

STUDY HELP I.

HOW OPPRESSION AND LIBERTY WORK.

Very often exaggeration is a way of giving more value to the meaning that something or some event has for us. Who has not heard of the great exaggerations of fishermen? As well as this, due to time and mere oral transmission of stories they always get very colourful exaggerations.

In the Bible it would seem that the purpose of these exaggerations is to give more value to the feats of the People of God. If God is capable of doing everything, then any form of exaggeration when telling of His actions is more than welcome. To give more importance to the conquest of the land, it would seem that the violence is very much exaggerated in the Book of Joshua. During the taking of a city, the destruction always comes accompanied by much exaggeration: nothing remains. This is what is known as massacre or extermination [Jos 6,21; 8,24; 11,8,14]. As we have already seen, in the history of the formation of the book, the conquest of the land happened in a rather different way. It was the city-states and not the people of Canaan who suffered defeat.

But there is also another reason for this exaggeration. Violence, conflict, competition and ambition are, so to speak, the very lifeblood of the oppressive system. The proposal being made by the Israelis is that of a society without any form of domination, without any class system, without any exploitation, where all live as equals in liberty and peace. The contrast between the oppressive system of the kings and the free system of the tribes is so great that it is necessary to completely destroy everything first before starting anew. So it is said to avoid the contamination of idolatry, God ordered everything to be destroyed [Dt.20, 16-18] and cursed those who even dared to reconstruct a city [Jos 6,26]. What was at stake here was the form of social organisation. The egalitarian system of the tribes of Israel was a total negation of the system used in the city-states

1. THE SOCIAL SYSTEM OF EGYPT AND THE CITY-STATES OF CANAH

a. The society is a pyramid, organised from the top down: king-nobility-functionaries-clerics-army and, at the bottom of the pyramid, the people, the peasants [Jos 11,12]

b. *Work exploitation*: hard work and slave labour are necessary to keep the king, his court, and the army, while the people are obliged to pay heavy taxes [Ex 5,6-18]

c. *Absolute power goes to the king*: he can do all, he is the owner of all and needs to give no account to anybody. [1S 8,11-17].

d. *A mercenary army at the service of the king*: the word soldier means the one who receives payment, is paid to fulfil the orders of the one who pays. The kings kept their armies as instruments of domination and repression [1 S 8,11-22].

e. *Laws to defend the interests of the king*: the king dictated the laws in his own favour which were to be obeyed by the people [Ex 1,8-10,22; 5,6-9].

f. *Religion, made up of different gods, is also organised in the form of a pyramid*; the temples are dedicated to the prevailing gods and in this way form the minds of the people so as to accept the oppressive system [Jos 24,14-15].

g. *Worship given to the idols always celebrates the same rites and myths*: these worship rites contained a lot of debauchery and even human beings were offered up in sacrifice.

They impressed on people the idea that nothing can be changed and reinforced the system of inequality and injustice [1 K 11,7-8; 1 S 5,1-22].

h. *Land owning priests, at the service of the kings*: they worked as intermediaries between the people and the gods to legitimate the system [Gn 47,20-22].

2. THE IDEAL SYSTEM AS PROPOSED BY THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL

a. *An egalitarian society without any governmental apparatus*: A classless society, organised from the bottom up: the patriarchal family, clans and tribes [Nb 1,1-2,34]. If by chance any form of superior came into existence, this person must continue the same as the others, that is, a brother of the people [Dt 17,4-20].

b. *Communal production to attend the needs of all*. Accumulation is prohibited [Ex 16,1-30]. The sabbatical year and the jubilee year [Lv 25, 1-25] were mechanisms to avoid all forms of inequality and impoverishment

c. *Decentralisation of power and participation* through the use of councils of the heads of families, clans tribes and assemblies [Ex 18,13-37; Nb11, 16-25; Jos 24 1-28].

d. *No military or police force.* In the case of war, an army came into existence by calling on the tribes, who sent their contingents of warriors [Jos 4,6-10; Jg 4,10; 6,34-35].

e. *Laws which defend an egalitarian system,* the 10 commandments [Ex 20 1-17] came into existence to defend the poor [Ex 23,3.6; Lv 23,22; Dt 17,7-11] and the weak [Ex 22,22; Dt 10,18].

f. *Faith in the one God, the God of their fathers, the God of the people.* He is the God who liberates [Ex 3,1-15], who becomes a partner through an alliance [Ex 24,7;Lv 26,42; Dt 5,2] and takes upon himself the cause of the oppressed [Ex 22,22.23].

g. *A worship that celebrates life and history, and not myths and fables.* It celebrates the marvels of God in the facts of history, renewing the hope and the spirit of the people through the celebration of past events [Ex 19,1-8; Jos 24,1-28].

h. *Priests without land and at the service of the people, and not of temples,* who must keep alive the memory and the identity of the people. Not being allowed to possess land they must live from their work with the poor [Nb 18,20; 35,1-8]

For more than two centuries, approximately 250 years, the Israelites tried to live according to this egalitarian tribal system. This ideal form of society never became a total reality. Women did not have the same rights as men [Dt 5,21]. There were many conflicts between the tribes and many of them fell into the temptation of ambition for power and wealth. [Cf. Jg 8,24-27; 9,1-6; 11,9-11]. The option for the monarchy, especially from the time of Solomon on, did away with this system, so dear to the hearts of the people, and for which they had fought for, for so long. It will be the work of the prophets and the prophetesses to reawaken the memory of the people this ideal form of society.

The importance given, in the Bible to the tribal system of Israel should open our eyes to the shocking events of our history. When the colonisers arrived here, 500 years ago, they found a land inhabited by numerous Indian nations, who, for thousands of years, had been living a tribal system. Despite all the massacre and destruction of which they were victim, many tribes and villages have survived all over Brazil. Many of them still continue faithful to their customs, living a different form of social organisation, the values of which can still be presented as an alternative for the future.

Similar things also happened to the Negro population, which came as slaves from Africa. Many of them bravely resisted the cruel burden of slavery, escaped from the houses of slavery, and organised themselves into “quilombos”, where they reconstructed the community social organisation which they had had in Africa.

Similar movements also took place among the peasants, the most famous one being the organisation lead by Antonio Conselheiro in Canudos, Bahia.

STUDY HELP 2

LAND DIVISION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

From chapter 13 on, the Book of Joshua deals with the dividing up of the land. The conquest of the land was the fulfilment of the promise made by God, under oath [Jos 1,6; 5,6].

It is God who gives the “Promised Land” [Jos 1,15; 21,43]. When compared with the time of the desert, the possession of the land means a time of rest [Jos 1,13]. When compared with the time of slavery in Egypt, the possession of the land means a guarantee of liberty and a life full of blessings [Jos 18,13]

The land promised and conquered is the collective property of the people. However, each one has the right to a piece of land where he can live in dignity. Because of this, the land is divided according to the natural divisions of the people: tribes, clans, and families. In the actual division of the land there is no swindling, no privileges, or no competition. It is God Himself that determines how the division goes, through the casting of lots.

Each possession is also known as an inheritance. It is the ground where the family establishes roots, settles down and grows. It may not be sold or taken by others .It goes from one generation to the next as an inheritance [1 k 21,3]. Because it is a gift from God, this inheritance is seen as something sacred and definitive. If, for one reason or other, it passes into the hands of others, the price is calculated in accordance with its probable production during the time that remains until the Jubilee year, when it will be returned to its original rightful owner [Lv 25,13.28]. As well as this there also exists the law, which gives the right to ransom. [Lv 25, 23-27].

The people were gathered together in the sanctuary at Shiloh [Jos 18,1]. Things had always been settled in assemblies of the people. Many different assemblies had taken place during the life of the

people of Israel. In them, the land question nearly always came up. During the Assembly at Shechem, it is said, that it was God himself who spoke of the gift of the land, through the mouth of Joshua [Jos 24,13]. Micah announced an assembly in which the big tracks of land were to be measured and divided up with justice [Mi 2,1-5]. During the reign of Nehemiah, an assembly was called to treat of the giving back of the land [Ne 5,7-13]. And in the solemn assembly of the renewal of the Alliance [Ne 9,25], after first recalling the “fertile and spacious land” as a divine gift [Ne 9,25], the people promise to honour the sabbatical year [Ne 10,32].

In various texts there is great insistence on how the land is to be divided [Nb 26,52-56; 33,53-54]. The criteria that must prevail in the distribution, is the necessity of each family, taking into account the number of people that have to live off the land. This orientation is attributed to God himself. The land is to be owned by those who work on it and make it produce, and not by those who have other types of work and who only want the land for speculation purposes.

The way that the land is divided in Brazil is a scandal, an affront, and an injustice that cries out to the heavens. Everything must be done to change the situation. This involves respecting the legitimate function of the land and the fulfilment of God’s plan, the only sovereign Lord of all the lands.

STUDY HELP 3

There is life where there is unity There is unity where there is life

Unity is only possible where you have life. If you break a bar of gold or of iron, a block of stone or of marble, the individual pieces continue being gold, iron, stone and marble. There is no real unity in the bar or the block: broken, they lose their unity, but continue being the same thing in the pieces. A living being is different: if you break the unity, it dies, it ceases to exist. This is so because unity is an essential, necessary characteristic of living creatures, which are made up of many different elements. The unity is the result of the harmonious integration of the various different elements.

The greater the number of elements in its composition the more perfect it will be. The greater the complexity, the greater the perfection. This is what happens with life. The variety of living creatures is infinite, from the vegetable to the animal form, and from the lower animals to the higher animals. The greatest of all the forms of life is the human person, which God created with such special love, as if he were reproducing a picture of himself, in man and woman, as the Bible teaches us: “He created them in his own image” [Gen 1,27]. Let’s not forget, in the unity of our God there are three distinct persons.

Just as in life, unity possesses infinite forms, and is not limited only to its separate, individual forms. There are also other levels of unity. The unity of the Trinity is reflected in the human couple [Gn 2,24], in the family and spreads out into society. The unity of the people of Israel, spread out into the clan, the tribe, into all the different elements that came together to form the people of God. The assembly held at Shechem is presented as the great manifestation of unity, organised by the different groups. The flag of unity blows in the wind of the same faith in YHWH, which gave life and courage to that people.

Jesus, who came so that “all would have life and have it more abundantly” [Jn 10,10], also prayed ardently to the father, asking for the unity of his disciples as an overflow of his unity with the Father [Jn 17,11.21-23]. The prayer of Jesus for unity is the driving force of the ecumenical movement, which was first born in the Protestant Churches, and was later taken up by the Catholic Church, especially during the Vatican Council.

