

TEAMS OF OUR LADY

INTERNATIONAL LEADING TEAM - ERI

**HOSTEL ON
THE OLD TESTAMENT**

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The proposition of a study on the Old Testament for couples of the Teams of Our Lady, is a complex task for at least two reasons: the actual subject matter being covered, and the differences in levels of understanding between each couple participating in this course.

With this in mind, we decided to write a document that contained the elements we considered important to enable a basic level of understanding of the subject matter being covered, bringing these elements together in an orderly and systematic manner, whenever possible.

In compiling this presentation we carried out extensive research by looking at other existing courses on the Old Testament, and how exegetes and scholars have enhanced the meaning and understanding of the passages contained in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament basically deals with the relationship between God and the Jewish people. The Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, constitute the first major part of the Christian Bible, and were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic.

God's revelation to mankind was transmitted via oral tradition for many centuries. Scripture only began to take shape from the time of David onwards.

The Old Testament is the longest part of the Bible. It consists of the official list or canon of books accepted as divinely inspired, from the time of the Jewish faith before the rise of Christianity. However, there have been some disagreements relating to this list of inspired books or canon of Sacred Scripture, even from ancient times. Such differences arose from the trials and tribulations the ancient Hebrews faced in the formation of the scriptures.

The longest list of books found in the Bible is also the oldest, derived from Judaism in Alexandria. Referred to as the Septuagint, it is a Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures that occurred three centuries prior to the advent of Christianity.

For various reasons, Christianity quickly adopted and accepted as canonical this Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures and the books of the Old Testament

contained in it. This was mainly due to the fact that the scriptures were written in Greek, which was the predominant and international language in use in the Eastern Mediterranean region at the time.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) affirms that **God is the Author of Sacred Scripture**. Citing Dei Verbum, it states that:

“The divinely revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of Sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”

“For Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself” (DV, 11; CCC, 105).

And:

“In Sacred Scripture, God speaks to man in a human way. To interpret Scripture correctly, the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm, and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words” (DV, 12, § 1; CCC, 109).

“In order to discover the sacred authors' intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating that were then current. For the fact is that truth is presented differently and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression” (DV, 12, § 2; CCC, 110).

Therefore, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we read that “God chose Abraham and made a covenant with him and his descendants. By the Covenant, God formed his people and revealed his law to them through Moses. Through the prophets, he prepared them to accept the plan of salvation destined for all humanity” and “God revealed Himself fully by sending His own Son, in whom he has established his Covenant for ever. The Son is his Father's definitive Word; so there will be no further Revelation after him” (CCC, 72 and 73).

Therefore, understanding the Old Testament means understanding God's revelation to man, that culminated in the sending of the Son, as prophesied by the prophets.

ENJOY YOUR STUDY!

TABLE 1 – INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

This first table seeks to establish the context of how the Old Testament was established as an instrument of communication between God and humanity, specifically with His chosen people. In this sense we should adopt some basic premises:

- a) Understanding the Bible as God's communication with man. God wants to save all mankind and communicate with them.
- b) Understanding the Bible as a revelation of God. God formed a Holy People, who He chose to reveal Himself to in a special manner. He later sent us His Son, who revealed His message to man. He died on the Cross and was resurrected to save us from our sins. The early Christians, led by the Holy Spirit, spread the message of Jesus.
- c) All of these manifestations of God is what is written in the Bible
- d) Understanding the Bible as Sacred Scripture. The Bible is our holy book containing the Word of God revealed to us through divine revelation. This revelation was communicated to the Jewish people first, then later realised in the form of Jesus Christ, and preserved by the Church.
- e) Understanding the "books" of the Bible as papyrus and parchment scrolls that were used to receive the written word. It is not a single book, but a library of books, written over a period of many years by various authors. There are a total of 73 books in the Catholic Bible.

This Table is organized as follows: it firstly begins with an introduction to the Bible and provides a list of its books. Following this, it is important to understand the context within which the Old Testament unfolded, especially in the Promised Land and Ancient Near East region, and the great empires that attacked and scattered the people of Israel. The habits and customs of the people of Israel are then presented and the different literary styles that were used in the composition of the Old Testament books. Finally, the Bible is presented as the Word of God to humanity.

1.1- Introduction to the Bible

Christians divide the Bible into two main parts. The **Old Testament** contains the books written up before the arrival of Jesus. This first part contains 46 books.

And the **New Testament**, which comprises the books written after the birth of Jesus Christ. This second part contains 27 books.

The books of the Old Testament are divided into four tables:

- a) **Pentateuch** - the first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
- b) **Historical books:** Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, 1 and 2 Maccabees.
- c) **Poetic and Sapiential / Wisdom books:** Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach.
- d) **Prophetic books:** Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

The books of the New Testament include:

- a) The four Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
- b) The Acts of the Apostles.
- c) Letters of St. Paul and other apostles.
- d) The Book of Revelation.

1.2- Some characteristics

a) Language

Most of the Old Testament was written in the Hebrew language. The final six books were written in Greek. The New Testament was written entirely in Greek.

b) From one Testament to another

Testament signifies "covenant." The Old Testament refers to the covenant with Moses, as the mediator between God and man on Mount Sinai. The New Testament is the covenant that confirms Jesus as mediator between God and man.

c) Chapter and verse

Each book is divided into numbered chapters, and in turn, each of the paragraphs in these chapters are numbered. Each chapter is divided into verses. Example: Genesis 2: 1 - 6: represents the Book of Genesis, chapter 2, and verses 1-6.

d) The Word of God written by man

The Bible was written by real individuals, in some instances by unknown or anonymous authors. They wrote and based it on their own cultural and personal experiences with God. God inspired them to communicate His message and helped to answer the fundamental questions of life: Who are we? Where did we come from? Who is God? Why does evil and death exist?

e) Written after a long process

The people of Israel discovered the presence and action of God throughout history. These accounts were firstly transmitted orally, and then later written down and recorded.

f) Different writing styles and genres

In the Bible, we encounter different writing styles and genres: from historical narrative, epic stories, parables, poetry, wisdom sayings, proverbs, songs, prayers, epistles, laws, letters, etc. These writings were written differently from how modern day literature is written, and therefore require careful study in order to be properly interpreted.

g) A world of symbols

The Semites used many symbols to express themselves. Example: "This lion of a man" signifies that the man was brave. Other examples were: "God is my rock, my fortress." "My Lord had a vineyard."

