his manuscript long served to obscure the apologetic character of the Pensées. For the same reason, the so-called "pensées religieuses" suffered considerable neglect. Their role in Pascal's larger argument was simply far from clear. Many editors of the Pensées attempted to reconstitute Pascal's apologetic scheme on the basis of evidence internal to the Pensées. Such "regroupements," Mesnard points out, "obéissaient généralement à des présupposés fort simples et fournissaient aux lecteurs des idées directrices dont la clarté était souvent obtenue par la réduction à une seule des multiples dimensions des textes."6

Only with the discovery of a general order established by Pascal himself has the true character of Pascal's Apology emerged. The editions of the Pensées of Lafuma (1950) and Sellier (1976) are based upon texts that reflect the extent to which Pascal had ordered and classified his arguments before the onset of his final illness. These editions, based upon the Copies of Pascal's papers made by the Périer family, reveal that the "philosophical" sections of the Pensées were but a provisional stage in Pascal's apologetic itinerary. These editions present a defense of Christianity that takes its definitive arguments from the realm of sacred history and whose ultimate objective is bound up with a proof of the credibility of the Bible.

The fragments that make up the second stage of Pascal's projected Apology have proved particularly inaccessible to readers and critics alike. They have found themselves confronted with cryptic arguments that have no discernible order and with long catalogues of scriptural citations whose documentary function is far from obvious. Moreover, the whole second stage of Pascal's arguments is founded upon a system of biblical science
that is essentially foreign to a modern understanding of the two Testaments. Pascal's expertise in this science is derived from the teachings of the neo-Augustinian theologians of Port-Royal. Modern biblical commentaries are of little help in understanding Pascal's interpretation of most scriptural texts. Nor can we take classical medieval exegesis to represent Pascal's interpretive model. Port-Royal sought to circumvent the abuses of the Middle Ages and to initiate a return to the primitive models of Saint Paul and Saint Augustine.

Pascal's perspective on the entire Christian exegetical tradition is focused through the optic of neo-Augustinian theology. The theologians of Port-Royal are his principal means of access to interpretive principles as old as Christianity itself. Fortunately, we have at our disposal a paradigm of biblical exegesis as practiced at Port-Royal: a thirty-two-volume commentary on the entire Bible composed by Isaac Le Maistre de Sacy. Sacy was the recognized authority of Port-Royal on questions of scriptural interpretation. His commentaries on the Bible greatly simplify our task of making sense of Pascal's proofs of the authority and authenticity of Scripture.

There exist significant parallels between the major themes of Sacy's biblical commentaries and ideas that are central to the argument of the Pensées. In chapter four, I will examine a view of the Fall that Sacy and Pascal hold in common. That both exegetes elevate this doctrine to the status of a major interpretive principle is not all that surprising. The formula “Adam”/“Jésus-Christ” stands at the heart of neo-Augustinian theology. Of greater significance is their mutual emphasis on the Fall as historical fact. Pascal's entire argument in the Pensées hinges upon the same literalist interpretation of Genesis that Sacy spells out in his Préface à la Genèse.

Sacy and Pascal both emphasize the apologetic implications of the doctrine of Original Sin. In strikingly similar arguments, they elucidate the practical consequences of the corruption of human reason in Adam's fall from grace. Metaphysical proofs, both insist, are beyond the grasp of man's fallen powers of reason. Apology, both argue, can do no more than exploit proofs that God has already built into the fabric of Revelation. In Sacy's view, the Fall itself is one such potential proof: “Cette vérité est comme un flambeau qui éclairet ce qu'il y a de plus inexplicable dans l'état présent où la nature humaine est réduite.” This same principle stands at the heart of Pascal's strategy in the first part of the Apology. The doctrine of the Fall, temporarily stripped of its Christian context and presented as pure hypothesis, serves to convince the unbeliever that the Christian Revelation merits his attention.

In chapter six, I will argue that Pascal's ultimate proof of the truth of Christianity was to have been based on an exposition of the fulfillment of
the Old Testament prophecies. In order to be able to interpret these prophecies, Pascal will insist, "il faut les entendre" (305/274). The system of scriptural exegesis that Pascal develops in order to carry out such an interpretation is greatly clarified by the commentaries of Sacy, which shed particular light on Pascal's theory of "figures." Sacy teaches that the "sens spirituel" of a given biblical text never invalidates its literal and historical meaning. In its passion for allegory, medieval exegesis had relegated the "sens historique" of Scripture to a place of relative unimportance. Port-Royal's restoration of the primacy of the literal level of meaning in the Bible is crucial to the ultimate aim of Pascal's Apology: proving that Christianity is not of human invention by establishing its historical roots in the religion of the Old Testament.

Protestant exegesis all but abolished the traditional exegetical category of the "sens allégorique." Sacy's approach could hardly be more different. While defending a literal interpretation of every person and event in Holy Writ, Sacy at the same time carries allegorization to a new extreme. He finds "figures" of Christianity in almost every verse of the Old Testament. Sacy's very criticism of Protestant exegesis is that it reverses "l'ordre du temps." While abolishing the "figures" of the Old Testament, Sacy charges, the Protestants make the mistake of allegorizing the New Testament by their purely symbolic interpretation of Christ's institution of the Eucharist.8

Sacy's most fundamental exegetical principle—that the key level of meaning in the Old Testament is typological but that the New Testament must always be interpreted literally—is everywhere reflected in Pascal's analysis of specific biblical texts. Sacy's vision of the unity of the two Testaments is the cornerstone of Pascal's Christocentric view of the Bible: "Jésus-Christ que les deux Testaments regardent, l'Ancien comme son attente, le Nouveau comme son modèle, tous deux comme leur centre" (7/388).

