

CHAPTER TWO

SALVATION - AS HISTORY

We noted earlier that it is the tradition of the Church that God has revealed Himself not only in the history of Israel and in the time and person of Jesus, but throughout all of human history “in the things he has made” (Romans 1:19-20). St. Paul also declared that the precepts of the Jewish Law have been “inscribed on the hearts” of the Gentiles who are saved outside the Law by following their conscience (Romans 2:13-16). From the beginning of time the “creative spirit of God” has moved in the world of mankind and nature (Jn.1:1-4). (Read again pp. 7-10 in Ch.1 on universal revelation.) In summary: *It is the developing awareness of God’s universal, gracious self-communication in the history of mankind to which the Bible gives witness, the essence of which we call revelation.*

This last point is very important. We talk a great deal about “salvation history” as an account of how God “acted” in the history of His people, Israel. However, as we mentioned above, this should be seen as a specific instance of “the developing awareness of God’s universal, gracious self-communication”. In other words, it is not as if God acted in the history of Israel, but was not acting in the history other peoples. In *Word and Revelation*, Urs von Balthasar concludes that the Fathers of the Church were not wholly wrong in their belief that there was a Gentile salvation history. In *The Theology of Revelation*, Moran states: “The ultimate indivisibility of sacred and profane history will become evident only from the perspective of the final judgment” (p.178)

Without being pantheistic, God can be called the matrix of all human history or the ultimate ground of all being and, therefore, the ultimate source of all goodness experienced in the history of human beings. History, *seen in depth*, became a symbol or sacrament of the presence of God in His creation. It is the unique gift to Israel that through the religious experiences of Moses and the prophets they became “aware” of this fact and translated it or mediated it through an interpretation of their history. It is this special, explicit “awareness” that we call revelation.

As their history unfolded, the Israelites distinguished themselves from their pagan neighbors by refusing to worship nature, make images of their God or trying to manipulate their God through superstitious or magical rites. Their God, Yahweh, was creator of all nature and thus above all created things. The sun and moon were not gods, but lights created by Yahweh. Statues and idols were merely the work of human hands and could not contain Yahweh. Plants and animals were not seats of magic, but were created by Yahweh and given over to the power and for the use of mankind (Genesis).

So where was the God of Israel to be found? He was to be found not in nature or idols, but in history, the history of His people Israel. God was seen as present in the wanderings of their ancient forefather Abraham, in the escape from Egypt and in their conquest of Canaan. Their history was so sacred, that their law required them to make an annual commemoration of the most important event in their history, the Exodus (Passover). For

the Israelites their history was seen as the sacrament of God's continuing presence in their lives.

So when Israel was first gathered together as a people by Moses and experienced freedom from oppression in Egypt, it was revealed to them, through the religious experience of Moses and the prophets, that God was the ultimate source of their unity as a people and their freedom from oppression. However, seen from our historical vantage point, it is equally true that in the history of all other nations, whenever they experienced unity based on love of self and others or when they experienced freedom from oppression, God was also "acting" in their history as the creative ground and ultimate source of all goodness. That same "creative movement", identified by Moses and proclaimed by the prophets as the love and power of Yahweh, was also calling other nations to unity, peace and freedom and was operative in their lives and their histories as a people, but they were *simply not aware* of it at all or in the same explicit way as Israel or as definitively as Christianity.

St. Paul alludes to this inexplicit revelation when speaking to the Greeks of Athens:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To an unknown god". What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. (Acts 17:22ff)

A Brief Historical Outline

In this chapter, we will certainly not attempt to cover the entire history of universal revelation or even revelation throughout the OT. We will confine ourselves to an examination of the Exodus event as the primary example of the developing awareness of God's gracious self-communication as it became more explicit in the history of the Old Testament people and to examine the concept of God as savior as experienced within this revelatory process. We shall also examine briefly the concepts of sacrifice and covenant because of their importance not only for OT theology, but also for NT theology as it attempted to interpret and understand of the work of Jesus.