The religious beliefs of the people of Israel were initially transmitted, from generation to generation, through these different expressions and ways of speaking which were later written down as scripture.

h) It is not a scientific book

Science provides data and information. Communicative language uses symbols. The authors of the sacred books were not scientists. They wrote in a manner that was influenced by the culture of their time. They sought to express the truths of faith, not science.

i) Growing in faith and commitment

To understand the biblical writings, it is necessary to believe and have faith. The Bible tells us about history, interpreted through the lens of faith. The believers who composed the Bible saw events occurring in light of the Word, and through God's intervention.

j) God continues speaking to us and acting within us, up to the present day

What interest is there for me to read the Bible today? God spoke to Abraham, Moses and the prophets. God performed miracles to liberate the oppressed, and to heal the sick.

What does this have to do with my life? The experiences of our own life are reflected in the Bible. God continues to speak to us, just as He spoke to the prophets and continues to work in us.

1.3- Palestine

a) The name

In Greek, Palestine meant "land of the Philistines". The Philistines were people who occupied these lands until they were defeated by David's armies. Throughout history, this region was known by various names: Canaan, or the land of the Canaanites; Israel - the name God gave to Jacob (Genesis 32:29). Christians refer to this region as 'the Holy Land', because Jesus sanctified it with His presence and his Word.

b) Physical Geography

Palestine was a territory located in ancient Western Asia between the Mediterranean, Lebanon, Jordan and the Sinai desert. Its total land surface area was estimated at about 27,000 square kilometres. The geography of Palestine consisted of three parallel strips that crossed the northern territory to the south:

➤ The Coastal Region

This was a strip of flat, sandy ground, where oranges were cultivated and most of the cities and the majority of the population were concentrated.

➤ The Mountainous Region

This region began in northern Galilee on Mount Hermon. It was cut by the fertile plains of Jezreel and Esdraelon, and continued south to the Samarian and

Judean mountains. The region extended up until the city of Hebron, at the edge of the Negev desert.

➤ The Jordan River Valley

The valley, through which the riverbed runs, is the lowest point on earth. The Sea of Galilee (also called Tiberius or Sea of Galilee), is 212 meters below sea level and is located in this valley, as well as the Dead Sea, which flows into the Jordan River. The Dead Sea is 408 meters below the Mediterranean Sea and has a high salinity level (26%). This is why the Bible called it the 'Salt Sea'.

➤ A crossroads of civilizations

Palestine, located between Egypt and Mesopotamia, was a region where caravans and armies used to pass through. This resulted in a great cultural exchange that occurred between peoples of many different races and populations. Among them were the Semites, descendants of Shem - Noah's son. The people of Israel or the Jewish people originate from the Semites.

Strategically located in the centre of a vast region, Palestine was constantly subjected to the pressures of the great empires surrounding it: Babylon and Assyria in the north and Egypt to the south.

➤ A land full of contrasts

Mount Hermon was perpetually covered in snow. Arid mountains cut across Palestine. The fertile plains were located in the north, and there were two deserts in the south: the Judean and the Negev desert. The Lake of Gennesaret had a wavy and smooth shoreline. Near the Dead Sea, the landscape resembled a lunar landscape.

1.4- Different cultures in the Middle East

The location and physical features of Egypt shaped the mentality and social norms of its ancient population. The Egyptians lived in a bright area that received much sunlight. The ancient Egyptians used to believe that the Sun was victorious over the power of the night. The sun thus became deified under various names, becoming one of the first 'gods' to be worshipped. It subsequently led to the development of other gods or men as gods. The Nile River was seen as the source of life, because of its life-giving water and the fertile valley that was nourished by periodic flooding.

The ancient Egyptians' temperament was naturally optimistic. Their gods were good and were watched over by man. They believed in a new and radiant life after death.

However, when the neighbouring populations of the region were taken into account, there existed widespread pessimism. These populations lived in valleys where floods were unpredictable and often caused widespread devastation. Many traces of this devastation have been found in subsequent excavations.

Nomadic invasions from the Arabian Desert and Persia were also frequent.

As a result, these gods of Mesopotamia were regarded as being capricious, and constantly fighting each other. Man saw himself as a mere mortal and afraid of the wrath of the gods. The realm of the dead was considered a sad place, where the shadows of the dead were brought together for them to live out their destinies without any joy or happiness. In the Epic of Atrahasis (an epic poem, based on Sumerian mythology, about the creation of the world and a universal flood), the story describes how these gods created man for the sole purpose of relieving them of their hard labour. Man was formed with a bit of clay mixed with blood.

The main god was called El and was often presented in the form of a bull. (One of the names attributed to God in the Bible is Elohim, which is the plural of El). In this religion, the forces of nature were deified. Baal was the god of the storms and rain, sometimes referred to as the "Knight of the clouds." His sister Anat, later called Astarte, was the goddess of war, love and fertility.

Israel, and especially the kingdom of Samaria, were attracted to the Canaanite religion, where worship involved sexual acts and rituals. These were offered up to the naked goddess in "high places", and these rites were considered as the means of obtaining fertility for the soil and flocks.