Unity was the greatest desire of Jesus, and this is something that all of us Christians must believe with all our hearts. But for this unity to become a reality, there is need for a total conversion because the air that we breathe in all of the churches is one poisoned by divisions, opposition, competition and prejudice. These are the barriers as high as the walls of Jericho. It is the same air as that of that of the “world” to which Jesus did not belong to [Jn 17,9], the world of hatred [Jn 17,14], the world of the evil one [Jn 17,15]. Jesus wants us Christians to give witness to unity in this mundane world, the only effective weapon against the blindness of this same world [Jn 17,21-23].

Ecumenism is not just a policy or a strategy to unify the churches. It is something much more profound and radical, on which the very life of the Christian faith depends. It is a gift – something to be insistently asked for from the Lord, the gift of conversion. Like any conversion, the living out of unity is a long, difficult and permanent process of change in people and institutions. Its fundamental characteristic is its universality. The word *ECUMENE* means “all the inhabited world” or “inhabitable

world”, like the big house [oikia] of all humanity. So, the only boundaries that unity has or knows, is the frontiers of the universe itself, and it knows no barrier: neither of religion, race nor culture. The unity that we aspire to is made up of liberty, equality, plurality, solidarity and participation.

STUDY HELP 5

THE CANTICLE OF DEBORAH AND BARAK

After describing the victory of some of the tribes over Jabin’s army in chapter four, the same happening is described again in chapter five, in a very enthusiastic manner. It takes the form of a canticle, a hymn of praise. This text is considered to be one of the most ancient of the Biblical texts. It is in the form of a hymn of praise, which must have been composed shortly after the event itself, and was sung by the people for quite some time before going into the written form. In it, can be felt the enthusiasm of those who were eye-witnesses of the fantastic victory of the people who had gone out to fight, encouraged by their heroine’s faith and confidence in the power of their God.

Judging by the geographical references – Taanach, Megiddo, Quison [Jg 5,19-21] -, the battle takes place in the valley of Jezrael, the largest plain in Palestine, which separates the mountains of Galilee from the hills of Samaria, a very fertile valley.

The main cause of the conflict seems to have been economical: the tribal peasants rebelled against the scorching taxation imposed by the “kings “ of the city-states and refused to hand over their excess production. Because of this, they organised ambushes against the convoys that tried to avoid the commercial routes by taking short cuts [Jg 5,6].

Deborah, who received the honourable title of “mother of Israel”, played a very decisive role in all of this. She was the one responsible for the entire mobilisation of the people. She convinced Barak to organise the war forces of Israel, drafting volunteers and warriors from the tribes. They succeeded in getting the support of Ephraim, Zabulun, Machir, Issachar and Naphtali [Jg 5,7-15a]. The tribe of Rueben, preoccupied with their flocks, did not get involved in the fight and are treated with a certain amount of irony [Jg 5,15b-16]. Reference is made to Dan, Gilead and Asher, who also did not take part [Jg 5,17]. The exceptional courage of Zabulun and Naphtali gets special mention [Jg 5,18].

The battle is described in very forceful language. The kings of Canaan rise up against Israel. However, they failed as they didn’t succeed in getting the money, that is, they didn’t succeed in imposing the taxation [Jg 5,19]. God’s participation, the God of Sinai [Jg 5,5] is through the forces of nature, the heavens and the waters, which recall the prodigies of the Exodus [Jg 5,4-5,20-21]. The powerful modern arms of the enemy, their 900 iron chariots and horses [Jg 4,3.13], were reduced to impotence, either stuck in the mud or dragged away by the waters of the Kishon [Jg 5,21-22].

The inhabitants of Meroz, who “had not come to the help of YHWH” [the real commander in chief of the Israeli forces!] are censured, maybe because, while not even being Israelites, had refused to defend a cause that was common to both groups [Jg 5,23]. To compensate, Jael, the non-Israelite is exalted as a heroine, whose fearlessness crowned their victory with the execution of the enemy general [Jg 5,24-27].

In contrast with these two heroines, whose action was decisive for the victory of the Israelites, we are, in a very dramatic way, presented with the foolishness and frivolity of the women of the house of the defeated commandant [Jg 7,28-30]. The canticle finishes off with a hymn of praise for the victorious God of Israel [Jg 5,31].

In the introduction to the book it was mentioned that the role of women in the book deserved special attention. Maybe it is worth while finishing off with a few general observations. As every coin has two sides, on the side of the Philistines, in the stories about Samson, two other women could be considered as heroines: the bride of Timnah [Jg 14,1-20] and the famous Delilah [Jg 16,4-20]. In fact, using seduction as a weapon, they tried to free their people from the real scourge, which was Samson.

There are still some other women: Achsah, daughter of Caleb, the wife of Othniel [Jg 1,12-15]. A concubine of Gideon’s in Sichem, the mother of Abimelech [Jg 8,31]. The woman that did away with Abimelech [Jg 9,53]. The daughter of Jephthah [Jg 11,34-40]. The prostitute of Gaza [Jg 16,1-13]. The mother of Micah [Jg 17,2-4]. The concubine of the Levite of Ephraim [Jg 19,1-30]. The virgins of Jabesh [Jg 21,12-14]. The daughters of Shiloh [Jg 21,19-23].

STUDY HELP 6

A Popular touch To the narratives.

In the narratives, which tell of the doings of the “Major” Judges, it is easy to get that picturesque flavour that the people like to add to the stories of their heroes. These are ordinary people, who become famous through their feats. In this book, the merit for the great actions of these heroes and heroines in favour of the people of Israel is attributed to the intervention of God, who answers the call of the people. The people love the picturesque, and at the same time, discover and contemplate, in their simplicity, God’s action in history. The judges are ordinary folk to whom God commits the mission of liberating their people. They are normally referred to as “charismatic leaders”. After fulfilling their mission they return to their ordinary lives. The reference that they “judged in Israel” for x number of years is a later addition by the deuteronomic editors, who, while collecting the ancient traditions, did the necessary joining together of the facts to compose the book.

Gideon, when he was called by God to liberate the sons of Israel from the oppression of the Midianites, did not want to accept. He alleged that “he was the least in the house of his father” and member of the “poorest clan of Manasseh [Jg 6,15]. He reminds us a little of Moses: he resists doubts and asks for signs from God [Jg 6,17-22.36-49]. But God goes even further: before the battle, he orders him to reduce the number of soldiers in the army that he had formed - about 30,000 warriors - to a meagre 300-, so that “Israel does not take any credit for the victory by saying that they had freed themselves by their own hands” [Jg 7,2]. All in all it is a very interesting story, and begins with the conversation between God and Gideon, the orders given by God and the signs asked for by Gideon. The preparations for the battle and the victory over the Midianites are just a nicety. After the battle Gideon “stayed at home”, and “had seventy children”, including Abimelech, whose mother was a concubine from Sichem.

The Jerusalem Bible uses the word “leaders” when referring to the people of Sichem, and to whom Abimelech went to look for help to become king. As this word refers specifically to the kings’ court, it indicates that Sichem was a Canaanite city-state and was not part of Israel. However, it is not exactly correct to say that Abimelech “exercised power over Israel during three years” [Jg 9,22]. In the story of Jephthah, it was not the “leaders” but rather the “elders” of Gilead who went in search of him [Jg 11,5].

Jephthah is no more than an outcast, being the son of a harlot and having been expelled from the family, becoming the leader of “worthless followers who used to go raiding with him” [Jg 11 1-3]. When sought out by the elders of Gilead, he complains of having been expelled by them. He only accepts to command the war against the Ammonites, under the condition that he is accepted as their chief, with God as his witness [Jg 11 7-11]. Before beginning the battle, he makes a promise to offer up to God in sacrifice the first person to meet him in his return, if he came home victorious. It is a very moving story, because, unfortunately, it was his only daughter, who came to meet her father in great jubilation [Jg 11,31-44]. He still had to fight another war, an internal one, against the Ephraimites, and lived another six years.

The case of Samson is a special one. Although it is said that he ruled in Israel during 20 years [Jg 15,20; 16,31], there is nothing concrete to indicate that he did in fact do this. He remained on in the memory of the people as the giant with extraordinary strength, who made hell out of the lives of the invading Philistines, through various military expeditions, remembered and told with great exaggeration. Everything that he did was with great show-off. Consecrated to God from the time of his mother’s womb [Jg 13,17], he had the vow to never cut his hair, to which, was attributed his incredible strength [Jg 16,17-20]. It is very interesting to notice the insistence on Divine intervention in the life of Samson: before his birth and at the beginning of his career [Jg 13,3-25]; in the choice of his Philistine bride [Jg 14,4]; in the battles with the Philistines [Jg 14,19; 15,14.18-19]; and in the triumphal end to his story [Jg 16,28].

For us, the lesson of the Book of Judges is very important. The sons of Israel knew not only how to preserve but also how to read the history of their tribal heroes, in the light of their faith in their God, the God of the alliance. The faithful God who never abandons His people and who actively accompanies their journey through life.

STUDY HELP 7

Prophecy in the Bible

In the beginning, in Israel as also in the other nations, the prophets were people or groups of people connected to the divinity. However, the God of Israel is not just any divinity. He is YHWH, the one God, living and real, the liberator of his people.

Among the other nations the prophets were not independent people, nor did they criticise the authorities. The specific divinity that they [the prophets] represented was the one that legitimised the very authority in question, and the king was seen as the incarnation of the divinity. But in the Bible, God does not give up his authority, and the king, his subject, is meant to be at the service of the people, faithful to the Alliance and to God's project [cf. Dt 17,14-20; 1 S 8,1-22].

The monarchy was implanted with the critical support of the prophet [1 S 22,5; 2 S 24,11-19]. But when the monarchy turned away from the Alliance and God's project, towards a system in contrast with all that these two things stood for [1 Kg 19,10.14], prophecy slowly but surely started on an independent route and took on the role of a critical force, completely independent of all the powers, an expression of the freedom of God himself. This was how the conflict between the monarchy and prophecy began.

For his life and his work, the prophet had two basic reference points. On one side he had a profound *experience of God*. On the other hand, he had a profound *experience of the reality of the life of his people*, this same people that had been called to be the people of God.

