

## LIVING THE OLD TESTAMENT

"What was done and said in the Old Testament was ordained and disposed by God with such consummate wisdom that things past prefigured in a spiritual way those that were to come under the new dispensation of grace."

Pius XII  
Divino Afflante Spiritu  
September 30, 1943

**T**HE MYSTERY OF CHRIST embraces the whole history of mankind. And in as much as we are incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ through Baptism, we take on, as it were, this mystery. Since we are part of the Militant Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, we are "the people of God," the basic themes in the Old Testament apply not only to the Israelites but also to us; they not only foretell the coming of the Messiah but foreshadow the realities of the Christian mysteries. As St. Augustine says: "Whatever that people (the Israelites) suffered in the desert and whatever God bestowed on them, both their punishments and their gifts are symbols of the things which we who are walking with Christ and seeking the true land through the wilderness of this life, receive for our consolation and suffer for our good" (Enar. Ps. 72:3). Therefore the history of Israel, of the chosen people of God, the history of the Church, is also in some measure the history of each individual soul in the Church. For the same words God used to call the Israelites back to fidelity He uses to cause us to turn to Him with all earnestness, giving us many reasons, warnings, instructions and inducements, leading us if we will but follow with signs and wonders and power, exhorting us through His prophets to depart out of the Egypt of this world and from Pharaoh, its king.

Just as the army of the Militant Church is still passing out of Egypt, company by company, still marching through the desert, still crossing the Jordan, still building Jerusalem and raising God's temple in Sion, so each individual soul must spiritually experience within itself something of the same exodus, the same covenant, and the same journey with all its hunger and thirst, mighty battles and anguished prayers, light and darkness, sacrifice and struggle to build Jerusalem a heavenly tabernacle of God.

Just as God was the Leader and Saviour of the chosen people

in the Exodus, so now He is leading us, working in our souls and unfolding before our eyes and sounding in our ears the same lesson in the world around us. And sad to say it is with us as it was of old with the people of Israel; we follow God in body but remain in Egypt in our hearts. For this reason the Old Testament can play a unique and vital role in our spiritual formation. The drama of the Old Testament goes on without ceasing because the army of the Militant Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, is still passing out of Egypt, generation after generation, century after century, still on the march toward the Promised Land. The battles and victories of the Israelites are our battles and victories. Figuratively, we too are leaving Egypt, making our covenant with God, wandering in the desert, complaining and growing restless and tiring of the heavenly manna, choking on its sweetness, preferring the harsh bread of Egypt. God's exhortations to love and serve Him are for us as well as for the Israelites. Let us go and search the Scriptures for ourselves, to hear God speaking to us and find therein our spiritual comfort. In the Sacred Scriptures God truly and vividly shows that His words have a vital and important meaning for each of us. They are unique in this regard. "What things were written, were written for our learning, that through the patience and the comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rms. 15:4).

Since there is this general correspondence between the way God acted toward the Israelites of old and the way He acts toward us now, it will be helpful to point out and correlate in a more particular way the main themes or movement of Sacred History as recorded in the Old Testament. Three main stages are discernible: the Election and Covenant; the Battle—the ups and downs, the warnings, consolations and punishments; the Victory or Conquest of the Promised Land.

### *The Election and Covenant*

In the mystery of Predestination we are presented with a fact, that God elects some souls not primarily because of anything on the creatures' part but out of sheer love and mercy. "The Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be his peculiar people of all peoples that are upon the earth. Not because you surpass all nations . . . but because the Lord hath loved you" (Deut. 7:6-8). "Know therefore that the Lord thy God giveth thee not this excellent land in possession for thy justices . . . but the Lord hath chosen thee this day . . . to His own praise and name and glory

that thou may be a holy people of the Lord thy God, as He hath spoken" (Deut. 9:6, 26:17-19). Our election is to be incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ through Baptism; it is a calling out from the death of original sin to the new life of grace.

Although this election is completely gratuitous on the part of God, salvation requires cooperation on the part of the creature. For with every election there is drawn up, as it were, a pact or covenant wherein certain conditions are set down. Our Covenant imposes upon each Christian responsibilities according to his vocation and function in the Mystical Body. For the Israelites it was the Law: "And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee but that thou fear the Lord thy God and walk in His ways and love Him, and serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and keep the commandments of the Lord" (Deut. 10:12). "If after thou hast heard these judgments, thou keep and do them, the Lord thy God will also keep His covenant" (Deut. 7:12). "Behold I set forth in your sight this day a blessing and a curse. A blessing if you obey the commandments of the Lord . . . A curse if you obey not . . . but revolt from the way which I now show you" (Deut. 11:26-28).