A fundamental characteristic distinguished the people of Israel from the other cultures surrounding them, and the mentalities of those nations. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." This was the essential aspect found in the faith of the Israelite people, and proclaimed in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The Israelites were aware that it was their God who called, chose and constituted them as one people. This One True God cared for and protecting His

people. The people responded with signs of their love for Him. Their worship was a sign of gratitude, a thanksgiving and an acknowledgment of the saving action of God.

On the other hand, in the other religions, man projected divinity within himself and therefore strived to attain it in order to put these powers to his service.

1.5- The Great Empires

a) Egypt

In the south, in the Nile valley, the Egyptians became an important people from 3000 B.C onwards, ruled by dynasties of kings and pharaohs. The history of Egypt is usually divided by dynasties. The exodus probably occurred around the 19th dynasty (about 1,250 B.C).

Egypt dominated Canaan long before the Israelites settled there. Following its zenith under Ramses (19th Dynasty), Egypt gradually started losing its power, but continued being a threat to Israel.

b) Mesopotamian Empires (name signifies between rivers)

Magnificent civilizations coexisted or were succeeded by others. Sumer, Akkad and Babylon were located in the South. Assyria was located to the north, in the territory that is now present day Iraq. Further east, in modern day Iran, were the Medes and then the Persians.

c) The Assyrian Empire

Assyrian expansion took place during the ninth century BC. Samaria was captured in 721 B.C. It marked the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Some of the inhabitants were deported to Assyria. In 701 B.C, Sennacherib, who was king of Assyria from 705-681 B.C, initiated a campaign against Judah and besieged Jerusalem. He was defeated in Egypt in 660 B.C, and this resulted in the rapid decline of the Assyrians. Nineveh was captured by the Babylonians in 612 B.C.

d) The Babylonian Empire

The peak of Babylonian supremacy occurred during the reign of Hammurabi in the eighteenth century B.C. It then came under Assyrian control. After 625 B.C., the Babylonian Empire regained its power and status. Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Assyrians, and in 597 B.C he captured Jerusalem, deporting the king and some of its inhabitants. In 587 B.C, Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem again and destroyed it,

razing the temple and the Ark of the Covenant. The habitants were deported to Babylon. It marked the end of the kingdom of Judah.

e) The Persian Empire

The Persian Empire gained enormous power, from the time of Cyrus the Great's reign onwards. In 539 B.C, Cyrus conquered Babylon. In 538 B.C, a decree was signed allowing the Jews to return to their country. The Persian Empire stretched from Egypt to Macedonia, but they did not manage to exert their influence or control in Greece.

f) Greece

Philip of Macedon managed to unite all of Greece under his command. When his son Alexander the Great came to power in 336 B.C, this marked the beginning of a new era in Greek history. Alexander conquered Egypt, Babylon, Susa and Persepolis (important Persian cities). In 333 B.C, Palestine fell under Greek control. King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who was a tyrannical Hellenistic Greek king, banned the practice of the Jewish religion in the year 168 B.C. He imposed Hellenistic religious practices upon the Jewish people by force. It was a time of martyrdom and battle.

g) The Roman Empire

Pompey defeated the Seleucids (63 B.C). From that moment onwards, Palestine was under Roman control. Herod the Great was appointed the king of Judea by the Roman senate in 37 B.C.

1.6- A thousand years of History and the Golden Age of Israel

a) Kingdom of David - Solomon

Around the year 1000 B.C, David captured Jerusalem and made it the capital of a kingdom that brought together the tribes of the South and the North. His son Solomon was responsible for the organization of the kingdom. Therefore, there was land, a king and a temple again where God was present with His people.

It is also around this period that the Israelites began to write down and record their history: The Exodus, or liberation from Egypt, became a crucial moment in their history, where God was revealed as the liberator and saviour of His people. The history of the patriarchs was also written, proving how God's promise to Abraham was realised in David. The beginning of the world is traced back and recounted: God not only desired to save His people, but all mankind.

b) The Divided kingdoms: Judah and Israel

When Solomon died in the year 933 B.C., the twelve tribes of Israel were divided into two kingdoms: Judah in the south, with its capital in Jerusalem and Israel in the north, with its capital in Samaria. Judah remained loyal to David's dynasty. The king maintained the unity of his nation, and presented it before God - the God who dwelt in His temple.

The traditions that were established under the reign of David-Solomon defined the sacred history of the Jewish people (and of the kingdom of Judah). Isaiah and Micah were prophets from the kingdom of Judah.

The northern kingdom of Israel broke away from the dynasty of David. The king no longer had the same religious significance and relevance as before. In fact it was the prophets who unified the people and maintained their faith, which was threatened by contact with the pagan beliefs of the Canaanites, who worshiped Baal (an image of a god in the form of a bull).

The traditions that developed under the reign of David-Solomon eventually filtered into the sacred history of the northern kingdom, where the prophets Elijah, Amos and Hosea preached. A collection of laws were formulated in the north that were then gathered together in the south in Judah to eventually become the book of Deuteronomy. The books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings were written in the kingdom of Judah.

In 721 B.C. Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians. In 587 B.C, the people of Judah were deported to Babylon.

c) Babylonian Exile

For half a century, the Jews lived in exile. They lost everything: their land, their king, their temple. Did they also lose their faith in God?

Some prophets, such as Ezekiel and one of Isaiah's disciples, revived the people's hope. Priests encouraged the Jews to reread their sacred traditions so that they could find the answers that would enable them to make sense of their suffering. This would become the basis of sacred priestly history.

d) Under Persian Rule

In 538 B.C, Cyrus the Great - king of Persia, freed the Jews who then returned to Palestine. Those Jews who returned, restored their religious traditions. The

community, purified by their suffering in exile, lived in poverty. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra the priest and scribe, fostered interest in the Word of God within the community.

Over the previous five centuries, the Jewish people had repeatedly revised their history. This enabled them to find a meaning to their lives, and a sense of hope for each different occasion in their history.