1. *The experience of YHWH, the God of the people.*

a. The prophet experiences the presence of God as he lives in the midst of the people [Is 52,6; 58,9; 65,1]. His experience is the source of the liberty that the prophet feels in relation to those in power. He bursts into history with the cry "Thus says the Lord"

b. The experience of God is always the experience of the *God of our fathers*. He brings with him the memory of everything that God had done in the past throwing new light on the understanding and updating of its meaning. This way the prophet becomes the critical memory of the people. The memory of the past as an expression of the fidelity or infidelity to the Alliance is one of the most important criteria used for the people to recognise if the prophet is true or false.

c. His experience of God is always the experience of the God of the Exodus, the God who hears the cry of the people, the liberating God, the God of the Alliance. The prophet becomes the guardian of the Alliance and demands that the people be faithful to their promise to be the people of God [Ex 19,6].

2. *The experience of the reality of the people of God*

a. The prophet feels deep down the sad reality of the life of his people, the injustices of which they are victim, the misery, the hunger, the suffering. While at the same time, he can't but feel indignant with the luxury, the waste and the corruption of the ruling classes. This blatant contrast is the total negation of God's project. The poor are seen as mere broken off pieces of humanity, and where you have splinters something has been broken. It is this deep experience that forces the prophet to lift up his voice and denounce vigorously the breaking of the Alliance.

b. However, in the life of the people, not everything is negative. There is compassion, a great capacity to be happy and celebrate, and a revolutionary hope for a New World, a world of equality and fraternity where all feel as brothers; in as much as they are sons of the same father. Basing himself on the hopes of the poor, the prophet announces the dawn of this New World.

c. Together with the poor, the prophet learns to resist, learns how to face up to suffering, and not fear the threats of the powerful. It is with the poor that he learns that he must risk his own life to give witness to his faith in the God of the Alliance. The same God who promised a land where his people could live a life blessed by him, with no misery [Dt 15,4], to the very point where the mere presence of a person made poor, just one, is a cause of alarm.

Prophecy goes in three different directions: *justice, solidarity, and the reconstruction of the human person*.

Justice becomes a reality when everything is where God wants it to be, when everything is as it should be. Prophecy wants life to be organised in keeping with God's project. It is at this level of the fight for justice that we find the conflict between prophecy and the monarchy: the prophet demands that the king also observe the Alliance.

Solidarity imposes itself as a **must** to be faithful to the Alliance due to the impossibility of being able to change the situation, as was the case after the fall of Samaria. It is through solidarity that the people of God become a sign of what God wants for all [Dt 15,4-11].

The reconstruction of the human person is an absolute necessity to neutralise the terrible effects of poverty and misery. The poor person feels inferior, humiliated, ruined. He ends up losing the very notion of his own dignity. As long as this lack of consciousness continues in the poor, any effort at change, in

the field of justice as well as in the field of solidarity, is like grafting onto a dead branch, plastering a cracked wall, plastic surgery on a dead body. The prophet sees that what is fundamental is the reconstruction of the human person, giving him back the dignity that had been stolen.

STUDY HELP 8

Prophecy and the monarchy

During the 200 years of judges [+ or - 1200-1030 BC], all of the problems of the people were solved without the presence or need of a king, without any need for a centralised administration or a permanent army. Tribal heroes and heroines, called by god, mobilised the people and defeated any enemy attacks. The monarchic system had been refused by Gideon, who alleged, as reason, that only God was king of Israel [Jg 8,23]. Abimelech was nothing more than a deformed caricature of a king [Jg 9].

During this period there were no prophets or prophetesses to be found. Both Moses and Joshua are considered to be great prophets, but of a different type. They are, before anything else, the great pillars of the history of the people of Israel: Moses led the liberation out of Egypt; Joshua led the occupation of the Promised Land.

Samuel, the last of the judges, can also be considered the first of the prophets, a title given him by the bible itself [1 S 3,20; 1 S 9,11]. Right from the beginning he is presented in a different way, which can be seen from the story of his birth [1 S 1,20-28] and of his vocation [1 S 3]. He led his people for many years. In his old age the people became worried about the succession process, because his two sons were corrupt, and, through the elders, demanded a king [1 S 8,3-5]. He ended up giving in, against his will and anointed Saul, appointed by God, as a liberating judge against the Ammonites [1 S 9,16-17].

Saul was a very efficient military chief. He saw straight away that a voluntary army had no chance against the trained well-equipped troops of the Philistines. He accepted the crown [1 S 11,15] and decided to form an army, keep troops in barracks [1 S 13,2], going against all the basic principles of the tribal system: never to have a permanent army [Jg 7,1-8].

On defeating the Amalechites, Saul did not obey the norm of tribal warfare: the holy war [Jg 7]. That is, instead of waging a defensive war, he carried out a conquest campaign, enriching himself through plunder and looting. Samuel stood up to the king in front of all the people. He condemned his attitude as a betrayal of the Alliance and no longer recognised his authority as king [cf. 1 S 15,10-35]. At this moment, Samuel became the voice of prophecy.

It can be said that prophecy and the monarchy came into existence together and worked side by side. Kings and prophets are complementary figures, but contrasting ones. With the coming of foreign empire rule, there will be no more need for kings in Israel. Prophets will also no longer be found. The people will then fall back on their past experiences and start to organise their writings. The name prophet will be used for those who, in defence of the people, and in the name of the God of the Alliance, rise up against the kings in the time of the monarchy.

The history of the people of Israel, during the time of the kings, is one of conflict. The origin of this conflict lies in the model of society being defended, on the one hand, by the politics of the kings, and on the other by the prophetic movement.

The policy of the kings defended the cities, trade, speculation, the sale of property, a centralised worship in the royal temples; a policy of taxation, commerce, strong armies and slavery.

The prophetic movement, on the other hand, defended the people, the villages, the rural type life, rural family properties, small places of worship, family worship, free labour. All in the name of the liberating God, who hears the pleas of the oppressed.

The task of the prophets and prophetesses was a difficult and arduous one. Death and persecution was an integral part of it. And all out of fidelity to God, who demands justice, sharing and equality. Prophecy fights for PEACE: the presence of God in the midst of a faithful people [Is 26,12]. Peace is only possible if there is fidelity to the Alliance. Prophecy emerges as the critical conscience of the people and can be summed up in this way: fidelity to the Alliance in search of the peace which comes from on high [Lv 26,3-13].

STUDY HELP 9

Prophecy and the temple.

Prior to the building of the temple in Jerusalem, the people had their own sanctuaries - small centres for meetings and assemblies, places here the people carried out their own devotions. For example, we find Ana asking for a son during a pilgrimage made to the important sanctuary at Shiloh, where the Ark of the Alliance was kept at the time [1 S 1,3-11]. Some of the other important sanctuaries were Dan [2 S 3,10], Sichem [Jos 24,1], Bethel [1 S 10,3], Guilgal [1 S 11,14-15], Hebron [2 S 2,1], Beersheba [1 S 3,20], Ramah [1 S 7,17] etc. In the tribal system religion was always decentralised. There was no official temple and no official priesthood.

These sanctuaries were very important places as refuelling centres to recall the memory of the Exodus and also for the formation of the liberating conscience of the people. The pilgrimage in the direction of the sanctuary recalled the march through the desert. They served, too, as a refuge for the fugitive pilgrims [cf. 1 S 21,2-10]. The sanctuary touched on the pious and mystical side of the people. The march to the sanctuary was an important celebration [cf. Psalm 23,6; 27,4] and took place three times a year, when the people were called together to stand before the Lord [Ex 23,14-17].

As centres of religious cult, the sanctuaries collected the offerings and donations given by the people [1 S 1,24]. Abuse on the part of those responsible, of course, was always a possibility, as was the case of the sons of Eli [1 S 2,12-17] and the sons of Samuel [1 S 8,2-5].

In the beginning, the sanctuaries served as cereal stores for the periods of drought. Whatever was stored there was considered as having the protection of the Lord. In the course of time, objects of greater value were also kept there, and in this way the sanctuaries began to accumulate riches. The treasury of the sanctuary at Sichem served to finance the royal adventures of Abimelech [Jg 9,4].

David was well aware of the importance of an official temple, making possible the unity of a country divided between Sichem and Hebron. Because of this he took to Jerusalem the Ark of the Alliance [2 S 6] their most important religious symbol which was accepted by all the tribes, [1 S 4,4-5; Joshua 18,1]. In this way, Jerusalem became the most important sanctuary in Israel. His plan to build a temple did not go ahead, because of the prophet Nathan [2 S 7,4-7].

With the construction of the temple during the reign of Solomon [1 Kg 6-7], the pilgrimages and processions for the festivities - and no one "could go empty handed" [Ex 23,15] - brought a lot of wealth in Jerusalem. With this money, Solomon started his international commercial activities [1 Kg 9,26-28]. Cattle, sheep, wine, wheat, oil and fruit were all taken to the temple as offerings and donations [Ne 10,33-40; cf. 1 Kg 5; 8,62-63]. The sale of these offerings accumulated gold and silver in the temple [2 Kg 12,5-6]. As the law guaranteed any promise made before the Lord [Ex 22,7], so any commercial transaction was possible in the temple. This centre of pilgrimage, house of prayer, of celebrations and blessings, house of cult and praise of the Lord, the temple slowly turned into a market place, bank, a money changing and registry office. In this way, as well as being a house of prayer, it also became a den of thieves.

The prophets saw and denounced this contradiction. They condemned what was, for the people, a holy place and the house of God [cf. Jr 26,1-19]. What is the point in having the house of God where the laws and the commandments are not respected? Prophets, like Jeremiah [Jr 7,1-27] and Amos [Am 4,4-5; 5,21-25], denounced the hypocrisy of the cult that camouflaged injustices and was not pleasing in the eyes of the Lord. Very much harmony never really existed between prophecy and the temple. It was rather very much the contrary. The prophets always rose up against a cult that was only an external show, empty of the true spirit of justice and fidelity to God, and which, because of this, became abominable to the eyes of the Lord.

Jesus, the greatest of the prophets, is part of the same line of prophecy to which Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and others belong. What had to be done was remove the false security given by the temple in search of the true liberating religion. Jesus said that the day would come, when the Lord will no longer be adored in temples but in spirit and truth [Jn 4,19-26]. After expelling the moneychangers from the temple, he identified his own body as the true temple [Jn 2,14-22]. During his trial, the greatest accusation made against him was that he spoke badly of the temple [Mt 26,61], the same accusation made against Stephen [Acts 6,13].