Despite their election and the covenant with God, the Israelites tended to despair in their first great encounter; they despaired of conquering the Promised Land, for they were weak and their enemy strong. "Thou sayst in thy heart: These nations are more than I. How shall I be able to destroy them?" (Deut. 7:17). Keenly realizing our native weaknesses, imperfections and faults, and how far we are from the attainment of the great Christian ideal, we too may likely despair. Like the Israelites we need encouragement, love and help—in a word, we need a father. "Fear not, neither be afraid of them. The Lord, who is your leader, Himself will fight for you, as He did in Egypt in the sight of all. And in the wilderness, as you have seen, the Lord thy God hath carried thee, as a man is wont to carry his little son, all the way that you have come" (Deut. 1:29). In the Christian Dispensation, God not only gives Himself as our Father but He gives us His Mother to be our Mother: "Behold, thy mother!" (Jn. 19:27). God assured the Israelites of His help: "Thou shalt not fear them, because the Lord thy God is in the midst of thee, a God mighty and terrible" (Deut. 7:21). St. Paul would strengthen the Christians with a similar thought: "If God be with us, who can be against us?" (Rms. 8:31).

Throughout the forty years of the Exodus, God would main-

tain a tender and loving intimacy with His chosen people. "In thy goodness you led the people whom you saved" (Ex. 15:13). Time and again He would forgive them in spite of their rebellious and unruly spirit, constantly heaping favors upon them. After the conquest of the Promised Land the love and mercy poured out upon the Israelites manifested the everlasting love with which God swore He loved them. "With an everlasting love have I loved you" (Jer. 31:3). This is the constant theme of the Old Testament and God insisted upon it. When Moses believed God would work no miracles for the Israelites because of their infidelities, God reprimanded him for thinking His patience and mercy had limits. During the Exile, some would exclaim: "God has forsaken us, He has forgotten us!" But God instantly guaranteed His unwavering love and fidelity: "Is it possible for a mother to forget her child, and not to have pity upon the son of her womb? And even though she forget, never shall I forget you" (Is. 49:14).

Yet despite this election and covenant, and now despite even the tremendous manifestations of love and promise of fatherly help, the Israelites retained their native distrust and weakness. "I thought you would call me: 'My Father!' and would never turn yourself away from me. Yet as a woman proves unfaithful to her love, so you have proven unfaithful to me, O house of Israel" (Jer. 3:19-20). God would justly complain: "If I be a Father, where is my honor? If I be a master, where is my fear?" (Mal. 1:6). God presents Himself as a Father with outstretched hands, begging His children to return: "I spread out My hands all the day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, after a people who provoke Me to My face continually . . . you did what was evil in My eyes, and chose what displeased Me" (Is. 65:2-3, 12). God therefore warned them not to transgress His Law, threatening them with severe punishments. "Take heed and beware lest at any time thou forget the Lord thy God and neglect His commandments . . . lest thy heart be lifted up and thou remember not the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of bondage . . . if thou forget the Lord thy God, behold I tell thee now, thou shalt utterly perish" (Deut. 8:11-19).

### ***The Battle***

The interior struggle to keep this covenant was as great as any battle of arms the Israelites had to wage in getting to the Promised Land. And as in those battles, so in the struggle to keep the covenant there were more "downs" than "ups." Although at

first sight it is difficult to imagine how the Israelites could have failed to observe God's Law in the face of so many wondrous manifestations of His power and care—the crossing of the Red Sea, the miraculous changing of the bitter waters of Mara, the marvelous gush of water from the rock, the mysterious fall of manna and the pillar of cloud that led them by day and the pillar of fire at night—still they did continue to violate the Law. They complained practically every step of the way through the desert. For them things always looked better back in Egypt. "Is it not better to return into Egypt?" (No. 14:3). The Israelites almost continually offended God by their idolatrous tendency, their blasphemy and neglect of the Sabbath, their immorality (especially when they honored Baal of Peor to whose cult immoral practices were attached), and their constant complaining. The situation was not a very happy one.

But the chosen people retained something of fidelity, even at their worst moments. At every victory they sang canticles to the Lord: "Let us sing to the Lord, for He is gloriously magnified" (Ex. 15:21). But even here they attributed their victories more to themselves than to God. Well could Moses say in God's stead: "You were always rebellious from the day that I began to know you" (Deut. 9:24). Jeremias emphasized the Israelites' stubbornness when he cried: "Give up Lord! We want to follow our own evil plans, each one of us wishes to act according to his own stubborn, evil notions" (Jer. 18:12).