These sacred stories, along with Deuteronomy, were collected by Ezra to form a single book: the Law. Besides these stories, the reflections of sages and wise men, that arose from before the time of Solomon, led to the development of some biblical masterpieces like the book of Job, Jonah, Proverbs, Ruth, Psalms and the Song of Songs.

e) Under Greek Rule: Hellenization

In 333 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East and disseminated the Greek language and culture throughout the region. With the death of Alexander, Palestine came under the jurisdiction of Ptolemy Lagides, the Greek dynasty that ruled Egypt. Many Jews settled in Alexandria (Egypt). Eventually, they forgot how to speak or write in their native language of Hebrew, and spoke and wrote only in Greek. This is why the Hebrew Bible was originally translated into *Koine* Greek. This translation is called the Septuagint (from the Latin *septuaginta* meaning "seventy") and was translated in Alexandria and in different stages between the third and the first century B.C. It was used by the first Christian communities.

The books Chronicles 1 and 2, Ezra, Nehemiah, Ecclesiastes, The Wisdom of Sirach and Tobias were written in Palestine.

When the Syrian Kingdom of the Seleucids invaded Egypt, this marked the beginning of a difficult period for the Jews living under the rule of the Seleucids. In 167 B.C, the king of Antioch tried to force the Jews to renounce their faith at the risk of the death penalty, and he imposed Greek practices on the Jews by force. The Jews who remain faithful to the Law of Moses were persecuted.

Judas Maccabeus then initiated an armed struggle against the occupiers and was victorious. The literary memoirs of that religious and nationalist attitude were collected and incorporated into the books of Maccabees, Esther and Judith. The Jews were eventually freed in 164 B.C. A reflection on the apocalypse then developed within

the sacred authors, where they awaited in hope for the intervention of God in the end times, as outlined in the Book of Daniel.

Several Jewish groups arose as a result of their struggle against the pagans, and these Jews live faithfully and in compliance with every letter of the Mosaic Law. This was contrary to those Jews who were more tolerant and interacted with pagans. This is how the sects of the Pharisees and the Essenes arose.

The Book of Wisdom was the last book to be written in the Old Testament.

f) The Jews under Roman Rule

The Jews were able to enjoy a few years of peace, thanks to the brave efforts of the Maccabees. However, in the first century B.C, divisions existed amongst the Jews that weakened them politically, and they established a treaty with the Romans. Pompey's troops entered Jerusalem in the year 63 B.C. Thus, Palestine became a Roman province. The Jews were subject to King Herod the Great, who reigned under the protection of Rome from 40 B.C onwards. It was during King Herod's reign that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

1.7- God's People

a) Their names

Several names were used to designate God's ancient people:

- Hebrews: likely derived from "to cross over", meaning: sojourner in a foreign land. The Hebrews were the people during the time of the patriarchs: men who were always passing and moving from one place to the next, true "nomads of the desert."
- Israelites, or the children of Israel. The name 'Israel' was the new name that God gave to the patriarch Jacob. The name signified 'He who has wrestled with God'.
- Jews, or children of Judah, were survivors of the kingdom of Judah after the Babylonian exile. This name signified to praise, celebrate and glorify.

These distinct names remind us of three important aspects in man's relationship with God: "being on a journey with God", "being together with God" and "Praising God".

b) Herdsmen

Major changes occurred in the lives of the Jewish people right throughout their whole history. At first, the Jews were herdsmen. They lead a nomadic life and were poor, wandering in search of pasture for their flocks. Economic equality existed among families to a certain extent. They respected hospitality as a sacred law. At times, conflicts broke out between neighbouring tribes due to issues like the control of water wells and cisterns.

c) Farmers

The Jews gradually abandoned their tents to live in mud houses or brick and stone houses. They changed their trade, from herdsmen to farmers. The Hebrews became an agricultural society. Wheat and barley were sowed. Vineyards and vegetable gardens were cultivated. Olives and fruit were gathered from trees.

d) Craftsmen

With the establishment of the monarchy, artisans, tradesmen and craftsmen gradually appeared in society. These individuals were potters, carpenters, weavers, traders and shopkeepers.

e) The city

The social, economic and political hubs of life were found in the city. The city served a purpose of protecting its citizens from enemy attacks. As a result, high walls and well-fortified gates were built. The streets were narrow and the houses were modest and small. Artisans and shopkeepers' homes were grouped together.

At night, the oil lamps were lit. Each house usually had a stone mill and a bread oven.

f) Social Inequalities

The emergence of a centralized State gradually highlighted the existence of social classes and their different functions within society. Social differences became visible, and it created a growing gap between the rich and poor. It was the poor who suffered the most from disasters such as: drought, epidemics and the devastation caused enemy invaders.

As a result, the prophets vigorously denounced these injustices and laws were written to protect the weak: poor, orphans and widows.

1.8- The Jewish Festivals

a) A people of Festivals

A festival or feast was the spiritual axis of Israel. When the Jewish people celebrated a feast, it was in homage to the wonders performed by God in their favour throughout history.

The Hebrew liturgical year contained three types of commemorations: The Sabbath, the feast of the New Moon (celebrated every lunar month) and festivals.

There were five major feasts: Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Trumpets - which was the ancient Israelite's New Year's Day, and the Day of Atonement. Joy and hope was the common feature found in all of the feasts of Israel.

b) The Sabbath

The Sabbath or *Shabbat* immediately acquired a religious significance. It was Judaism's day of rest and seventh day of the week, where the faithful enter into God's rest just as He did on the seventh day after the creation of the world. The joy of being in a covenant with God was celebrated. On this day the priests and doctors offered sacrifices or educated the people, teaching them the Law.

c) Passover

Passover signified "passing over", and was when the Israelites commemorated how God protected them in Egypt, after the angel of death passed over their doors that were marked with blood on the lintel and spared them, but slayed every Egyptian firstborn. It was celebrated in the spring.