STUDY HELP IO

Prophecy and politics

If there is one thing that comes clearly through the Books of Kings it is the political activity of the prophets. The prophet Nathan is the person responsible for the succession of David, arranging things so that Solomon's group predominates over his brother Adonijah's group [1 Kg 1]. The prophet Ahijah, from Shiloh, pushes Jeroboam into rebelling against Rehoboam, and thus causing the division of the kingdom. The same prophet ends up condemning the dynasty of Jeroboam, unfaithful to the Alliance, demanding his removal [1 Kg 14,7-16]. The prophet Jehu instigates an uprising against king Baasha [1Kg 16,7-10]. The prophet Elijah foments resistance against Ahab and Jezebel. Accused of being an agitator, he escapes out of the country and his followers are persecuted and killed [1Kg 18,1-18]. The prophet Micaiah, son of Imlah, goes against Ahab and is put in prison [1 Kg 22,19-28]. The prophet Elisha gets General Jehu anointed king and supports a bloody war against king Jehoram and the prophets of Baal [2 Kg 9-10]. In the very exercise of their mission as "men of God" or spokesmen of YHWH, the prophets play a political role.

They appear beside the throne as the king's advisers, as is the case of the prophet Nathan, in the court of David [2 S 7]. This, however, does not hinder him from raising up his voice and, in the name of God, condemning the errors of the king [2 S 12,1-15]. Independent prophets and prophetesses also appear, to whom the king resorts to in moments of crises. A case in hand is that of the prophet Isaiah, consulted by king Hezekiah [2 Kg 19,1-34], or that of the prophetess Huldah, consulted by king Josiah [2 Kg, 22,11-20]. But, in general, they live far removed from the royal palaces where they pronounce their oracles and sentences in total liberty and with full authority [1 Kg 12,22-24; 13,1-4; 21,17-23; 22,19-23; 2 Kg 3,14-19]. Some are merely mentioned as just "prophet", or "man of God", or "one of the sons of the prophets", without any proper name, which would be a sign that they are just simple people.

In their ambition for total control over society and in their thirst for power, the kings like all governments, needed religious support. It was not enough just to put the temple and the priesthood at their service [1 Kg 8,3-6; 1 Kg 12,31-32; 2 Kg 11,17-19; 2 Kg 16, 10-12], they also needed the support of the prophets for carrying out their plans and activities. The kings were well aware of the fact that the prophets always had great religious influence with the people. Because of this, they always had space in their courts for prophets who, in the majority of cases, were at the service of the interests of the king and against the people [2 Kg 22,19-23]. These were the official prophets, the prophets of the king, false prophets and not true prophets having the approval of the people. Very strong accusations are made against these prophets – liars, impostors and flatterers. A good example is the case of the story told in Jeremiah 23,9-38.

In the cases of the prophets Elijah and Elisha it is interesting to notice their life experience, not only in the midst of the people, but also as part of the people. Before the most decisive activities of his prophetic career, Elijah spent, at least three years in the house of the widow of Zarephath [1 Kg 17,8-18,1]. It is noteworthy that, without the support of this woman who took him in, fed and protected him, he would never have been able to fulfil his prophetic mission. Elisha was working in the fields when Elijah called him [1 Kg 19,19-21]. In the story of Elisha many different women are present: the wife of one of his fellow prophets, in whose favour he works the miracle of the multiplication of the oil [2 Kg 4, 1-7]. The Shunemite who takes him in, and in payment has a son who dies, and who Elisha raises up [2 Kg 4,8-37; 8,1-6]. Jezebel, who is executed as Elijah had foreseen [2 Kg 9,30-37]. Queen Athaliah and Jehosheba [2 kg 11,1-16]. Elisha lives with the "sons of the prophets" who were groups of simple people [2 kg 2,3-18; 4,38-44].

The Alliance between YHWH and his people never got on very well with the Alliances between priests and kings, between the temple and the palace, between the altar and the throne. Sad it is to remember, that during the colonisation of Brazil, when so many crimes were committed against the Indians and the Negroes, so much importance was given to the Alliance between the cross and the sword! Any Alliances made between the institutions and powers, in general, do not favour the people.

The Prophet

The word prophet comes from the Greek language, and it means to "speak-for-another", or to speak in the name of God. In Hebrew, the word used was "nabi". It is difficult to define exactly what a prophet is, although everyone claims to know what it is to be one. In the wide sense of the word "to prophesy" is used to mean foresee something that is going to happen in the future.

The Bible has a collection of books called the books of the prophets, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, etc. No one can exactly say who their authors are. Three different authors, for example, wrote the book of Isaiah, at three different times. Is 1-39 comes from the time of the prophet Isaiah himself [740-700 BC]; Is 40-55 was written during the captivity in Babylon [587-537 BC]; Is 56-66 dates from the rebuilding of Jerusalem [520-445 BC].

Perhaps the best way to understand what a “prophet” is in the Bible would be to look for, in the history of the people of Israel, what the prophets and prophetesses did. We can see that the Bible uses the word prophet and prophetess for all those who are part of a single, wide ranging activity, present throughout the different stages of history. We can call it the “prophetic movement”.

From a study of the history of the people of Israel, it may be said that the social crisis appeared with the growth of the cities. Generally speaking, the Israelites lived in small towns and rural communities, in a tribal egalitarian system. This system was broken by urbanisation, which brought with it the commercialisation of the lands and the growth of the big farms. The rural workers thrown off their properties were forced to flee to the lands of the sanctuaries or to form groups of assailants [cf. 1 s 22,1-5]. On the lands of the sanctuaries these brotherhoods then appeared, which became known as the “company of prophets” or the “brotherhood of prophets” [1 S 19,20; 2 Kg 2,3].

As a consequence of the Philistine invasion, which took over the fertile flatlands, many of the Israeli rural dwellers were forced to flee to the mountains and form brotherhoods during the period of Samuel. These brotherhoods, under the leadership of Samuel, must have played a very important role in the setting up of the monarchy, since they supported the indication of Saul as the liberating judge. Everything would seem to indicate that Saul himself was part of one of these brotherhoods [cf. 1 S 9,11-14; 10,9-13; 19,18-24].

These brotherhoods of the “sons of the prophets” lived in communities [2 Kg 4,38-41]. They had leaders who presided over their celebrations [1 S 19,20]. Their support came from donations and almsgiving [2 Kg 4,8.42]. They wore cloaks of skin and leather belts [2 Kg 1,8]. Sometimes, they went into ecstasy, sang, shouted and danced

[1 S 10,6-9; 1 Kg 18,26-29], they pulled off their clothes and threw themselves onto the ground [1 S 19,23-24]. The others found this behaviour strange, and many considered them to be mad [2 Kg 9,11].

During the period of the kings, the prophetic movement became stronger. Nathan, who appeared alongside David, and had the courage to condemn the sins of the king [2 S 12] and Gad, who transmitted to the king God’s rejection of the census [2 S 24,11-15]. During the time of Solomon, we do not find any prophets, probably because they were repressed, as can be concluded from the important role played by Ahijah of Shiloh in the rebellion against Jeroboam [1 Kg 11,29-39; 14,6-15].

With King Ahab, the cities were rebuilt [1 Kg 16,34]. There was a lot of money in circulation; the agrarian policy favoured the big landowners, and property speculation [1 Kg 21 – Naboth’s vineyard]. Prophetic activity was intense: Elijah, Elisha, Jehu, Micaiah son of Imlah and a whole series of anonymous prophets. King Hezekiah took orientation from the prophet Isaiah [2 Kg 19, 1-34], while king Josiah asked the prophetess Huldah for orientation [2 Kg 22, 14-20]. It is at this time that the prophetic writings start: Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Micah, and Ezekiel, with a total of 18 books.

The prophetic experience in the history of the people of God is presented with great originality, variety and richness. It is not easy to express all the experience contained in the word “prophecy”, because it is a profound living experience: life is lived, but it cannot be described. We must not forget that the prophets and prophetesses speak in the name of God. Through the voice of the prophets and prophetesses the Spirit speaks. “The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who were born of the Spirit” [John 3,8].

Prophecy and the interpretation of history

1. Memory of the past, source of identity

When you ask anyone: “who are you”, he or she will answer: “my name is so-and-so, I was born in such a place, I am here because of this or that”. To say who he or she is, he or she must tell you the

story of his or her life. The people of God did the same thing. To say who they were, they told their life story [cf. Dt 26,5-10; Jos 24,2-13]. And they always recalled the same facts, because the facts do not change. What changed was the way the facts were told.

When you are feeling good, you tell your history one way. When you are down and out you tell it in a different way. That is what happened with the people of God. They always recalled the same facts: creation, Abraham, Moses, the Exodus, Joshua, the Judges, Samuel, the Kings... These stories were told in different ways, according to the demands of the new situation in which they found themselves.

The Bible was born of this preoccupation of the people of God never to forget their past, to never lose sight of their identity. It was born of the necessity to retell the past; to tell their children who they were and who they were supposed to be [cf. Dt 6,20-25]. The updated memory of the past helped them to situate themselves in the present and find the road into the future. The worst thing that can happen to anyone is to suffer the loss of memory. Worse than a *person* losing his or her memory is a *nation* that loses its memory.

The most significant experience for the identity of the people of God was the coming out of Egypt and the new organisation of the tribes during the period of the judges. During each period of their history, especially in their moments of crisis, this Exodus experience and the time of the judges were reawakened by the prophets and served as a yardstick to judge the deviations of the kings. It also helped the people to make a revision of their lives.

2. The prophetic reading of history

The greatest number of prophets appears during the time of the monarchy. What makes them the guardians of the Alliance and the defenders of the defenceless in the midst of the history of the powerful? This question opens the door to the prophetic reading of history.

We have already seen that in the Hebrew Bible the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are known as the "Early Prophets". Their main purpose was not to inform the people about their past, but rather to help them read, with prophetic eyes, not only the past but also the present. A prophetic reading of history is to read the facts of history through the eyes of God, and denounce all interpretations, official or otherwise, which use the name of God to defend interests that are against God's Project, the well being of the people.

The past, not only of individuals but also of groups and nations, contains realities and facts which people prefer to ignore or simply forget, because they accuse or disturb. For example, the official history of Brazil hardly ever mentions the "lay" fights, or just speaks of them in a negative way. While the struggles of the Indians ["confederações"], of the Negroes ["canudos"], of the peasants ["canudos"] are all ignored, the vicious colonial exploratory expeditions and the many killers are all exalted as the great heroes of civilisation. This is the main reason why the different movements, which are on the side of the people, try to rediscover those facts which are left to one side by the official history.

The same holds true in the case of the prophetic reading of the history of the people of God. This kind of reading insists on the facts, people and aspects that were ignored by the official reading. An example in question is the Exodus. The memory of the Exodus accused and disturbed the kings, because it spoke of liberation, justice and equality. It is exactly because of this that this fact is constantly brought to mind by the prophets. This is the reason why the Exodus theme runs right through the Bible. The Exodus was the one fact that disturbed most.

