

OLD Testament

Eighteen centuries before Jesus Christ many nomadic tribes leave Chaldea along with their flocks to go and to live in Egypt. Among these tribes and nomadic clans there are a certain number of families whose chief is Abraham. For Abraham – quite insignificant for the historians –, this forced migration was accompanied by a great hope: God had called him and had promised him an extraordinary recompense: “Abraham, all generations will be blest in you.”

When God revealed himself to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they were still nomads; they shared a simple religion with other nomads, an attachment to the “God of their forebears” and the veneration of a number of family idols. Their meeting with the Living God led them to a new awareness: God watches over those whom he chooses. Many trials seemed to contradict God’s promise to them; but each time God intervenes in favor of his faithful people. This led to the establishment of a privileged relationship between God and the patriarchs, marked by God’s fidelity to his word and by the unshakeable confidence of his faithful people. Through them, Israel was incited to contemplate both the marvels of God for those he has chosen and the unfailing faith of their ancestors.

Six centuries later, descendants of the patriarchs were in the desert being guided by Moses towards the Promised Land. The sojourn at Horeb was decisive: it was here that the nomadic clans were to live a spiritual experience, such that the biblical text would never cease referring to it. God solemnly committed himself to his people at the same time that he gave them a Law: the rule of a covenant with God and a code of personal and communal behavior for Israel. The word spoken to Abraham was echoed by the message of Sinai. *The Promise, the Alliance and Salvation* will be the three pillars of Israel’s faith, and the strong point of the first five books of the Old Testament.

With the entry to the Promised Land, Israel was confronted by other people much more culturally advanced. For more than two thousand years these people had an urban civilization, developed agriculture, established commercial relations within the region of the Near East, and beyond. This civilization, brilliant but pagan, would be a constant stumbling block for the faith of Israel. God sent prophets to his people; they were his representatives. David took hold of a small Canaan town and made it his capital: *Jerusalem*. To it he brought the Ark of the Covenant, the visible sign of the presence of God in the midst of his people. From this date, not only did the Holy City enter into the history of God’s people but its vocation surpassed time and history as it appears in the last pages of Revelation as a figure of humanity definitively reconciled with God. Solomon, in building *the Temple* of Jerusalem, which in time would be recognized as the only legitimate sanctuary, gave his people a rallying center: “God’s dwelling place.”

Condemnation for Israel’s numberless infidelities, remembrance of God’s tireless

mercy towards Jerusalem, the demand for truth and sincerity in the cult of the Temple, proclamation of a coming salvation: all these are at the heart of the prophets' message.

With the approach of the end of time the meditation of Israel became more intense. Many trials refined hopes which were too human. With the prayer of *the psalms*, with edifying narratives or maxims, with the development of humankind and society, sages undertook to guide Israel in the last stages of its journey towards the One who would fulfill all things. The Wisdom Scripture which constitutes the last and third part of the Old Testament may appear less coherent than the Law or the Prophets; they are in fact the reflection of a people distraught and often divided. This was the time when God formed "a small remnant" for himself in the midst of a nation attracted and carried away by temptations to power, and the confusion between the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God.

But after so many accumulated experiences by the people of Israel, a period of crisis takes place: where God lead them to overcome the greatest challenges of faith and of history. It is then that Jesus comes.

The 46 books of Old Testament make up the first and most voluminous of the two parts of the Bible. It concerns the gradual preparation of Israel for the definitive and eternal Covenant that God would seal with humankind in the person of Jesus Christ.

Just as items in a library might be classified differently by one or another librarian, so the 46 books of the Old Testament were classified in different ways from the first centuries of the Christian era. Modern editors of the Bible have had to choose between the two most frequent classifications adopted by the ancient manuscripts: the order of the Hebrew bible or the order of the Greek bible.

In classifying among "the prophets" the books recording that span of history, the Hebrew Bible highlights the originality of these texts. For the Old Testament as well as for the New, every event carried the word of God: history is not told for the pleasure of knowing the past, but rather to witness God's fidelity towards his people, to know his will, and so prepare us to welcome the grace of salvation. In this way every biblical text is "prophetic."

It is generally the order of the Hebrew bible that we have adopted for the present edition. So to begin we find the five books of the Old Testament, called **the Law**, the Torah for Hebrew-speaking Jews, the Pentateuch for the Greek-speaking Jews. We see in them God in action in human history to liberate a people he wants to make his own. We see God instructing his people and making sense of their history.

Then come the **PROPHETIC BOOKS**: God intervenes in history by the intercession of the prophets to whom he communicates his Word and his Spirit "to destroy and to build, to uproot and to plant." These inspired prophets are going to play a decisive role in the education of Israel's faith.

Finally we have the **WISDOM BOOKS**, that is to say a group of many writings under the most varied forms which make us enter into communion with the prayer, the wisdom and morality of the old covenant people. They teach the art of serving God in everyday life and of becoming responsible persons in our life of faith.