From the time of King Solomon, the people would go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate, in the form of sacrifices, the joy of liberation from slavery in Egypt. The Supper of the Lamb reminded all the members of each family about Yahweh's feat that saved His people and made them triumph.

d) Pentecost

It was originally known as the feast of the harvest. It was a day of joy and thanksgiving. On that day, the first fruits that had been produced were offering up to the LORD. This day soon became the Festival of the Covenant. With joy in their hearts,

the people celebrated the gift of the Law, given to them on Mount Sinai, and the renewal of the Covenant.

e) The Feast of Tabernacles

It was held in late summer and with great solemnity, to give thanks to God for the fruits of the earth, and to ask the LORD for rain for the subsequent planting of crops. For seven days, the people commemorated the Jews' long, hard march through the desert.

f) The Day of Atonement and Jewish New Year

The joys of creation and forgiveness marked these Feast.

1.9- The Bible as the Word of God

a) The Word of God

The Bible is the Word of God because He communicated and revealed to man what he required from his people, through the events and day-to-day life of Israel. God spoke more directly to man through the prophets and His Son.

Before writing anything down, the inspired or sacred authors of the Bible reflected on what had happened to their ancestors over the course of many years. Through this reflection, they discovered the message of God in the events of everyday life.

Therefore, the Bible contains Truth divinely inspired by God, and revealed to certain individuals who wrote about mankind's salvation under divine guidance.

b) The Inspired Authors or Sacred Writers

The authors who composed the books of the Bible are considered as true and inspired authors, in accordance with the Second Vatican Council. This signifies that, under the divine inspiration from God, they imparted all the different aspects upon their writing that one expect from a human author. From their distinctive writing style ideas, and the social norms reflecting the ancient society and context that they lived in, to their rudimentary understanding of scientific knowledge, they presented divine revelation confined to the mould of the limitations of their human mind.

This implies that these holy books are also human books, in the full sense of the word. So we shouldn't be surprised or alarmed if certain historical and scientific errors

are present in the texts, as these are the fruits of the ancient ways of thinking and society the writers found themselves in when they wrote the texts. They expressed themselves differently from what we are used to in the modern age.

c) The religious truth

The Bible is not a history book in the sense of how history is defined and understood in today's world, although it does provide some historical data. It is not a scientific book either, despite having been misconstrued as having been so for centuries, which led to serious errors and misunderstandings.

The fact that the Bible contains inspired truth implies that it is inerrant in matters that pertain to our salvation. The purpose of the biblical authors was to convey a religious truth, and not to give us a scientific or historical treatise.

This religious message or truth was revealed to man using the language, mentality, customs and beliefs relevant to the era when the text was written. The most important thing is to regard the Word of God as a guide for us, where we find the light that represents the relationship between God and man.

Let us therefore seek the religious messages and meanings that the Bible was written for, and intended to convey.

d) Divine inspiration

From around the second century A.D, Christian writers were already comparing the prophets and sacred authors to musical instruments through which God played His music. This implied that the Word of God could not be fully grasped or understood unless it was translated by man in order to convey its human message.

The inspiration of Scripture presupposes a positive influence of the Holy Spirit in the capabilities and actions of the writer, who through prayer and reflection discerned what God wished to convey in His message. Divine inspiration is an inner revelation in the human heart, which does not nullify the author's originality or personality.

1.10- Literary Genres

There exist different ways of saying the same thing. These different forms are called literary genres. Every society needs its own literature. Israel had its own laws, political discourses, festivals, stories from its past, poems and songs.

The existence of Israel as a people resulted in a nascent literature, and like all nascent literature, different genres existed. Each form of expression or genre has its own truth. It is not necessary to read the creation account (Genesis 1) as a scientific account: it was mythical in genre; nor should the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14) be regarded as a 'live report' of what actually happened: its genre was epic.

Let's review some of these genres present in the Old Testament.

a) Mythical

The biblical writers were inspired by the great myths of antiquity and reformulated them, basing it on their faith in God who intervenes in history. In this way, they answered the fundamental questions that man asked about his origins.

Examples of the use of genre are found in the accounts of the Creation of the Universe and of Man, Original Sin, Cain and Abel, Noah's Flood and the Tower of Babel.

b) Historical

A large part of biblical literature falls under the historical genre. The history that the sacred writers describe bears little resemblance to modern history. Many details are omitted, while others are highlighted. The religious significance of these stories are emphasized, rather than specific details or dates. What is important is man's relationship with God. Examples are: Book of Kings, Nehemiah, Ezra.

c) Epic

The past was narrated with the purpose of specifically enkindling enthusiasm within the reader, in order to celebrate the heroes in the story. The historical facts are exaggerated, embellished and exalt God. The reality of what occurred in the narrative was probably much more mundane and simpler, but the story was intentionally exaggerated in lieu of the importance and significance of the events that occurred. These events highlighted the works and deeds of God. Examples where the epic genre is used are: the crossing of the Red Sea, the conquest of the Promised Land, the book of Joshua, Judges.

d) Narrative

The literary structure, which may have a historical basis or simply be invented, serves the purpose of delivering a religious lesson or meaning in the story being

conveyed. Example of use of this narrative is found in: Esther (the value of prayer before God), Judith (God saves his people if they are faithful to the Covenant), Tobias (God is present in our lives), Jonah (Gentiles also receive God's forgiveness), Job (we need to persevere in our faith and hope in God).

e) Liturgical

These texts were central to religious tradition and typical of liturgical worship: festivals and feasts, rites and rituals (sacrifices for example). These religious acts embodied the relationship that man had with God. The thoroughness of the rituals performed was a manner for the people to express the way they felt by living in God's presence. Most of the rules and regulations set out in the text reflect the author's own culture and ensures appropriate conduct before God, where the sacred is strictly separated from the profane. An example of this genre is found in Leviticus.