3. The rereading of the facts is what gives rise to the Bible

The five books of the Pentateuch give us the history of the origin and the formation of the people of God. Before reaching the written stage, this history was transmitted orally for centuries. Biblical scholars have succeeded in discovering that the stories contained in the Pentateuch were transmitted in environments with different mentalities and orientations, which resulted in the four different traditions:

"Yahwistic": in the united kingdom of David and Solomon [1000 BC].

"Elohistic": in the Kingdom of the North, after the time of Elijah [850 BC].

“Deuteronomic”: during the reform promoted by Josiah in the Kingdom of the South [640 BC].

“Priestly”: at the end of the Babylonian captivity [550 BC].

The Bible preserves an immense variety of traditions, many of which differ on the same fact. An example: in 1 Samuel 16,19-22 David is admitted into the service of Saul as a skilled harpist. In 1 Samuel 17,55-58 David was admitted only after he had killed Goliath, as Saul had never even heard of him before. This shows the great pains the authors went to faithfully preserve all the traditions.

4. Characteristics of the prophetic rereading of history

The prophetic reading or rereading of history, which appears on nearly every page of the Bible, has certain characteristics, that are worth noting here, both as a synthesis and as a challenge:

1. The prophetic rereading of history reveals an awareness of an historical continuity with the past: “We are one and the same with the people who lived in the past”. The system in which we live in today causes total dispersion, that brings along with it a sentiment of conflict, one of loss of memory, almost a rupture with the past. We are a people without roots. We lack the awareness of an historic continuity. Fortunately we are beginning to feel this. The Indian nations, the Negro communities and the lay movements now understand the importance of recovering their past and saving the values contained in their various histories.
2. The past is read and reread to help the people discern in their “today” the hidden presence of the liberating God. “You will know that I am YHWH” [Ezk 14,8; 32,15; Is 45,3]. The prophetic reading of history relativises the past in function of the absolute possessed in the present, which is the certainty, that God is with us. In the rereading done by the Bible, what is important is not so much the past, but the present, the people who live today, so that they discover in life the central truth of the faith: “He is in our midst”.
3. In each stage of history and in each situation, the facts were presented in such a way that the people could recognise themselves in these facts. For example, each of the traditions present Abraham as a model for the people who want to progress in the faith. The Gospel of St. John does the same thing when he presents Abraham as having faith in Jesus Christ [Jn 8,56]. The prophetic reading of history re-reads and re-tells the past to give up to date models for action.

All of this reveals the great desire to remain faithful to God, to oneself, to the past and to the mission that must be fulfilled.

STUDY HELP I

Prophecy and the Outcry of the Poor

One of the great truths of the faith found throughout the whole Bible is: God always hears the plea of the oppressed people. This was the identification used by him when he revealed himself to Moses [Ex 3,7-8]. From the leaving of Egypt and the arrival in the Promised Land, right up to the introduction of the monarchy, we have at least 200 years of endeavouring to implant God’s project of equality and fraternity as evidenced in the tribal system. With the arrival of the monarchy the social inequalities began to reappear, and the grass roots of society got gradually poorer, or rather, was made poorer. It was then, through the activity of the prophets, that the belief that God hears the cry of the people came to the foreground again. The awareness of this certainty lived on right through the captivity, was evident during the reconstruction of the

nation, permeates the New Testament, and continues up to the present day in the form of the “option for the poor”.

1. The monarchy causes the outcry of the people

The monarchies had their own very special form of existence. It was up to the king to choose his capital, build himself a fortified palace, sustain a permanent army, surround himself with privileged servants and build a temple to keep religion at the service of the throne. The money necessary for all of this came from taxes, trade, wars and plundering. Because of this, during the time of Solomon, forced labour was reintroduced, just the same, or even worse than when the people were in Egypt [1 Kg 5,27-32; 11,28; 12,4]. The luxury of the pharaohs was back again [1 Kg 5,1-8; 7,1-8; 10,14-23]. All the wealth of the country was concentrated in the hands of the king, who was nothing more than a merchant, even on the international level [1 Kg 9,26-28]. Women were considered by the kings as mere objects to be traded or used [1Kg 11,1-3]. And all of this in the name of the god, who had appeared twice to Solomon [1Kg 3,5-14; 9,2-9].

After Solomon the kingdom was divided into two: Israel in the North, and Judah in the South. Both in the North and in the South the kings oppressed the people just like the pharaohs had done in Egypt. The bittersweet advantages of the monarchy. Once again the cry of the poor called out to the heavens. Through the mouths of the prophets God made it clear that he still continued very attentive to this cry.

2. The various efforts made to quash the voice of the people.

What was new now, though, and which had not been the case in Egypt, was that the people kept clearly in mind the experience of the Exodus and were certain that they could count on the God of the Alliance and their liberator. This gave a whole new aspect to the outcry of the people, and was much more dangerous and upsetting than in the past. So the oppressors had to do everything in their power either not to hear or to squash this disturbing clamour.

The kings, the nobility and the rich lived in their palaces and mansions in the cities; well protected by the high walls and far removed from the suffering and difficulties of those who lived in the countryside. In this way, the well off did not even have to listen to the cry of the poor and “were not worried about the destruction of Jacob” [Am 6,6]. According to their way of thinking the poor were poor because they were lazy, incapable, and inferior creatures who had been born to be failures in life. It was not worth wasting time with them. And, as thought structure of the ruling class is always the one that prevails and comes out on top, the poor accept this way of thinking and feel crushed.

As they had all the necessary conditions to organise pompous liturgies in the temple, the prosperity of the “well off” was attributed to divine favour and they considered themselves as having been blessed in a special by God. Poverty, in this way of thinking, was considered as punishment for sin and the poor were considered as sinners. The poor, in their turn, ended up going along with this way of, and concluded that their situation was, in fact, the will of God.

To combat total mental paralysis on the part of the people, the prophets attacked, like roaring lions [Am 3,8], reawakening faith in the God who hears the outcry of the poor and always comes down on their side against the oppressors.

3. The prophets transform the cry of the poor into a divine plea.

In The Bible, the word poor means “made poor”. Poverty is a sign of man’s infidelity to the Alliance. Poverty is not the consequence of some natural law, and neither is it the will of God. Poverty is the direct result of violence and injustice. And it is because of this that the opposite of poor in the Bible is the evil ones, the perverse, the proud, the powerful and the oppressors. YHWH abhorred the presence of poor people in the midst of his people [Dt 15,4].

The exploited peasants during the time of the kings of Judah and Israel, and the exiles during the captivity in Babylon preserved faithfully this memory of their past and were well aware of the fact that their situation of misery was the direct fruit of injustice and oppression. They were the ones that kept alive in their memories the ideal of that tribal project of a society with no social inequalities and with no poor. So they dreamt of freedom and yearned after a new different world. It was the work of the prophets to preserve that dream against the destructive attacks of the rich and powerful. Through the prophets the cry of the poor became God’s appeal, bringing to the foreground the terms of the Alliance and restoring the awareness of their mission in the minds of the people.

Today, with the apparent victory of the so-called neo-liberalism, a new idol has appeared - free global trade. It seems that the destiny of the poor is destruction and that there is no place in the world for those who do not take part in this market. There is no more space for the dream of a better world. Driven by the same faith that was the driving force of the prophets, we too, are called to change the cry of the poor, the excluded, into a call from God.

STUDY HELP 2

Prophecy and the Alliance

What always remained on in the minds of the people was that the time spent in the desert was the period of the ideal observance of the Alliance [Ho 2,16]. The vivid memory of the Exodus was the driving force, which helped the people resist and carry on in their moments of crisis. The Exodus was the event used by the prophets as the touchstone for their activities.

1. The two sides of the alliance: gratuity and observance

The escape from Egypt, the Exodus, was for the people of God a project of life, a program forever. Anyone who lives through an experience of freedom and justice, has forever implanted in their minds a seed that will sprout again and come to the surface every time oppression and injustice make their way into that persons life. That was the case with the Exodus the Alliance concluded and signed at the foot of Mount Sinai became a living and ever present memory throughout the history of the people of Israel.

The living out of the Alliance has two aspects: on God's part, gratuity, and on the part of the people, observance.

God in his goodness, took the initiative of the Alliance and, without any merit whatsoever on the part of the people, he reveals to them his love, takes them into his care, adopts them and offers them his justice [Ex 19,4; Dt 7,7-8; 8,17-18; Ho 11,1-11]. This is the gratuitous aspect.

Once God's proposal has been accepted, the people must fulfil the clauses of the Alliance to meet the requirements of the love of God and put the justice of God into practice, which are the *sine qua non* conditions of a dignified and happy life for all [Ex 19,5-6; Dt 4,40; 6,25; Ho 11,10-11; 12,10-11]. This is the observance aspect.

Gratuity and observance are the two sides of the same coin. God's grace and our fidelity; divine providence and human efficiency; faith and politics; awareness of the dignity of all in the eyes of God and the fight for the right of citizenship.

During the time of the kings, many people, the privileged ones, invoking the gratuity aspect considered themselves to be privileged and heirs to the promises made by God, while forgetting the other aspect of the observance of the demands of the alliance. The prophets rose up against and denounced this hypocrisy and threatened them with the curse of God. Infidelity could not remain unpunished and the liberating God continued to hear the cry of the poor – victims of injustice and oppression.

2. The dangerous subversive memory of the Exodus is brought to the forefront by the prophets

The prophets appeared during the most difficult and most critical moments of the people. They came on the scene and were active principally after the implantation of the monarchy, which lasted about 500 years [1050-587 BC]. The prophetic presence was most felt during periods of economical progress, as was the case of Jeroboam II, because the people, forced to work and pay heavy taxes to meet the demands of the ambitions of the kings and the privileges of the ruling classes, quickly got poorer and poorer. The very presence of this ever-increasing number of impoverished people was the proof that the Alliance had been broken, because the memory of the Exodus said, "Let there be no poor among you then. For YHWH will bless you in the land YHWH your god gives you for your inheritance only if you pay careful attention to the voice of YHWH your God, keeping and observing all of these commandments that I enjoin on you today" [Dt 15,4-5].

It was the living memory of this precept that gave life to the prophets who lifted up their voices, not allowing the people to forget the marvels that their God had worked to take them out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery, and lead them into the promised land, where, during 250 years, their predecessors had tried to organise a fraternal egalitarian society, in keeping with the commandments.

Yesterday, today, and for all time, these promises of the Alliance hold true. If the voice of God is heeded and his commandments put into practice, all of society will be renewed, and that perverse, unjust division between rich and poor will be eliminated; a division which is the fruit of the idolatry of capital and profit, the God of the system. Now, more than ever, we need to burst open the horizons of our faith not allow ourselves to be suffocated by the ever-increasing pressures of neo-liberalism.