Can we not see in the attitude of the Israelites towards God a figure of our own unruly spirit in the battle? For we too are being conducted out of the Egypt of this world by God through His Holy Church. He leads us out with a strong hand and those wondrous manifestations of His love and care which are the Sacraments. For in Baptism He calls us out of original sin and floods us with His grace and plants within us His virtues and gifts. In Confirmation He signs and strengthens us for the battle against evil, promising His support in all trials, and He nourishes us with His own Flesh and Blood in the Eucharist. He removes all the impediments to spiritual vitality by the Sacrament of Penance and Extreme Unction, establishes leaders for His Church in the Sacrament of Holy Orders and sanctions and seals the natural propagation of His children through the Sacrament of Matrimony. Throughout our journey He teaches, guides, admonishes and consoles us by the teaching authority and maternal solitudes of His Church. In the Christian Dispensation these are His

great signs of power and care. Yet in the face of these great favors of His mercy do we not turn away from Him? Are we not almost continually wasting all our energies on everything that is not of God? We are even idolatrous if we are guilty of the sins that made St. Paul say: "Their god is their belly" (Phil. 3:19). We would do well to ponder in our hearts God's exhortations and warnings.

### *The Victory*

In the definitive battle of the Israelites, the battle of Jericho, God obtained the land of Canaan for them almost singlehanded. All the Israelites had to do was march around the city on seven successive days, then God tumbled the walls of the city. God had promised the patriarchs that Canaan would belong to their children and had assured Moses of final victory. He kept His promise in spite of the almost continual insurrection and unfaithfulness of His chosen people.

So God, in our own struggle with sin and self shows us that He saves us almost despite ourselves. He works out His justice not in a mere man, lest perhaps we become too proud, but in the God-Man, Jesus Christ. His victory then becomes uniquely His. In this way He impresses upon our minds and hearts that it is God Who saves, God Who conquers, God Who is the Victor over all evil. In order to share in this victory, we must strip ourselves of all independence of spirit and recognize our utter dependence upon God. In the Christian Dispensation, God makes membership in His Church and consequently in His New Covenant dependent upon a lively faith, faith in Jesus Christ His Son. "Let not your heart be troubled. You believe in God, believe in Me . . . I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through Me" (Jn. 14:1-6). The life stream of this victory is found in Jesus Christ, in the sacramental perfecting of the Christian to the complete realization of the Christian mysteries. As St. Augustine says: "Whatever took place on the cross of Christ, in the tomb, in His resurrection on the third day, in His ascension into heaven and His sitting at the right hand of the Father, was done so that the Christian life might be mystically configured not only in words but in deeds" (Enchirid., 14). This is a literal interpretation of the Pauline precept: "Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ!" (Rms. 13:14). For with the coming of the God-Man Jesus Christ, a new order or dispensation, of which He is the principle, is established in the world. In the Christian Dispensation, the Incarnation modifies in every way the relations between man

and God. Man's victory over evil can only be had in Jesus Christ. The Christian must add his testimony to that of the saints before him: that Christ alone is Victor, Conqueror and Saviour. "To be witnesses unto Me . . . even to the uttermost ends of the earth" (Acts. 1:8).

Christianity is a battle; for the Christian, there is no standing still in the way. Of his very office, the Christian is marked for perpetual warfare and persecution: "All who want to live piously in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (II Tim. 3:12). Being a soldier of Christ, he cannot remain inert or indifferent. There can be no pacifists in the Militant Church of Christ. But while the Christian battles, he believes with the surety of God that his victory will be both unique and absolute, simply because it is God's victory. In the light of the same faith, he believes that through Baptism a covenant has been established between him and God, a covenant which is a mystery and a paradox. For unlike the Israelite, the Christian's victory is already won in Christ. The promise of the kingdom has already been established, the covenant has been perfected—the covenant between man and God—in the God-Man Jesus Christ. Nothing essential remains to be done except that the individual Christian realize that this victory is had for him when Christ lives within him by grace. The greater the participation in Christ, the greater the completeness of this victory. There is no waiting for the future kingdom, it has already come: "the kingdom of God is within you" (Lk. 17:21).

The Christian, then, is seen as a miniature incarnation, living the mysteries of Christ in his own life, sharing in the universal life and grace of Christ, in His Passion and His Resurrection. For him the victory is had before the battle ends, for the victory begins at the very inception of the covenant with God. The Christian needs only to begin to fight and if he believes in Him Who overcomes the world, he has already won: "for whosoever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (I Jn. 5:4).

With a dynamic faith, then, the victory is already ours, "not by reason of good works that we did ourselves, but according to His mercy, He saved us through the bath of regeneration and the renewal by the Holy Spirit; whom He has abundantly poured out upon us through Jesus Christ our Saviour in order that, justified by His grace, we may be heirs in the hope of life everlasting" (Titus 3:5-7).

—Henry M. Camacho, O.P.