In a way, the entire history of the OT is a history of salvation. Salvation is not merely a concept, but a lived or perhaps interpreted experience of God seen acting as savior in the history of this particular people. Looking back on their history, the OT people believed that salvation was something they had seen and experienced -- their freedom from Egypt and their life as a people. They believed that the source of this freedom and their life as a people was God and God alone. Thus their literature, the OT, is riddled with affirmations that God did this or that and God said this or that. There was no such thing as secular history, it was all sacred. They owed everything to the providence of God. They did not save themselves -- salvation was a gift, a grace, totally unmerited.

The fundamental reference point for this experience of salvation was a singular event -- the Exodus. The Exodus marked the real beginning of the OT people. All events prior to

the Exodus (e.g. stories of Abraham, Noah, Adam and Eve, etc.) were understood and presented in the light of the interpretation of the Exodus experience and the subsequent history of the OT people.

Briefly stated, the uniqueness of the OT faith was that their allegiance was only to one God, Yahweh, the God of Moses. In their faith, this God acted and revealed Himself in human history and took the initiative in creating a binding relationship of steadfast love between Himself and His people.

The Bible narrative itself gives no indication of the literary form which contains its message. The pre-history as related in Genesis includes non-historical events (creation stories, the Flood, the Tower of Babel) and some events with a historical basis, related in legendary form, (Abraham and his family) all of which receive their meaning and theological significance from a much later time, but are set in the real historical context of the ancient Near East. Given these observations, we will sketch pre-Exodus and post-Exodus events *as chronologically presented* in the biblical narrative, beginning with legendary stories of the pre-Exodus era that are, in fact, set in a time frame that can be identified within the actual history of the ancient Near East. There are indeed some factual errors in this history, but they are not fundamental to the overall story. An examination of material prior to Abraham will be covered in the next chapter.

These “historical” events began sometime in the 18th century BC with a man called Abraham. While it is true to say that Abraham was a legendary figure, it is highly probable that he was a real historical figure (legendary does not mean fictional), although his “religious experiences” are probably imputed to him from the post-Exodus experiences of the OT people.

His life is presented in a historical context that, in general, reflects actual historical events in the Near East of the 18th century BC. Abraham was undoubtedly an Amorite, identified in language, culture and religion with a people whose culture made major contributions to the history of the Ancient Near East from 5,000 BC to 1,600 BC. Amorites established the First Babylonian Dynasty whose greatest king was Hammurabi, who reigned from 1792 to 1750 BC.

As a possible participant of the Amorite incursion into Syria, Abraham is portrayed as migrating with his father, Terah, from “Ur of the Chaldeans” to the northern city of Haran. From there Abraham and his family journeyed to the land of Canaan, where the Lord “appeared” to Abraham and promised him this land for his descendants. Driven by famine to Egypt, Abraham later returned and entered into a covenant with God who promised the land to his descendants. Later the God of the Exodus would be said to speak these words to Moses: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” Ex. 3:6.

Abraham was succeeded by his son Isaac, the father of Jacob, who fathered twelve sons who would give their names to the Twelve Tribes of Israel. During a time a famine, the family of Jacob sought refuge in Egypt. Living there for a time in peace, they were later

subjugated to forced labor by the Egyptians. Under the leadership of Moses (1290 BC?) they escaped from Egypt and fled to the desert where they were formed into a people, through a covenant with God, who revealed Himself by the name of Yahweh. After years of a semi-nomadic tribal life in the desert, they attacked and entered the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. No doubt many of the people already living in the land of Canaan became part of the people of Israel. Operating as a loose tribal confederation, in times of crisis they were organized by leaders known as Judges. Finally, the tribes established a monarchy under Saul. Saul was succeeded by David and his son Solomon (1000 - 922 BC) who molded the tribes into a kingdom.

After the death of Solomon, the kingdom split in two - north and south - known as Israel and Judah respectively. These two tiny kingdoms became pawns in the great power struggles of the empires surrounding them. The Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian empire (722 BC) and the Southern Kingdom fell to the Babylonians (586 BC), after political domination by Assyria for more than a century. After the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, many of the leaders and people of Judah were taken into exile in Babylon, until Babylon itself was taken by the Persians (539 BC). Through the lenient policies of Cyrus the Persian king, the people were allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

Following two centuries of Persian rule, the people, now known as Jews (from the tribe of Judah), came under Greek domination as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great (332 BC). Alexander and especially his successors tried to impose the Greek (Hellenistic) culture on the conquered peoples, including the Jews. The Jews steadfastly resisted all attempts and finally revolted under the leadership of a family known as the Maccabees (170 BC). After nearly a century of independence, the Jewish nation fell to the power of Rome, when Pompey entered Jerusalem in 63 BC. Roman domination continued through and after the time of Jesus.