3. Gratuity and utopia

Contrary to what all the “owners of the world” may think, and going against all the plans of the new empires, it is necessary to reaffirm our faith in the gratuity of the God who saves, and also call his people to be faithful to the Alliance. This will give us the right to dream, keep alive the “utopia”, the dream of a different society, the New World where life is greater than all the attempts made against it. This utopia can become a reality, even if, at first only on a small scale, in our communities, associations, co-operatives, lay movements, and all the other forms of organisation invented by the people to resist the attacks of neo-liberalism. These brutal attacks have succeeded in breaking up the flow of popular resistance. The gratuity, the “grace”, which is the very core of the prophetic message, is perhaps, the only vaccine against the epidemic of “free market” that has contaminated the world. This vaccine rests in the hands of the people, and is the weapon of the poor of the earth.

This gratuity is plainly evident and becomes a reality in the solidarity that continues to exist in the midst of the poor and needy. It is essential to encourage and multiply these experiences of solidarity and sharing, the fundamental values for the reconstruction of the human person and human relationships. These experiences are the seeds of a New World, a world of justice and fraternity, which God through the prophets, promises as the fruit of fidelity to the Alliance.

The Breeding Ground for Prophecy

The rain comes from the heavens, but the seeds only sprout in the soil. The prophetic inspiration needs to fall on the ground of every day life, with all its complex facts and situations for prophesy to be able to sprout and come to life. Precisely because of this we need to recall the historical facts of the people of God during the VIII and VII centuries BC, a period of intense prophetic activity.

1. WHAT WAS HAPPENING DURING THE VIII AND VII CENTURIES BC?

1. From 800 to 750 BC.

The Assyrian Empire was now weaker. With this crisis the small nations began to prosper somewhat. Both the kingdom of Israel, in the north, under Jeroboam II [793-743 BC, - cf. 2Kg14, 23-29], and the kingdom of Judah, in the south, under Uzziah [781-740 BC – cf. 2Kg 15,1-7] experienced a period of prosperity. To the extent that the monarchy got stronger, the living out of the Alliance got weaker, in exactly the same proportion. Corruption, exploitation and social inequalities increased [Am 2,4-8; 3,10, 8,4-5] and the two sanctuaries, Jerusalem and Bethel, became symbols of power and with apparent divine protection [Am 2,5; 4,4; 5,4-6; 7,10-13]. While the kings got stronger, in the name of God, the people got poorer, with no chance of a reaction.

It was in this scenario that Amos left his hometown in the south, and went up north, with the mission to denounce the abuses, the growing contrast between the luxury of the mighty, the misery of the weak [Am6, 4-7] and the religious hypocrisy [Am 5,21-27].

2. From 750-700BC.

As the Assyrian Empire began to recover, it, in turn, started invading the surrounding nations [2Kg 15,18-19]. Frightened and cornered, Pekah king of Israel and Rezin king of Damascus launched a campaign to force Ahaz, king of Judah, to join them in battle against Assyria [2Kg 16,5-9]. This was the beginning of the “Assyrian-Edomite” war, which went on for four years [736-732 BC]. Ahaz, however, did not give in and instead looked for help to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria. He paid dearly for this help, affecting even the silver and gold of the temple [2 Kg 16,7-18]. It is in this situation that we find the prophecies of Hosea, in the north, Isaiah and Micah in the south.

The social chaos, resulting from the Assyrian-Edomite war, with the invasions, deportations and taxation can be clearly seen in the Book of Hosea. Also evident is the confusion caused by the official religion with its fertility rites, which reduce the God of Israel to just another Baal.

On the other hand, it is in Micah and Isaiah, that the situation in the south is treated. Micah raises up his voice against the injustices [Mi 2,1-2; 7,2-3], the abuses of the politicians [Mi 3,1-3] and the rich of the cities [Mi 6,9-12]. It is Isaiah that vigorously denounces the infidelity of the people and their false religion [Is 1,2-15], the corruption and debauchery of the ruling classes [Is 3,1-24; 5,8; 9,12-10,2] and does not spare his threats [Is 1,7-8; 5,26-30; 24,1-11].

Assyria invaded the kingdom of Israel and Samaria was completely destroyed in 722 BC [2Kg 17,3-6]. Those who could escaped by fleeing into Judah. Among those who escaped was a group of scribes, who joined with other scribes in Judah and started the renewal movement known as the “Deuteronomy movement”.

3. From 700 to 650 BC

The most outstanding political figure of this period was King Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, king of Judah from 716 to 687 BC. “He put his trust in YHWH, the God of Israel. No king of Judah after him could be compared with him – nor any of those before him” [2Kg 18,5]. He did everything to help those who, out of fidelity, wanted a new beginning and it was he who started the famous reform [2 Kg 18,3-6]. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and refused to serve him [2Kg 18,7] and the prophet Isaiah was his great councillor [2kg 19-20; Is 36-39].

Hezekiah’s successor was his son Manasseh [687-642 BC], who unlike his father, was one of the most criminal and most corrupt of all the kings in all the history of Israel. But he did not succeed in drowning out the voice of the prophets. “Then YHWH spoke through his servants, the prophets: since Manasseh, king of Judah has done these shameful deeds, acting more wickedly than all the Amorites did before him, and has led Judah itself into sin with his idols, YHWH, the God of Israel, says this: look, I will bring such disaster as to make the ears of all who hear it tingle. I will stretch over Jerusalem the same measuring line as over Samaria, the same plumb rule as for the house of Ahab” [2 Kg 21,10-13].

4. From 650 to 609 BC

Amon, son of Manasseh, was his successor as king, was every bit as evil as his father. He was assassinated two years later [642-640 BC]. However, the peasantry rebelled against those who had killed him and put Josiah, his son, on the throne, who at the time was only eight years old [2Kg 22,i]. Josiah reigned for 31 years, and, like his great grandfather Hezekiah, is highly praised in the Bible. After the discovery of the Book of the Law in the temple in the year 622 BC, he lead the famous reform, with the help of the prophet Huldah [2 Kg 22,15-20; 23,1-3]. The prophets that stand out during this period are Zephaniah [Zp1, 1], Jeremiah [Jr 1,1-3], Nahum and Habakkuk.

As the Assyrian Empire began to decay the Babylonian Empire began to impose itself. To prevent the Egyptian army from reinforcing the Assyrian forces against Babylon, Josiah marched against the Egyptians, and was defeated and killed during the first battle at Megiddo [2Kf 23,29]. Josiah's tragic death in 609 BC marked the end of the VII century, and the resulting despair that came over the nation can be felt from the words of Jeremiah [2 Cr 35,25; Jr 22,10].

11. RESISTANCE AND RENEWAL MOVEMENTS

During these two centuries various renewal movements appeared to which the prophets were closely connected.

1. The **Sons of the Prophets**. They lived in communities near the sanctuaries [cf. "From the Tribes to the Monarchy", volume III of this series, page 89].

2. The **Levites**. Their mission was to keep the memory of YHWH alive in the hearts of the people [Nb 18,20; Ex 32,25-29; Dt 33,8-11]. They usually showed up among the beggars, the orphans and the widows [Dt 14,29].

3. The **Rechabites**. Jonadab started this movement. They lived in tents and lived out the customs of the 40 years in the desert. This way they were a living memory of the Exodus and a living appeal to live the Alliance [Jr 35,1-19].

4. The **Poor of YHWH**. They appear in the Book of Zephaniah [Zp 2,3]. The obstinacy of their faith is registered in the 4 canticles of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah [Is 42,1-9; 49,1-6; 50, 4-9; 52,13-53,12].

5. The **Deuteronomic Movement**. Made up of people who came from the north, after the fall of Samaria and, upon arriving in the South, joined to those who wanted reforms. They reread the past in the light of the new situation.

STUDY HELP 4

Prophecy and Hope

In the history of the people of the Bible, God's action was felt as one great promise, which was their inexhaustible source of hope. Their liberation from Egypt and their success in the conquest of the Promised Land were, for them, the greatest examples of just how God kept the promise he made to Abraham [Gn 12,7]. Using the people's experience of God in their past history as a touch stone, the prophets mission was to give direction to the future and strengthen the hope of the people. The following are some of the factors that helped give content and strength to this hope.

1. The frustration caused by the monarchy gave life to hope in the Kingdom of God. At first, the monarchy had built up great expectations for the liberation of the people [1 S 9,16]. However, the kings did not form a monarchy in keeping with the demands of the Alliance [Dt 17,14-20]. Both in Israel [North] and in Judah [South] the monarchy was a carbon copy of the monarchies of any of the neighbouring nations. and in a very special way, of the Egyptian monarchy of the Pharaoh, "the house of slavery" [Ex 20,1; Gn 5,6]. The monarchy became an instrument of oppression for the people of God in the very land that had been promised as the land of freedom. At the end of the story of each of the kings we find the same refrain, "he did what was evil in the eyes of

YHWH". Of the kings of Judah, only Hezekiah [Si 48,22] and Josiah [Si 49,3] escape this condemnation.

This total frustration with the monarchy gave birth to a new hope, the figure of the ideal king, a new David, a Messiah, the restorer of the Alliance [cf. Jer 23,5; 33,15-17; Ez 34,23-24; Zc 3,8; 6,12]. Many of the Psalms echo this hope [Ps 2; 20; 21; 72; 89; 101; 132]. They awaken the people's recollections of the journey through the desert as they marched towards the Promised Land, and of the times before the monarchy, when the people organised themselves in the tribal system - the period when God himself was their king [Jz 8,23; 1 S 8,17]. Here we get an outline of the Kingdom of God that was later proclaimed by Jesus [Mk 1,14-15].

2. As men of faith, the prophets kept alive the certainty of the presence of God in the midst of his people, and they had no doubt that it was the hand of God himself that on the tiller of the boat of history. They reminded the people that God had given his own name as guarantee, and that they would, one day, feel the proof of his loving, faithful, strong and invincible presence: "You will know that I am YHWH" [Is 45,3; 49,23; 52,6; Jr 16,21; Ez 14,8]. During the Babylonian captivity, the disciples of Isaiah, turned the sorrow and depression of the people into a new hope, presenting the future as a new, renewed, enlarged and much better version of their past. "See how former predictions have come true, fresh things I now foretell; before they appear I tell you of them" [Is 42,9]. Everything will be renewed! A new heaven and a new earth [Is 66,17], a new Exodus [Is 41,17-20; 43,16-20], a new Alliance [Is 54,10; 55,3; 61,8]. Jeremiah and Ezekiel echoed the same hope of renewal: a new law engraved in the hearts of the people [Jr 31,33], a new heart and a new spirit [Ez 36,26]

3. After the return of the people from captivity, the traditional expression of prophecy slowly disappeared. Some people, when they noticed this complained: "There are no more prophets" [Psalm 74,9]. "The hand of God has changed!" [Ps 77,11]. "In the past YHWH answered his people" [Ps 99,6-8], now he has nothing to say. Prophecy became a thing of the past. However, to the extent that the people missed the "prophets of the past" [Zc 7,7], their desire and hope of a new form of prophecy grew.