f) Poetic

The Bible contains many poems. Through the means of the poetic genre, the poet beautifully expresses the feelings and reflections of his spirit. The poetic imagery utilized by the author were typical of the time and era they lived in. The imagery evoked the social, familial, cultural, political, rural and religious aspects of that time. We take in the profound spirituality that these poems express. Examples: the Psalms were prayers and song that the people offered to the Lord; the Song of Songs celebrates the beauty of human love; Lamentations were the painful cries of the people as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem.

g) Wisdom

Wise is the person who seeks to discover the things in their life, and in the world, which favour life as opposed to death. The master taught his disciples by reflecting on life's most important questions that all humans seek the answers for. In doing this, it enabled each person to conduct their life based on wisdom, love of neighbour, the avoidance of bad habits, exercising the virtue of prudence and skills necessary to help them deal with life's unpredictable and diverse situations. Examples of this type of genre are found in: Proverbs, the Book of Wisdom, Job, Ecclesiasticus, and Ecclesiastes.

h) Prophetic

The prophet spoke in the name of God. The words he used were not his, but something inside him that inspired him to speak, despite the dangers he may have been exposed to. The prophetic genre included:

- Oracles, which were solemn declarations, where something was prophesied to occur, such as in Jeremiah 19:3-9;
- Symbolic actions, where prophets reminded the people about the significance of the situation they found themselves in, and the dangers to come. An example is in Jeremiah 24,1-10;
- Visions, the means through which the prophets expressed their intimate experiences and relationship with God, as in Jeremiah 35:1-13.

i) Apocalyptic

Between the year 150 B.C and 70 A.D, this type of literary genre profoundly influenced the minds of believers, compelling them to live their lives in the hope of the end times. It sought to encourage the people of the persecuted Church.

The genre consisted of apocalyptic visions and warnings of catastrophes to come that would characterize the end times, prior to the establishment of total peace in the world. These books were full of symbolism, metaphors and imagery, describing cosmic disturbances and symbolisms in the form of animals, representing the mysterious forces that loomed large as a threat over man but were subject to God. There was symbolism and significance in the numbers mentioned, especially the number seven and its multiples, representing the biblical number of completeness and perfection, or the symbolism found in colours, etc. Examples are found in the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation.

1.11- The Bible in the Life of the Church

a) The Magisterium of the Church

The interpretation of the Bible should not be left to the individual discretion of each believer, or even the wise. The Church's Magisterium has the right and duty to give its final and authoritative say on the interpretation of scripture. But before making any declaration, it is necessary for the Church to analyse the Bible in light of science and the life of the Church and humbly listen to the faith of God's people.

b) The Bible, an integral element of the Church

The Church of Jesus Christ is inconceivable without Scripture. The Church is a community of believers who proclaim the Word of God, celebrate it and live it. The Holy Scriptures are present in liturgical gatherings, especially in the celebration of the sacraments and used in homilies, prayer and individual meditation; for theological and pastoral reflection; in the dialogue among Christians; in literature and art.

A renewal of the life of the faith in the Church cannot occur without the necessary contact of ecclesial faith with Holy Scripture.

c) Listening to the Living God

When a Christian reads the Sacred Scriptures, that person needs to know how to go beyond the words they are reading, and focus their attention on God the Father who is speaking through his Son and the Holy Spirit. This attitude of faith transforms the Christian reading of the Bible into an authentic spiritual dialogue. Whenever we read the Holy books of the Bible, we need to place ourselves in the right frame of mind as if we are listening to the living God.

d) Reading the Bible

Reading the Bible nourishes our faith. We should frequently read the scriptures, "because ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (St. Jerome).

We need to have a spirit that is welcoming and open to God. This attitude of openness to the Word of God also requires a consistent response from us in the form of our actions.

e) Praying with the Bible

"Let us not forget that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; because we talk to Him when we pray and we listen to Him when we read the divine words" (St. Ambrose).

Therefore, the Church prays using the psalms, hymns and biblical canticles; proclaims the Word of God in the Eucharist and in other liturgical celebrations; invites us to pray with the Word of God and bring it to life as we apply it in the daily practices of our lives. The Church also teaches us how to pray and get closer to God when we interact with the Word of God.

1.12- The Canon of the Old Testament

a) Canon

The "canon" is a list or collection of inspired books, as declared by the Church. These books contain divine revelation that was written down and is therefore central in the lives of the faithful and their moral conduct.

b) Protocanonical books

The Protocanonical books are those holy books of the Old Testament that are also included in the Hebrew Bible, and were considered canonical by the Church during the formational period of Christianity. They were the books that were accepted first.

A group of Jewish rabbis, who survived the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 A.D, defined the Hebrew text of the Bible and recognized them as inspired books that had been read in the community of Jerusalem before the siege, and that the people regarded as a gift from God.

c) Deuterocanonical Books

The term deuterocanonical refers to some books that are present in the Septuagint (the *Koine* Greek translation of the Bible, that was done in the city of Alexandria in Egypt, which is traditionally referred to as "The Seventy").

It is a corrected translation that includes some words in Hebrew that have no equivalent in *Koine* Greek, and includes additional books in relation to the Hebrew Scriptures. The Septuagint was considered inspired by the early Christians and this was reaffirmed at the Council of Rome in 382 A.D, the Synod of Hippo in 393 A.D, the Third Council of Carthage in 397 A.D and the Council of Trent in the year 1546.

They represent the books that were adopted at a later stage. Several books were included in the canon, which were written or known in Greek and read in the synagogues of Alexandria, but were not used by the Jewish community in Jerusalem.