From a secular point of view, this is the history of a small nation caught up in the upheavals of other great nations. However, we must remember that for the OT people and for ancient people in general there is no such thing as "secular" history. For them all history is alive with the activities of the "gods". The rain did not fall because of the right combination of atmospheric conditions, but because the gods made it rain. Thus the gods are active in ordinary life and had to be kept in a good mood through magic or worship.

This is too vast a subject to be treated here, but it is important to remember that the notion of "God acting in history" was not considered as something unusual, not a surprise supernatural intervention in secular history, but actually taken for granted. They did not make a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane as later generations would do. Our post-Darwinian scientific world of change, natural selection, randomness, chaos and indeterminacy would, of course, have been unthinkable. The unique testimony of the OT people was not that God was actively involved in their history. This was the assumption of all ancient religions. Their unique testimony was to the *kind of God* with whom they were involved. This was a God of faithfulness and promise. A God who related to them in a covenant of blood, a covenant of life. He was their God and they

were His people.

So it is quite natural for the OT people to assume that history must be *interpreted by faith*. It is here that God is believed to have revealed Himself and indicated the ultimate dimensions of human life. This particular faith perspective, originating with this obscure people, has altered human consciousness and the course of human history in a unique and unparalleled way. From the Jews we received much in western civilization which we take for granted. The Jews gave us monotheism, the glimpse of the one God who creates, sustains and saves. From the Jews we received our notion that history is linear, with a beginning and an end, an end in which God will finally triumph, in contrast to the pagan cyclic view of history with no final consummation. And from the Jews we received the theological matrix for the event of Jesus the Christ.

Through the ups and downs of this history, from the Exodus through the Roman occupation in the time of Jesus, the OT people either experienced salvation or were in need of salvation. Their experience of salvation was simple: God took them from their various conditions of disunity and slavery and united them into a people. Salvation was an experience of a unifying power, mediated through the leadership of Moses and later the kings, through which they became one with each other as a people and at one with God in a covenant of love. For them, salvation was something they could see and experience, it was the stuff of ordinary life, God active in their lives making them into a nation.

Salvation was an eternal promise of a faithful God, but its fulfillment demanded a faithfulness to the covenant on the part of the people. Their history was the drama of their faithfulness or unfaithfulness to this covenant which was the required condition for God's salvation to become effective in their history. It was the message of the prophets that God was always faithful, but the people were not.

The Exodus Event

Because the Exodus event is so central the OT understanding of history and of the God who directs this history, we need to take a closer look at what the Exodus meant to the OT people. It can never be viewed as secular history, but always seen within the context of faith as salvation history.

Note: There will be no attempt here to apply exhaustive scholarly methods to this brief examination of biblical texts. Was the experience of Moses actually a primitive, non-rational divination or experience of the holy (see Otto) reconstructed hundreds of years later after the Exile in the literary form of a human dialogue with God? Was God known and worshiped as Yahweh from the time of Abraham or introduced by Moses who may have borrowed it from the mountain god of the Kenites? Was Moses in any modern sense a monotheist? Was there a strictly developed monotheism in the OT prior to the Exile? Was it only a small band of refugees who left Egypt rather than the millions alluded to in the OT narrative of the Exodus? Were the basic laws said to be given at Sinai actually

borrowed in substance from the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, which antedates the Mosaic law by hundreds of years? From the perspective of modern history are the accounts of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob actually legendary folk tales of real but shadowy figures with a theological twist?

For our purposes, the answers to these questions are not of critical importance. This is not to say that it does not matter whether some parts of the OT have a historical base or not, or that the historical reality of someone like Moses is unimportant. Undoubtedly Moses was a historical character, even though there is not a scrap of information about him except in the OT.