This hope took on various forms. They hoped for someone like Moses, who would pass on to them the word of God [Dt 18,18] or someone like Elijah, who would reunite the people and restore the tribes of Israel [Ml 3,23; Si 48,10]. The new prophecy would be more abundant than of old and all the people would receive the gift of the spirit [Jl 3,1-2; Ez 39,29; Zc12, 10].

But prophecy had not disappeared. As was so well expressed by Frei Carlos Mesters in, *Profeta: saudade e esperança* - number 17/18 of the series **A Palavra an Vida** – page 38

"Prophecy can be compared to a perfume. At one stage, it was preserved in the phial of the lives of the great prophets. Now and then this phial opened up, and spread out its perfume into the atmosphere... During the exile, the phial was broken, and the perfume spread throughout the exiled people. Prophecy is like water, which slowly flows along the bed of the river, irrigating the lives of the people. During the exile, there were no more riverbeds, so the water filtered out into the four corners of the land. Now, there is no more river, but the same water still runs, more abundant than ever."

Prophecy appears above all in the person of the Servant of YHWH, the personification of the oppressed people [Is 41,8-9; 43,10; 44,1-2] and possesses all the qualities of the prophet: he will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit [Is 41,1; 61,1], he will

proclaim the Good News [Is 61,1], he will comfort those who suffer [Is 50,4], he will restore the tribes of Israel [Is 49,6], he will establish true justice and the law [[Is 42,3-4], he will stand up to the oppressors [Is 50,6-7]. Prophecy is the main spring for the restoration of the Law [Ez 40-48; Si 24,23] and is the seat of all popular wisdom [Si 24,33]. Prophecy is the tone of voice of the opposition: the Book of Ruth goes against the banishment of foreign women; the Book of Jonas laughs at the pretensions of those who think they have a monopoly over the truth; and finally, the Book of Job criticises those who, in the name of tradition, present themselves as being the defenders of the Lord.

4. For the prophets, the past is the inexhaustible source where all the necessary ingredients to nourish the hope of the people in times of despair can be found, when there is no hope left, no light to be seen at the end of the tunnel. The prophet is a photographer, who, contemplates the past, picks out some slides of the most beautiful moments in the life of the people with their God, puts these slides into the projector of faith, and projects them into the future, while saying to the people: “this is what you can hope for”.

Making prophecies about the future is like building a new wall using old bricks. They help the people feel at home, because these bricks are taken from the past. Prophecies are something like patchwork quilts: each individual piece has long been preserved in the trunk of the memory of the people. In the words of Saint Augustine: “The new is hidden in the old, the old blooms into the new”.

For the nations, and for each of their members, the memory of the past is the fountainhead that nourishes the hope of the future.

STUDY HELP 5

Vocation

Our very existence is a vocation, an answer to a call. An answer to the call of life, or better still, an answer to the call of God, the author of life. This call is made in very concrete circumstances, at a specific moment in time, in a specific place, in a specific family, in a community and in a very concrete society. Each of these elements brings with them responsibilities. First of all we are called to be faithful to life. Not only our own personal, individual lives, but to Life in all its universal amplitude.

Looking at the examples of the prophets in the Bible, we can see that there are other kinds of callings, and there are other answers to be given. It is from the earth of everyday existence that the roots of our mission get their nourishment. There is no such thing as a person that doesn't have a mission to fulfil.

The prophets are fully convinced that it was from God that they received their mission. All of them present themselves as heralds of the word of God. The majority of the prophetic books begin by saying, “The word of God was sent to....” This is the basis for their talking with complete liberty. And this is why they defy kings, priests and the mighty – all because of their fidelity to the God of the people and the People of God. In the name of God they hear the anguished cry of the people and come to their aid [Ex

3,7], denounce the injustices, criticise the false religion, make threats and demand conversion to make possible the fulfilment of God's promises and his blessings.

It is worth remembering some of the vocations described in the Bible.

- **Abraham**, called to be the father of a great nation, recover the blessing and the promised land, just does not believe in his mission, and invents a whole series of other projects instead [Gn 12,1-3; 15,1-6; 17,15-22; 22,1-18].
- **Moses**, considered to be the greatest of the prophets, called to liberate his people, receive the Law and seal the Alliance, resists this mission with all his power [Ex 3,10-13; 4.1.10.13], but eventually gives in.
- **Joshua**, called to succeed Moses and lead the people while taking possession of the land, could count on the help of God and is encouraged to be strong and courageous [Jos 1,2-9].
- **Deborah**, called to lead her people at a very critical moment of their history, mobilises the troops and commands the defence process [Jg 45].
- **Samuel** does not understand the call and needs to be helped by Eli, who tells him to be ready and waiting: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" [1 S 3,1-18].
- **Elijah**, one to be compared with Moses, is called upon to free his people from the idolatry which had been imported and imposed on them by king Ahab and the impious queen Jezebel, lives through moments of profound personal crisis [1Kg 19,3-9].
- **Elisha**, called by Elijah [1Kg 19,19-20] to be his successor [2Kg 2,15], in spite of the many unexpected adventures has a very decisive political role to play in the revolution of Jehu [2Kg 9,1-10].
- **Amos**, was called to leave behind his easy going farmers life in the kingdom of the south, and go North to denounce the oppression, was driven by an irresistible internal power [Am 3,3-8; 7,15].
- **Hosea** is called to transform his own personal life into a prophetic symbol of the fidelity of God, in spite of the infidelity of his people [Ho 1,1-3,5].
- **Isaiah** has a profound experience of God, discovers his own incapacity, but eventually gives in saying, "Here I am" [Is 6,1-13].
- **Jeremiah**, when he feels the call, stutters and looks for an excuse: "I am just a child" [Jr 4,1-10].
- **Ezekiel**, when he gets the call to be the watchman of his people, goes dumb, and remains so for some days [Ez 3,25-27].
- **Ruth**, called through her solidarity with her widowed mother-in-law [Ruth 1,15-18], brings back to mind the long forgotten laws which favour the people.
- **Judith**, called to liberate her people in a moment of extreme anguish [Jdt 8,1-36], places all her confidence in God, who is the "God of the humble, the help of the oppressed, the support of the weak, the refuge of the forsaken, the saviour of the despairing" [Jdt 9,11].
- **Esther**, chosen as queen of another nation [Est 2,15-17] is asked to put her own life at risk to save her people who have been condemned to extermination [Est 4,12-17].

The variation of ways used by God to call his servants and reveal to them his will is infinite. Each call from God causes a different reaction. Each one reacts in his or her own special way in the light of the mission received. Each one has to get involved in

a double fight: the fight for the transformation of the world and his own personal fight for conversion. Both of which are equally important.

STUDY HELP 6

The Prophets during the Captivity [609 BC – 538 BC]

The Babylonian captivity [587-538 BC] was every bit as significant in the history of the people of the Bible as the Exodus itself. They lived this experience as if it were a new Exodus, a new possibility of liberation through the action of YHWH.

This was not a very long period, but a very rich one, in terms of their experiences of the presence of God. Lost in the greatest crisis of their history, the people launched out on their search for the presence of the God of the Alliance, opening up new paths to the living of that Alliance. The result of this search is the Bible. The result, not only of their re-remembering of their past and of their repentance, but also of their hope and desire to be faithful to the Alliance and restart their journey.

During the captivity the people lost all the identity references: the land, the king, the Law, their worship and their traditions. They were back again as slaves in the land Abraham had left 1300 years previously. Living in this foreign land, in the midst of pagans, mesmerised by the ideology of the ruling classes, the people found their faith shaken to its very roots: where is YHWH? It was this question that caused them to do a rereading of their history, the result of which is the various writings, later put together into one book, the Bible. In this book, the people tried to pass on to future generations their historical experience and the new awareness gained through the captivity. By their rediscovery of the past, and with their feet firmly on the ground of the reality, they wrote a text that would serve as an enlightening beacon for the future.

The Bible did not just appear ready-made. To resist the culture, ideology and religion of their oppressors, the people, during the captivity, fell back on their traditions and their symbols. The Sabbath was a day consecrated to recalling the liberation from Egypt [Dt 5,12-15]. In small groups they began to come together to review their history and celebrate the presence of God [Ps 137]. This was the origin of the Synagogues. In the celebrations, putting together their memories of the past and their resistance, the writings slowly took shape:

1. **The Law:** while reviewing the history of the people, from the creation to the death of Moses, the priestly group took a major step towards the elaboration of the Law, which resulted in the Pentateuch [Gn, Ez, Lv, Nb and Dt].
2. **History:** the Deuteronomic theologians made a revision from the conquest of the land right up to the captivity [Jos, Jg, 1 and 2 S, 1 and 2 Kg].
3. **The Psalms:** In their celebrations they remembered the hymns, prayers and canticles from the past, a major part of which were attributed to King David [Ps 3-4; 51-72] and new canticles and prayers came into existence, based on their then situation, such as Psalm 137.
4. **The Prophets:** very important in this revision of history was the rereading of the message of the prophets who had lived prior to captivity. The writings brought together and updated during this rereading of history are known as The Law, History and The Psalms

On their return from captivity the people brought with them as the precious fruit of their captivity – The Sacred Scriptures.

“They did their very best to project, organise and even dream the future. This does not seem to have been a strong point of the “masters” who had preceded them. This was the job of the “disciples”. They gave shape to a new prophetic project. Zephaniah gave one of the co-ordinates. He identified the historical subject: ‘the poor of the earth’, ‘a weak oppressed people’ [Zp 2,3; 3,12]. Obviously, he is here referring to the exploited farm labourers [in 2,3], and to the marginalised people of the cities [in 3,12]. In Ezekiel this seed of the new society is to be identified as the slaves and exiles.