The books are: Baruch, Tobit, Sirach, Judith, Wisdom, 1 and 2 Maccabees and some chapters from the books of Esther and Daniel which were written in Greek. This Bible became the *de facto* Bible of the early Christians who adopted its list of books.

d) Jewish and Protestant canons

Jews and Protestants only accept the protocanonical books as being divinely inspired. As a result, the Protestant Bibles omit the deuterocanonical books that are also known as the Apocrypha.

A famous meeting of Jewish rabbis, known as the Council of Jamnia, was held at the end of the first century A.D. Their aim was to seek a new path for Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. The participants decided to only consider as canonical those texts that were written in the Hebrew language and could be dated back to the time of the prophet Ezra. This criteria adopted by the rabbis excluded the deuterocanonical books of the Jewish canon.

Reflection:

- 1) The books of the Old Testament can be divided into 4 main tables. Do you know what these tables are called? Can you name a few books from each table?
- 2) Why is it necessary to believe or have faith in order to fully understand the biblical texts?
- 3) The history of God's people is rich with meaning and many significant events that took place. What are the biblical passages that impress you the most? Why?
- 4) Different literary genres are found in the Bible. What is your preferred literary genre? Can you name the biblical books that contain these genres?
- 5) The Bible is an integrating element of the Church. What does this mean?
- 6) How do you normally read the Bible? How frequently do you read a passage or a book from the Bible? How many times have you read the entire Bible?
- 7) Reflect briefly on how you read the Word of God, especially the Old Testament books.

TABLE 2 - THE PENTATEUCH: GENESIS AND EXODUS

In this second table we will begin our study of the Pentateuch. For Jews, the Pentateuch was known as the Torah or Law. We will start off by learning about this set of five books and focus specifically on the first two books: Genesis and Exodus.

2.1- The Pentateuch

The first five books of the Bible form a collection of books the Jews called "the law," or Torah. Pentateuch means "five scrolls". Christian tradition regards the Pentateuch as being the first five books of the Bible:

- Genesis: The Book about "origins".
- Exodus: The Book about the Jewish people's "exit" out of Egypt.
- Leviticus: The Book about the "Levites," priests of the tribe of Levi.
- Numbers: The Book about the "census" done on the people of Israel.
- Deuteronomy: The Book referred to as the "second law" with civil and religious laws, Moses' sermons and events prior to his death.

a) The oral traditions of the people of God

The Pentateuch in its present form took a long time to be written down. At that time the people of Israel had no books, but relied on their memories and oral traditions. This enabled them to orally transmit their experiences with God, with the world and with men from generation to generation.

These memories and traditions date back to the time of Abraham and specifically the time of Moses, when Israel was formed as a people. The recollections of these events became a national epic. Moses' beliefs and teachings forever directed the observances of faith and practices of the people of Israel. The Law of Moses became the social norm. Poets, musicians and popular singers recounted these traditions and history during pilgrimages to shrines. The priests embraced the religious customs, social norms and the laws.

b) The traditions were collected in writing

According to biblical scholars, the Pentateuch was a compilation of four documents or traditions, differing by date and origin and long after the time of Moses. Each of these traditions approach the mystery of God in different ways:

- Yahwist Source (J);
- Elohist Source (E);
- Deuteronomist Source (D);
- Priestly Source (P).

b.1- Yahwist Source (J)

The Yahwist document was written at the end of the 10th century B.C. and recounts the whole story of King Solomon and the Jerusalem court. It became a tradition for poets and musicians to recite with musical accompaniment for the nobility. God was known by the name of Yahweh. The document was written in a vivid and colourful style. It provides the answers to the profound questions and problems posed by man, and does so figuratively.

b.2- Elohist Source (E)

The Elohist document was probably written between the late ninth century and middle of the 8th century B.C, and recounts the events of the Northern Kingdom in a prophetic manner, where we find Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, etc. The word "Elohim" is the name used for God. The Elohist source does not have any creation account or the universal origins of humankind. It reveals the greatness of God Who speaks to man from the clouds, in the form of fire, in dreams or through angels. It has a sombre style to it and recommends the adoption of appropriate moral conduct.

These two documents (Yahwist and Elohist) are narratives of parallel stories, so it's therefore possible to make a synopsis of both. These two traditions merged in Jerusalem, around 700 B.C, during the reign of King Hezekiah.

b.3- Deuteronomist Source (D)

This tradition portrays the story of Moses and the connection the people had to God's law. This document was compiled in the Northern Kingdom and was only complete during the reign of King Hezekiah. It was finally edited during the Exile of Babylon, between the years 587 and 538 B.C., therefore in the sixth century B.C.

It emphasized how the Jewish people were God's Chosen people who were liberated by God. It demanded that Israel remain faithful to the law of their God. The authors of this tradition appeared to be concerned with upholding and highlighting the key characteristics that defined the people of Israel: one people, one God, one land, one law and one temple. This was evident in Deuteronomy.

b.4- Priestly Source (P)

This Priestly tradition described all the events and concerns of the priestly class exiled from Jerusalem. The priestly source is thought to have developed during and after the Babylonian Exile (587–538 BC), thus it dates around the sixth century BC.

It was written by the priestly class to strengthen the faith of the Jews living in exile in Babylon and protect them from the influences of the pagan environment they found themselves in. The writing style was dry and factual, without any specific details being mentioned. It was filled with facts, figures and lists, and the vocabulary used is precise and technical. Some of the terms used are unique to this tradition. The Priestly Source's concern about genealogies was emphasized to demonstrate who the roots of the people were.

In this sense, we understand why intermarriage with foreigners was prohibited, because it placed the people in danger of being led into idolatry. There were many laws present in the narratives. These laws or institutions emphasized religious values: the Fertility Law (Genesis 1:28), the Sabbath (Genesis 2:3), circumcision (Genesis 17: 9 -14) and Passover (Exodus 12:1-13). The sacred writings presented genealogies, dates, laws and liturgical ceremonies. These laws were put into effect especially during the time of the Babylonian exile and are also found at the end of Exodus, Leviticus and throughout Numbers.