However, this is not the place to discuss nature of the historical enterprise as such, but perhaps it is sufficient to note that all history involves some degree of interpretation. It is not simply that certain historical events took place, but what did these historical events mean to the people involved.

Our immediate interest is *theological*. Whether the theological message is couched in myth, folk tales, saga, legend, history, borrowed law codes or whether the theology of Exodus is primarily the theology of Moses or represents a post-exilic theology refined over hundreds of years by priests and prophets is not of primary importance for us. Our goal is to extract the theological message, the faith of the OT people, no matter who mediated the message or what literary vehicle or form was used in its presentation.

That the Exodus is the central historical event and marks the beginning of the OT people is beyond dispute. As Christians celebrate and participate in the event of Jesus Christ through the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, so too the Jews recall and make present the Exodus in the Passover celebration. The prophets give further testimony as they recall the Exodus as the beginning of the people (Amos 3:1-2; Hosea 11:1; Ezekiel 20:5-6; Micah 6:4; Jeremiah 2:4-7). The importance of the Exodus is also recalled in a beautiful confession of faith which the worshiper was to make as he presented his first fruits to the Lord:

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great and mighty and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou O Lord, hast given me. (Deut 26:5-10)

Throughout their history, the OT people knew and worshiped God as the Lord and savior who brought them out of the land of Egypt -- an experience of freedom, community and oneness with God -- peace.

The central human figure in the Exodus is Moses. His early life story is contained in Chapter 2 of the Book of Exodus. Born of the oppressed Semites of Egypt, he is saved from death and raised in the royal household. One day he observes an Egyptian maltreating one of his kinsmen and kills him (Ex. 2:11-12). He then flees to the land of Midian where he marries and lives with the Kenites, a Midianite clan.

Here in the wilderness, while tending sheep, Moses has a deep religious experience. An experience of an Other taking the initiative and breaking in to his consciousness in some way. This experience, like those recorded of other OT prophets, was totally unexpected and in a way almost unwelcomed, certainly not of his own making.

This encounter with God is described in the story of the “burning bush”, as related in Exodus 3:2: “The angel of the Lord appeared to him in the flame of a burning bush.” The rest of the story is sheer poetry. There is no need to objectify the “burning bush” or the “angel”, as if they could be captured on video tape or visible to a casual observer. Fire and the “angel of the Lord” are terms which are frequently used in OT literature as symbols of the manifestation of God. Whatever Moses actually saw or experienced was transformed into an objective “sign” of the divine presence and indicated that he was standing on “holy ground” in the presence of a god.

With the plight of his people weighing heavily on his mind, Moses perceived that this god was calling him to return to Egypt and liberate his kinsmen. In answer to his inquiry, Moses declared that God revealed His name -- Yahweh. Through this religious experience, Moses believed that God had made known to him His purpose, His demands and His promise.

As Anderson explains in his classic work, *Understanding the Old Testament*:

The “voice of God” did not come literally out of a burning bush, but out of a historical situation that was illumined with new meaning and depth as Moses reflected on it. In that historical crisis the God of the fathers made known his purpose, his demand, and his promise...In antiquity, this (knowing God’s name) was an important question, not just because it was popularly believed that there were many gods,...but because it was believed that the name is filled with mysterious power and significance, for the name represents the innermost self or identity of a person...Moses’ question, then, represented an attempt to know the mystery of the divine nature - that is, the name of God. (p33)

Expressing unwillingness at first (Ex 4:1-18), Moses finally responded to God’s call and returned to Egypt. He urged his people to believe in God and His promise to deliver them out of their bondage. With great color and imagery, signs and wonders, the drama unfolds. The story of a people of faith and the power of their God over the oppressors. They finally find themselves freed from Egyptian power and their oppressors crushed (Ex 5-14). Moses continues to lead them through the desert where God sustains, guides and protects them (Ex. 15:2-17). Finally, on the third moon after their flight from Egypt,

they come to Mt. Sinai, where the true birth of the Old Testament people took place (Ex. 19). Here too we find the primitive origins of the Church.