Sacy and Pascal hold in common a carefully worked out theological rationale for the existence of "figures." Both exegetes elevate an idea implicit in the Augustinian tradition, the notion of Deus absconditus, to the rank of dogma. In both their systems, "figures" are a mechanism of divine predestination, serving to "aveugler les uns et éclaircir les autres" (264/232). When they set about proving the existence of two levels of meaning in the Old Testament, both rely upon a proof "par l'Ecriture même," basing their arguments upon (1) contradictions in the literal meaning of the Old Testament itself and (2) exegetical models found in the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles.

Throughout my study of Pascal's historical demonstrations, I will make use of arguments found in Sacy's Préface à la Genèse. Sacy's "Preuve de la prophétie par les Juifs" serves to clarify the role of Pascal's proof of the
Pentateuch in the larger argument of the Apology. Pascal's proof of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch reproduces in almost exactly the same form Sacy's arguments concerning the longevity of the Patriarchs. His research into the "état des Juifs" mirrors a constant theme in the Sacy Bible: the centrality of the Jews to any proof of Christianity. Pascal's assertion that the "perpétuité" of the Jewish people "n'a point d'exemple dans le monde ni sa racine dans la nature" (736/492) finds its theological rationale in Sacy's explanation of why Israel's rejection of Christ was a historical necessity.

The definitive argument of the Apology is founded on an assumption often restated in the Sacy Bible: the Old Testament prophecies constitute "la preuve la plus assurée" of the Christian religion. Sacy's judgment that any argument in favor of the credibility of miracles must be founded upon the prophecies recalls a critical juncture in Pascal's formulation of his apologetic strategy. Abandoning the idea of an Apology constructed around a defense of biblical miracles, Pascal forged the notion that the Old Testament prophecies themselves constitute a "miracle subsistant" (211/180). Both Sacy and Pascal offer an explanation as to why the prophecies are superior to any proof founded upon "raisons naturelles." And both insist that God has built this proof into the very fabric of the Christian Revelation.

Our examination of Pascal's "plus grande des preuves" will suggest the need for a critical reassessment of the whole meaning of the Apology sketched by the Pensées. Neglect of Pascal's historical demonstrations has led many readers and more than one critic to conclude that the apologist's fundamental though unstated position is that of fideism. Faith alone, or so concludes a prevailing view of the Pensées, is the only source of certain knowledge about God. Though perhaps an accurate description of the Essais of Montaigne, fideism is far from the ultimate solution offered by Pascal's Apology.

Pascal's dissection of certain fundamental assumptions about human reason has definite parallels in the Essais. In the Entretien avec M. de Saci, Pascal lauds Montaigne's method. "Je vous avoue," he tells Sacy, "que je ne puis voir sans joie dans cet auteur la superbe raison si invinciblement froissée par ses propres armes."9 The image of reason being brought to its knees "par ses propres armes" is an excellent description of Pascal's strategy in the first half of the Pensées. At that stage, however, Pascal's proof of Christianity has only begun to unfold. The Apology pushes on to a demonstration of the credibility of Christianity that is founded upon a proof of the credibility of the Bible. Reason is rehabilitated to serve the purposes of apologetics. The prophecies are proofs that are "solides et palpables" (221/189). Reason may act upon them without exceeding its inherent limits.
In the last analysis, Pascal’s proof of the credibility of Christianity is meant to be empirical. Pascal’s contemporaries seemed to have grasped this fundamental principle. Writing in the preface to the Edition de Port-Royal of the *Pensées* (1670), Pascal’s nephew Etienne Périer reminds the reader that his uncle’s principal aim was to demonstrate “que la religion chrétienne avait autant de marques de certitude et d’évidence que les choses reçues dans le monde pour les plus indubitables.”

Such a view of the *Pensées* is totally at odds with the position of those who take the famous argument of the *pari* to be the key to the meaning of Pascal’s whole *Apology* and conclude that the work is of a fundamentally “existential” character. Nothing could be further from the existential point of view than Pascal’s assertion that God has built convincing proofs of the truth of Revelation into the fabric of sacred history. The prophecies are for Pascal “marques visibles” of the reality of a hidden God. They are powerful enough to convince reason that it must abdicate in the face of the case built for the credibility of Christianity. “Il n’y a rien de si conforme à la raison que ce désaveu de la raison” (213/182).

Footnote references are to three editions of the *Oeuvres complètes*. With the exception of the *Pensées*, Pascal’s writings are cited from Louis Lafuma’s edition (Collection l’Intégrale, Editions du Seuil, 1963). Historical documents not reproduced by Lafuma are cited from Brunschvicg’s edition (Collection des Grands Ecrivains de la France). Additional references are to the as yet incomplete edition of Jean Mesnard (Bibliothèque Européenne). References to the *Pensées* appear in the body of the text. Two fragment numbers are given: the first refers to the edition of Philippe Sellier; the second to the text reproduced in Lafuma’s *Oeuvres complètes*. Sellier’s edition was chosen as a working text because it reproduces the *Seconde Copie*, the most accurate record of the state in which Pascal left his manuscript.

10. Lafuma, p. 495.
Part One

The Bible

in the Theology of Port-Royal