

The Concealed Theology

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Holy Scripture is not a book of historiography. It is a book of theology; it speaks of God's work among human beings while God acts within human reality and human life. When believers read and understand what God has done for them, they read their history in light of this divine action, for the believer has no life apart from God. It is in this sense that we approach the historical dimension of Holy Scripture.

History books are concerned with historiography: recording events in detail, determining as accurately as possible when they occurred, gathering the various accounts of a single event, and comparing and examining them in order to arrive at the most precise possible knowledge of what happened, when, and how. In this sense, Holy Scripture is not a book of history, even though it contains information useful for historical study.

The journey of the people of the Old Covenant—and, consequently, of every believer—is like that of a poor man who suddenly discovered that his only son needed a costly operation, while he himself did not possess a single penny. He turned to his Lord, offering a prayer from a sorrowful and afflicted heart and placing his suffering in God's hands. The following day, a money transfer arrived from his brother abroad, who had not been in contact with him for years. When he opened it, he found that the amount sent was exactly what he needed. If this man is truly a believer, his experience will lead him to see what God has done for him as more significant than his son's illness. Indeed, his son's illness becomes a means through which God's work is revealed.

The believer does not see such an event as a coincidence, but as providence—indeed, as God's providential care prepared beforehand for him. When he tells others what happened, he is speaking primarily about God's action and intervention in his life. How numerous are the events through which God speaks to us and enters into our lives!

The believer reads his past—that is, his history—in the light of God's presence in his life and His companionship with him; glory be to Him. Otherwise, he blinds himself to God's works. In recounting this divine action, he may sometimes exaggerate, sometimes misread it, and at other times clothe God in human culture. This is how things happen among human beings.

Take several witnesses to an accident in which a car strikes a person, and you will receive several accounts, all of them true. Yet each witness recounts what he saw through the lens of his own reaction to the event. Many factors shape his account: his psychological disposition and temperament, the accuracy of his observation, his ability to analyze, whether he has a personal relationship with the driver or the victim, and so forth.

So it was with the people of the Old Covenant. God accompanied them in order to establish the foundation through which He would reveal Himself to humanity. Throughout this companionship, the people were often astonished by His works; they frequently misunderstood His intentions. At times, they corrected their wayward conduct, but often they disregarded both Him and His commandments.

The Old Covenant taught humanity divine truths practically, not theoretically. The people understood that they prevailed when they obeyed God and were defeated when they abandoned or disobeyed Him. This, for example, is the theological rhythm of the Book of Judges. The people learned that God could feed them out of nothing when they received manna and quail, and that they would go hungry if they trusted in His gifts rather than in Him personally, when they discovered that the manna spoiled whenever they stored it as provisions for themselves.

You must read the history of the Old Covenant in order to understand how God works with you personally. Yet you must approach it not only in its human dimension, but also in its divine dimension. Why? Because it is not merely ordinary human history. It is, on the one hand, the history of humanity's dealings with God and, on the other, the history of God's action within humanity.

The historical event is not the ultimate purpose; rather, it is the theology concealed within the folds of the event and lying beyond it. Scripture mentions the event primarily to disclose its theological meaning, not to chronicle it. When Scripture recounts the fall of Jericho, for example, it narrates it in a liturgical style. Why? Because, according to many prominent scholars, the city had already been completely destroyed and abandoned at least two centuries before Joshua and his people entered it.

How are we to understand this? Centuries after the people had settled in the land, and after the rise of its monarchy and its administrative institutions, the religious writing of the community's history began. The scribes started recording traditions

that had been preserved orally for centuries. This was not unique to the Hebrews. All ancient peoples wrote their histories on the basis of traditions handed down orally from a time before writing had been invented. Yet what was preserved and transmitted orally centered primarily upon God and His role in the community's life. With the passage of time, therefore, it becomes more a theological reading of events than a precise chronicle of them. Thus, in the eyes of later generations, the settlement of the ruined city became a divine gift.

When the community of the Old Covenant enjoyed stability and prosperity, it saw greatness and power in its heritage and regarded God as its support and protector. When it was humiliated and defeated, it perceived God as having abandoned it, as well as punishing and disciplining it. God played His part in shaping the people, just as an artist carves a stone to create a beautiful statue. In the end, God fashioned a faithful remnant from which Christ came and opened the door to all nations.

The history of the Old Covenant is the history of every human soul that journeys with God. Every soul, engaged in spiritual struggle, understanding God's purposes well, errs and falls, repents and rises again, then strays and comes to its senses. Throughout this entire journey, God accompanies it as guide, shepherd, and disciplinarian, gentle and severe, present and sometimes seemingly absent, caressing and striking. He knows how to draw us along until He brings us to the pastures of salvation.

But the problem with humans, generally speaking, is that they often treat God as merely a miraculous being, wishing Him to be a dazzling magician. They demand miracles from Him, but they stipulate them according to their own understanding, not His. They want to see in the manna and quails only divine rain, and they refuse to see God's miracle in the simultaneous arrival of the fleeing, hungry, and exhausted people on the shore, and the migration of birds from north to south!

They want to see in the drowning of Pharaoh's chariots a miraculous parting and return of the waters of the Red Sea, as depicted in the famous film *The Ten Commandments*. Yet they refuse to recognize God's wondrous action in His use of the tides in the marshlands of the Red Sea lakes to impede the movement of Pharaoh's chariots. This is precisely what the Book of Exodus says in chapter fourteen.

God is able to perform a spectacular miracle, but He is also capable of making nature which He created serve His divine purposes.

An elderly Polish woman suffering from severe toothache complained to her parish priest about Saint Anthony—the patron saint of toothaches in Poland—because he had not answered her prayers and healed her. The priest prayed and asked the saint for an answer. The saint appeared to him and said, “What am I to do for her, Father? I have sent her a dentist three times!”

Do not many people deal with God in precisely this way?