Before proceeding further, let us look at the theological message contained in the events thus far. We have, first of all, a people subjugated and in virtual slavery, helpless to improve their lot. Symbolically, this is seen as the situation of all mankind hopelessly caught up in the slavery of sin, with the resultant disunity and devastation of human life. God graciously “intervenes”. In this religious experience, God takes the initiative and becomes present in power and vision to Moses and through him becomes in like manner present to His people. Moses is the first OT prophet (defined as “one who speaks for another”) and as such is a sacrament of the presence of God to his people. It is the function of the prophet to perceive in historical events a depth of meaning that is not obvious to everyone. History is interpreted in depth by the prophet. To quote Anderson:

God’s revelation comes through events to persons whose eyes are opened to perceive in a historical crisis a depth of meaning that is not obvious to everyone.(p. 37)

It is extremely important to note that this “intervention” on their behalf is not seen as due to any prior goodness on their part, but is completely free - a grace (gift), the grace of election. All that is required on their part is an act of faith, a living faith in which they dedicate their individual and corporate lives to following the call of God.

In terms of the history of religion, this is a strange new god, a god who acts to save this people *because of their need and not their virtue*. And their need is unqualified, they cannot save themselves. And their virtue or lack of it is not part of the equation, it is a free act of unmerited love. Their salvation takes concrete form in their improbable rescue from the forces of evil (Egypt) and a new life as a community formed, guided and protected by God. Salvation is experienced as freedom, unity and peace brought about by the free initiative of God.

So it is that God revealed to all of us, by means of this theologically interpreted, historical experience of the OT people, that the Creator/Savior God is the One who is constantly calling us to freedom, unity and peace. If we give ourselves over (in living faith) to God’s call we will indeed find salvation. For God is calling us to fulfill our true human destiny, which is to live in peace. It is not that God *becomes* Savior at the Exodus or even in Jesus, but that in these two fundamental events, God is revealed as such and His power is uniquely available through the Exodus event and in a final, explicit way in Jesus.

Note: We cannot help but speak of God in human terms, this is the only language available to us. The OT is full of reports that God “said” this or that or God “did” such and such. And while we constantly predicate human attributes to God - forgiveness, love,

anger, saving, promising - we know that we do so only in an analogous way. We know that we cannot speak of God in univocal, anthropomorphic (human) terms. Perhaps we can better say that God has only one “creative movement” toward us and the world. However, when seen from our different situations in life, this “creative movement” is experienced as *salvation* from our situations of hopelessness, as *anger* or *judgment* when we become conscious of our sins, as *acceptance* when we repent, as *election* from our state of unworthiness and as *unconditional love* in our need for such love. Much of this is conveyed in the OT word *hesed*, describing God’s constant, steadfast love.

Our story continues with Moses and the people at Mt. Sinai. It is here that God reveals His purpose, gives the Law through Moses and makes a covenant with the people. First, the nature of the covenant is explained:

And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him out of the mountain saying, “ Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.” (Ex 19:3-6).

Next the Law is given to Moses, including within it the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20-23). (refer again to Chapter 1, p.10 for a discussion of revelation, the giving of the law, etc.) After this, Moses read the Law to the people and they responded: “All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do” (Ex 24:3). It was then that the covenant was sealed with a blood ritual and a sacrificial meal.

Sacrifice

Before we proceed further, some explanation of the meaning of sacrifice is necessary. The word sacrifice is connected with many important events in the OT and is used to describe the life and death of Jesus. Unfortunately in modern times, the common understanding of the word bears little, if any, resemblance to its original meaning. The results have been at best confusing and at worst devastating, especially in interpreting the meaning of the life and death of Jesus.

In popular modern usage the word sacrifice usually denotes something of value surrendered by an individual to attain some goal. Or on a more violent level, we may recall such things as the Aztec rituals of human sacrifice where the beating heart of the victim is cut out and offered up to assuage the anger of the gods in what was called a “flowery death”. In any case, the object of sacrifice is usually thought of as lost or destroyed. Because of the notion of loss, sacrifice evokes a note of sadness or suffering. This act of giving up or destroying is done because it is calculated that something of more value will be obtained than what is lost. For example, certain people might “sacrifice” a

promotion to live in a community which they feel is better for their family or a person may be willing to “sacrifice” one’s life for the protection of family or country.