“Jeremiah gives us another decisive co-ordinate for this project: the land. The monarchy had enslaved the land, and caused the death of the small landowners, who had gone against the expropriation of the land and its appropriation by the king – a case in hand being that of Naboth [1Kg 21]. They had joined field to field [Is 5,8]. The redemption of this sacred inheritance takes the forefront as the symbol of the new, in favour of which Jeremiah dedicates his whole life [see Jr 29-40]. There is also another group of authorities who, in giving continuity to the prophet of Anathoth [Jeremiah], dedicated all their work to giving a new dimension to the meaning of the land for the people of God. We refer here to the group known as the “Deuteronomic School” which for example, gave us the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings. One of the objectives of this great collection is to give dignity to life in the land of milk and honey.

“A New Kingdom, without any shadow of doubt Davidic, slowly comes into existences through the action of these prophets. Habakkuk refers to this kingdom: it is ‘to save the anointed’ [Hab 3,13]. The theme: ‘and the sovereignty shall belong to YHWH’ [Ob 21]. Jeremiah and Ezekiel announced the new David [Jr 23,5-6; Ez 37,24]. This new David is to be a believer in YHWH and a lover of justice, and not of injustice or idolatry, as the majority of the monarchs of Israel and Judah had been”

Milton Schwantes: *Profeta – Saudade e Esperanca*.
No. 17/18 of the series **A Palavra na Vida**, page 22-23.

STUDY HELP 7

The Resurrection of the People

Ezekiel lived with his people who had been taken into slavery in Babylon. His prophecies arose from the dramatic situation of the deported people. He, like the rest of the captives, felt in the flesh, the suffering and insecurity of captivity, but was called by God to encourage his people to brave the crisis with a mature faith. He was a great fighter. “Harder than stone” [Ez 3,9], he was implacable in his fight against idolatry, the false prophets and the false securities offered. But he helped his people situate themselves in the wider historical context [Ez 16; 20; 23].

To understand the message of Ezekiel it is necessary to separate two distinct stages in his prophetic activity: before and after the fall of Jerusalem. In the first phase his attitude was one of accusation and alert, like that of a watchful guard [Ez 3,17]. His

oracles were of condemnation. However, in the second phase, his attitude changes radically and his oracles are ones of hope and consolation.

In the first phase [597-587], Ezekiel directs himself, basically to the people who had been deported into Babylon. But he still kept a close eye on the ruling group at home in Jerusalem, Zedekiah and his court. He disagreed completely with the efforts that were being made to form an alliance with Egypt against Babylon, [Ez 17], foreseeing the worst which was, in fact, confirmed by the facts. Both the captives living in Babylon and the inhabitants of Jerusalem all thought that king Jaconiah would shortly be freed, thus putting an end to the captivity. What they least expected was the total destruction of Jerusalem [Ez 5, 5-14; 6,1-10]. Ezekiel drew their attention to the causes of the first deportation: injustices and idolatry. But the very centre of corruption had been installed in the temple in Jerusalem [8,14-18]. If, instead of a conversion and a change in their ways of life, the people rebelled against the king of Babylon, a second deportation, much worse than the first, would certainly be inevitable. Like the watchman who warns of danger, the prophet did everything possible to open the eyes of the people. From chapter 12 to 24, with the vivacity of his imagination, he describes the abuses, the falseness of the prophets and prophetesses [Ez 13], and of the idolatrous elders [Ez14, 1-11]; he recalled the glorious beginning of the Alliance and the infidelities of Israel [Ez 16]; he foresaw the ruin of Jerusalem [Ez 24] and even the death of his wife became a sign [Ez 24, 15-25].

During the second phase, after the destruction of Judah, the prophet rebelled against the attitudes of the neighbouring nations, against whom he pronounced a series of oracles [Ez 25-32]. Feeling one with his devastated people, he tried to lift up their spirits, giving them certainty of a future liberation [Ez 36-39]. Now, in his vision of the glory of God, [Ez10-11] the prophet shows that he, God, was not to be confined to the temple, but had gone with his people into captivity. To pass on to his people this certainty, the prophet repeats more than 50 times the refrain “You will know that I am YHWH”.

The vision of the dry bones was the high point of the prophecies of Ezekiel. In an all evolving way he describes his own experience: the hand of YHWH lead him into a valley full of scattered bones and made him move around in their midst going in all directions. It was the picture of the people in captivity, in the midst of whom the prophet was circulating. A situation of death, and the only hope left was that of a resurrection. The prophet did not hesitate to give this guarantee [in a convincing way], that the spirit of the Lord would perform that resurrection.

We today, have the same guarantee, which was sealed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. From it we get the strength to resist and, against all the plans and calculations of those who condemn the people to live in a captivity with no apparent way out, we can believe in the future and work towards its formation.

The last part of the Book of Ezekiel [40-48], after the destruction of the final menacing enemy, Gog [38-39], we have a detailed description of the new temple and the new Israel.

STUDY HELP 10

Different projects for the reorganisation of the people

The edict of Cyrus in 538 BC allowed the exiles to return to the homeland. They came back to Judah and Jerusalem all keyed up to restart their lives, to rebuild the holy city and the temple of the Lord. However, not all were of the same frame of mind [cf. Jr 24,27; 29]. Neither did they have the same proposal as the prophets. Ezekiel's proposal was a nationalist one [Ez 40-48], while Isaiah had a universal one [Is 48-52]. As well as this, so many people had remained on in Judah and had made their own lives, without taking into account those who were now returning. To complicate more the situation, the Persians, the rulers with all the power in their hands were in control of everything. The conflicts become evident in the different attempts made at reconstruction.

1. Project number 1: Zerubbabel and Joshua.

The first of the families to come back in 538 BC was lead by Sheshbazzar [Ezra 1,11] who, straight away, began the reconstruction of the temple [3,1-13]. The work, however, had to be interrupted, due to the opposition coming from the Samaritans [Ezra 4,23-24]. Around the year 520 BC during the reign of Dario [521-486 BC], a still larger group returned, lead by Zerubbabel, a descendent of the king of Judah [cf. 1 Ch 3,17-19], something that gave New Hope to the re-establishing of the monarchy. The prophet Haggai encouraged this hope [Hg 2,22-23]. Possibly the Persians went against the idea and the plan that went ahead was that of the reformation based on the temple and the worship, thanks to the intervention of the high priest Joshua, who could count on the support of the prophet Zechariah [Zc 6,9-15]. . The Persians were happy with this, because by giving up the idea of political independence, the whole restoration movement is going to be concentrated in the hands of the high priest. The rebuilt temple with all its religious practices would then be the pillar for the rebuilding of the nation of God's chosen people. The new temple was inaugurated in 515 BC. [Ezra 6,15].

2. Second Project: Nehemiah

Nehemiah was one of the Israelites who held an important position in the court and consequently enjoyed the favours of the king Artaxerxes I [465-423 BC]. On becoming aware of the difficult situation of his people in Jerusalem [Ne1, 3] Nehemiah asked the king to allow him to go and "rebuild the city of my ancestors' tombs" [Ne 2,7]. He was quite a competent individual and before making any big decisions, he first examined well all the situation. Feeling indignant with the gap between the rich and the poor, he called a meeting of all those who were exploiting the people and demanded that, in the name of God, they give back to the poor the lands that had been stolen and also pardon the accumulated debts [Ne 5,7-13]. He himself gave the example [Ne 5,14-15]. He came up against a lot of opposition, not only from outside, from the Samaritans, but also internally from the well off people and the nobility [Ne 6,17-19]. He tried to restore the family and clan system [7,4-72] and took care of security by rebuilding the walls around the city [Ne 2-11; 3,38; 5,16]. That was his first undertaking between 445 and 433 BC [cf.

Ne 2,1; 13,16]. After going back and spending some time with the king, he returned on a second mission. In view of the abuses, he set himself to the task of enforcing the Law and protecting the people from the bad foreign influence [Ne 13,19-22. 29-30].

3. Third Project: Ezra

Ezra was a doctor of Law, well read and very well respected. He got from the king of Persia the mission of reorganising the Jewish community through the strict observance of the Law and ritualistic norms [cf. Ezra 7-8]. The measures being taken by Nehemiah, who was more concerned about the social problems, were in no way pleasing to the Persian king, who then nominated Ezra and whose program is very much along a religious and legalistic line. Ezra became worried about the purity of the “holy race” [Ezra 9,2]. He ordered all foreign wives be rejected and prohibited any new mixed marriages [Ezra 9-10]. Another important point of his reformation plan was the encouragement given by him to the strict observance of the Law, which was explained by Ezra himself and the Levites [Ne 8,1-8]. It was during this period that the Pentateuch got its final touches.

4. Fourth Project: Popular Resistance

All of these projects had one drawback in common: they were all promoted and supported by the rulers, the kings of Persia. They had no roots in the lower classes, nor did they have any liberating features. However, resistance on the part of the people at this time was not absent. Signs of resistance can be found in other books of the Bible such as Ruth, Jonah, Job and Ecclesiastes. Frei Carlos Mesters had this to say about the Book of Ruth:

“Imagine a family like that of Naomi: no food, no land, and no future; forced to live far from home, without the support of any relatives. Imagine too, the projects that spoke of the temple and the altar, the purification of the race and the observance of the Law, the security of the city of Jerusalem, the giving back of what had been stolen from the people. In spite of all the good will on the part of those responsible, these different projects in no way met the needs of Naomi and her family, because they still continued without enough to eat, a piece of land to live off and without any hope for the future. Imagine that you are a member of that family. Put yourself in her place and then read the book of Ruth.

As you read pay close attention to the following:

1. The value of a story is not only in what it says, but also in what it doesn't say. Now the first thing that strikes you when you read the book of Ruth is that there is no mention made of either kings or priests. There is no talk of the temple or the altar. Jerusalem is not mentioned and neither are the sacrifices that took place there. Based on that alone one can draw their own conclusions about what the Book of Ruth thinks of the project of Zerubbabel and Joshua.
2. The second thing that catches our attention is that at the center of the story we have a foreigner. Ruth is a foreigner! The Book even goes as far as to ask God to put Ruth on equal footing with Rachel and Leah, the two mothers that are at the very roots of the People of God [Ruth 4,11; Gn 35,23-26]. In other words, it implicitly admits that the new mother of the People of God can be a foreigner. And from that, one can guess the opinion of the Book of Ruth about the project of Ezra.
3. The third thing that catches our attention is the way used by Boaz to solve the problem of Naomi and Ruth. Boaz belongs to that social class called by Nehemiah to carry out the agrarian reform. However, in the book, the initiative is not taken by Boaz, but by the two poor widows. They are the ones to do all the planning. Nehemiah does not even appear, and the action of Boaz is limited to carrying out the plans. So from that one can guess the opinion of the Book of Ruth concerning the project of Nehemiah.”

- *Ruth, uma historia da Biblia* – Ed. Paulinas - pages 26-28