

The Holy Scriptures: Nourishment of the Faithful, Part Three

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Then what?

After revealing Himself as “the God of our Fathers,” God began to reveal Himself through His attributes by practical application. The people He had chosen were ignorant and ungrateful: “Not because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Deut 7:7). They were a stubborn people who understood only practical things with great difficulty: “For you are a stiff-necked people” (Deut 9:6). Is this not the reality of human beings even in our present day? God first revealed to Moses that He is the Existing One: “I am who I am” “ehye ‘ăšer ‘ehye” in Hebrew (Exodus 3:14), and the journey effectively started. God became known through His action in nature: He became our God, the One Who takes care of us. He is the God Who made the Red Sea into dry land, Who fed us in the wilderness with manna, Who brought water out of the flinty rock, Who healed us from snake bites, etc. Thus, God appeared as the Master of nature.

Confrontations began with other tribes and nations. These conflicts were common in those ancient days, especially among nomadic peoples (we can recall the tribal invasions, the raids of the Bedouins). The land was still under various forms of colonization and occupation. Here, God appeared as the Master of history, but His program with His people was different. Although He is supremely powerful and mightier than all gods, He does not always grant victory to His tribe. When they win, He is the victor and the strongest, and when they lose, He has withdrawn from them His support yet remained the strongest. Why did God abandon us? This question recurs many times in the Old Testament. We still ask today why God left us in this or that ordeal. Why does He allow temptations? Why doesn't He stop evils from happening to us? Do we not often behave like the people of the Old Testament? Do we not act as though God is exclusively our God, as if we were His chosen people and other peoples are not of His creation, and are, at best, of a lower rank?

God's answer was, I am with you as long as you are faithful, but when you abandon My covenants, I leave you to what you have left Me for. They knew, then, that He is the sovereign God and that they must obey Him. His laws and commandments require moral change and spiritual transcendence.

It was time for humans to rise to the level of justice. God's law for them became to establish justice: “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:24). This was

a qualitative leap for a society dominated by vengeance and disproportionate retaliation.

What does this God want next?

Justice is good, yet it is merely a step towards knowing God, but not in itself sufficient. Man must move from the letter to the spirit, from the laws to their goal, from the canons to their purpose, from the rituals to the heart of the Lord. He must move from the flesh to the soul. Mercy is more important than justice (see Matthew 9:13). Animal sacrifice is a symbol of the sacrifice of the heart: “Sacrifices to God are a broken spirit” (Psalm 50:17). Worship is not in hymns, incense, and grand celebrations but in mercy, justice, and kindness. This God seeks hearts of flesh, not stone (read from the prophets, especially Isaiah and Joel).

However, the harshness of man drives him to resist spiritual transcendence. Hence, exile was a means of purification from worldly and eternal impurities. God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to destroy the ancient temple, thus mocking the people who tried to confine Him to it. In the exile in Babylon, they had spent a thousand years with this God, yet they still were unable to grasp that He is the one true God, not confined to any place – not even the temple of Jerusalem. They lamented: “By the rivers of Babylon... how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 136:1). Their concern was whether He would hear their song, as if they were far removed from Him. The shock of exile was severe yet purifying and cleansing. The Babylonian captivity created the faithful remnant who remained loyal to their God’s teachings and aligned their lives with His commandments. From them would come the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, and all who would accept Jesus Christ.

In light of this reading, we understand the holy scriptures and hear God’s word directed to us personally. Such a reading recognizes that the holy scriptures are a religious book, not a history book, although they contain elements of history. They are not a book of science and secular knowledge, even if they mention information that may align or conflict with contemporary scholarship. They are not a book of human wisdom, although they used the wisdom of the time to educate and refine humanity. They are the journey of God with humanity – a personal journey and intimate companionship – culminating in His death on the cross for them and their salvation. They are a book where we encounter our God, get to know Him, and hear His word.

Shall we now begin to understand our Christian reading of the Holy Scriptures?