This common understanding is very nearly a complete contradiction of the original meaning of OT sacrifice. With this misunderstanding, the way we think of sacrifice in the Old Testament and the sacrifice of Jesus became distorted. Because ancient sacrifice could sometimes involve the offering of an animal, who in fact gave up its life, the essence of sacrifice was thought to be the act of “giving up”, which included the death of the victim.

The ancient meaning of sacrifice distinguishes itself from the modern concept on nearly every point. Sacrifice always denotes a giving *to*, not a giving up. Of course there was something offered or given up, but the focus was not on the act of giving up something, but rather on the act of giving to or sharing something. Sacrifice was offered to God by the community, and was not only offered to receive something in return, but also to give thanks for gifts received, to celebrate joyful occasions and, in instances where a meal was involved, it provided a powerful, symbolic way to establish unity with God and with one another.

Never sad, sacrifices were occasions of great communal joy and festivity. Not all sacrifice involved animals, but when the death of an animal was involved, the death or killing of the animal was not part of the sacrifice as such, but only a remote, necessary preliminary -- *a sine qua non* --to the offering or meal, much as it is necessary in the preparation of a steak dinner for friends. The “fact” of the death of the victim had no significance in any sacrifice.

Death itself was no more a part of the meaning of sacrifice, than it is a integral part of our Thanksgiving dinners or a steak dinner we might have for friends. Death in itself never effectuated anything. The stress on this point is intended, because it is central in efforts to correct certain erroneous notions of sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of Jesus considered in itself and in relation to its ritual memorial in the sacrament of the Eucharist celebration.

Our English word sacrifice derives from the Latin. Any object that has been ritually given to a god was called *sacer*. It described persons, places, things, times, etc. set aside for use in worship. This process was called *rem divinam facere* (to make a thing belong to a god) or simply *sacrificare*. Things so set apart were *sacra* or holy. *Sacrificium* referred to objects for the gods, especially vegetable and animal foods. The original meaning of sacrifice was any such ceremonial act to a god. Latin was the first language to coin a blanket term to describe all such offerings or acts. (adapted from *Sacrifice* by Royden Keith Yerkes) Simply put, sacrifice meant to give something to God. Like all gift giving, it was a symbolic way of giving oneself to another, in this case to God. It was a way of having communion (*cum* = with, *unio*= union) with God -- a way of establishing unity, that right relationship implied in the OT concept of *peace* (shalom).

There are two sacrificial traditions interwoven in Chapter 24 of Exodus. It is clear,

however, that in the ratification of the covenant a blood ritual and a peace offering were the rituals symbolically used to express the meaning of the covenant and to make it binding. In Exodus 24:5, Moses orders the burnt offering and the peace offering (both animal sacrifices) to be prepared by the young men. As in all such animal sacrifices, there was a special ritual for the disposition of the blood. Moses takes half the blood and throws it against the altar. Then he again reads the words of the covenant (the law) and the people repeat their pledge to do all these things that the Lord has commanded. Following this Moses sprinkles the remaining blood on the people.

To grasp the meaning and the power of these ritual acts, we must first realize that blood was regarded by the Old Testament people with awe and reverence - blood was holy, blood was life. They spoke of blood as the “life of the flesh”, as illustrated in Leviticus 17:14 - “for the life of every creature is the blood of it” (see also Gen 9:4 and Deut. 12:23). Blood was always the symbol of life, never death. For the ancient Semites blood and life were synonymous. Since God is the author of life, the blood belongs in a special way to God and, out of reverence, man must not eat of it. The blood poured on the altar, over which the presence of God “hovered”, did not signify death, but life liberated and offered or returned to God its author, which in turn established a life relationship with God. When sprinkled on the people, it was to signify that the partners to the covenant now share a common life, they become in a real sense blood brothers and sister. They have become a people.

A new blood (life) relationship was now established between God and His people and the people with each other, so that they now became a family, a nation. It was a moment in which they experienced becoming one with God and with each other, it was therefore a moment of unity, of *peace* or *salvation*, the establishment of right relationships with God and with each other. The ancient greeting *shalom* was more than a hello, it was like a blessing, expressing a wish that the one addressed would experience the gift of *peace*. In later years the final authors of Genesis would depict this situation of *peace* as the state of Paradise intended by God for mankind from the moment of creation. The establishment of this *peace* in a world broken by sin was a moment of *salvation* experienced in the concrete.

Following the blood ritual, seventy representatives of the people ate a *peace offering* banquet together in the presence of the Lord. In this sacrifice, after the proper disposition of the blood, the choice parts of the animal were burned on the altar and thus given to God while the remainder of the animal was consumed by the worshipers in the presence of God, which again symbolized the covenant union of *peace* with God and with each other. In the ancient East the meal was a powerful sign of the sharing of life and creating or reinforcing the bonds of friendship. A stranger invited to a meal was, by that fact, under the protection of the host. Such invitations were not given lightly. Sharing food was truly a sharing of life, especially in the days before refrigerators. And so it was an experience of *peace* - the establishment and reinforcement of right relationships between the participants. In the OT faith it was, like the blood ritual, a moment of the experience and the celebration of *salvation*. Certainly we too have all experienced such moments of unity, based on love, expressed and experienced in a meal.

Covenant

The OT people understood themselves as the people of the covenant. Covenants appear in ancient cultures and many places in OT history. They are solemn ritual agreements equivalent to written contracts and are deeply binding. They go beyond a mere external adherence and imply a promise of loyalty and community of spirit expressed as a steadfast love.

In its simplest terms, God's covenant with His people is explained in the words of Jeremiah, "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Jer.31:33). The covenant expresses the unique relationship of God to His people - He has a steadfast love for them. God and His people are bound together in loyalty and a sharing of life. Not that they are equals entering into this agreement, God is the all powerful One who has graciously chosen to make this covenant with these people. The covenant imposes certain duties on the people, i.e., the law. In return God promises to be with them. The symbols of blood and the context of a meal, which each symbolize and actually bring about the sharing of life, will be used by Jesus to inaugurate the New Covenant as we shall see later.

From what we have said before, the theological message of the covenant should be evident. God is portrayed as revealing to them that the meaning and fulfillment of human life is to be found in a community of peace -- unity with self, others and God. The community founded by God is His people called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5ff). They could lay no claim to their election on the grounds that they were better than other people, either religiously or morally. They are as weak and sinful as any people, even from the beginning, as reflected in the episode of the Golden Calf (Ex.. 32). They were different precisely because God freely chose to reveal Himself and His creative purpose in their history and to call them into His service. For Moses said, "For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people: Is it not in your going with us, that we are distinct, I and your people, from all other people that are upon the face of the earth?" (Ex. 33:16)

Their election did not give them an elevated status, but laid upon them a task: to be an example, a light to the nations, a kingdom of priests, so that God's revelation about human life might be made evident through them (the opposite of election is not reprobation, but simply non-election). The community life was intended to be a sign, symbol or sacrament of what all human life *should be and could be* when people put their faith in God. This is their priestly task, this is the meaning of their election -- to proclaim that God's saving power is present and available as a gift in the lives of all the peoples of the earth. A new life is promised, a life of peace for which all on earth yearn. It is the good news that we can be saved from the slavery of our sin and its resulting alienation and death. Even though we are powerless to save ourselves, we are not alone, God is with us and He is stronger than the forces of sin and death. If we give ourselves to Him in faith, the power of the creative movement of His steadfast love will save us.

The partial successes and the gross failures to live up to this task to be a priestly people is

the history of the OT. The great prophets were the ones who constantly confronted the people with their unfaithfulness and called them back to faithfulness to the covenant. With unfaithfulness on all sides, it was the prophet Jeremiah who spoke of a new covenant of the future.

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.

But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31-34)

Before examining this new covenant hinted at by Jeremiah, we will first take a look at an important theological insight give us by our Jewish forefathers. Centuries after the Exodus, these people began to reflect beyond their own history to the origins of mankind and the cosmos. Where did the world come from? Who were their first parents? Why was there evil in the world? Some of the various myths and traditions circulating in their culture which addressed these questions were collected, adapted and impregnated with the best of OT theology to be incorporated into the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. It is to an examination of the theological message contained in these traditions that we now turn.