These four traditions, and their additions and amendments, were gathered together in one volume: the Pentateuch. This work seems to have been completed by the year 400 B.C, after the Babylonian exile, and was attributed to Ezra, the Jewish scribe and priest.

c) Progressive Revelation

God gradually revealed Himself to man. Many centuries passed leading up to God sending the world his Son Jesus Christ, the supreme revelation of God. But the

Word contained in the Pentateuch shows us the path followed by the people of Israel that allowed them to get closer to God: a path consisting of great escapes, cowardice and betrayal, but also great strength, struggles, hopes and regrets.

Today, God continues calling us all to approach Him, offering His love for us. How do we respond?

2.2 - Genesis 2.2

a) Age old Questions

Who created the universe? Why is there life and death? Who created Man? How and why was Man created? Why does Man love and hate?

Man continues asking these important questions up to the present day. And the Bible gives us God's answer right from the beginning.

b) A confession of faith in God

Genesis is not a history book in the modern sense, because there were no eyewitnesses in the beginning to describe and record what happened. It is also not a book about natural sciences. It is a confession of faith in God.

- God is the origin of all creation, of all that is good and of Man. Mankind almost immediately chooses the path of pride after he is created (Original Sin).
- As a result of Original Sin, hatred entered the fallen world and the first murder occurred (Cain) then a total degeneration of Mankind (Flood) and the arrogance of Man who thought he could do all things without God (Tower of Babel).
- Therefore, God intervened in the day-to-day life of the believer (Abraham).
- God took the initiative to elect a Chosen people (from the time of the Patriarchs onwards).

c) The language of imagery

People use language that is full of imagery in their oral traditions. Phrases like "I'm sick and tired." "I saw the stars shine" "Like father like son". "I'm at the end of my tether" The first chapters of Genesis are full of symbolism, imagery and allegory. By using different literary genres, the inspired authors wanted to bring us closer to understanding the mystery of God and communicate to us, in a poetic form, that God

is present in the lives of men. God loves us all and patiently waits for us to respond to His invite. Here are some examples:

- At the beginning: When did everything begin? It doesn't matter because God already existed. "In the beginning was the Word". God created everything with His absolute power. He brought order to chaos, created light and creatures. Creating life is the work of the Creator.
- Light: God created light and He Himself is the eternal Light that overcomes the darkness caused by lies and hatred. Light is truth and is love. It is life.
- The Celestial dome: the sacred author, like the wise men of Babylon, believed that the Earth was flat and supported by columns, and that the world had a celestial dome or the firmament placed above it that held water. The firmament contained the sun, moon and stars as lamps. When God opened the vault of the firmament, it would rain. They believed in a dark place called Sheol or hell that existed under the earth.
- God created everything in six days and rested on the seventh day: by using the mind-set, beliefs and language from the ancient culture of his time, the sacred author summarized and directed the creative work of God in a period of six days with the seventh day reserved for rest. This highlighted the author's intention in encouraging the people to rest on the Sabbath. God rested on the Sabbath. The Children of Israel should do likewise.
- He formed man out of clay: this imagery reveals God as a potter who moulded man in His image. It teaches us how much God cares for His favourite creature made in God's image.
- God infused the breath of life into man: only God is uncreated, and He gently and caringly calls man to have life in His name. Mankind's essence depends entirely on God: from his material body to his spiritual life.
- The Garden of Eden: a garden or an oasis signified happiness in Bedouin culture. Paradise was a gift from God entrusted to man. There existed harmony and peace in the garden. It was God's house. It was the Father's house.
- The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: it signified discerning what is good and what is bad. It only belonged to God. Therefore, by disobeying God's

command and eating of the forbidden fruit, this exposed man as wanting to be like God.

- The naming of the creatures: Adam gave names to the other creatures as a sign of his dominance and stewardship over all creatures. God called these creatures into existence and the man calls them to be at his service.
- The Rib: the imagery of the rib enables us to understand the unity of humanity and how man and woman were one in the beginning. This is why they desire to be unified as one flesh again. The man and woman have the same flesh, the same life, the same dignity and are united in marriage. They share the same love for a common destiny.
- Serpent: The serpent was a symbol of evil for the Israelites because they experienced being bitten by snakes in the desert. The snakes would then disappear after inflicting pain and death. The snake was also an idol frequently worshipped by the Canaanites: it symbolized life, fertility and wisdom. By symbolically using the snake as an example, the inspired author affirmed that it was merely a creature not to be worshiped, as they were deceptive and used their words to fool man. The serpent promised to give life and instead brought about death. It promised wisdom but brought about humiliation and ignorance. In this account of the serpent in the garden, the serpent serves as a mask for Satan, God's enemy who is envious of man's happiness.
- Ye shall be as gods: To be "like God" signified man wanting to enjoy all the benefits of life, where all his wishes and desires were fulfilled. This was the temptation of "omnipotence". Man found it difficult to face the realities of life.
- Nudity: was the fruit of sin. The man's sinful nature was exposed before God, to himself and the rest of creation: he was naked. He realized that he no longer reflected the glory of God. He no longer had any dignity and fear entered his life. He feared God. He ran away from God's gaze but God sought him.

- Suffering: the sanctions imposed by God upon Adam and Eve - pain, fatigue and death were the result of sin and the Fall. Everyone shall be born with evil inclinations and Original Sin.
- Adam: in Hebrew it meant 'man'. His name signified he who came from the earth (clay).
- Eve: She signified life. The woman was the bearer of life. Being a mother was an experience unique to women. Eve was the mother of those born to life.
- Clothes: God punished man for his disobedience, but also protected him from his shame and helplessness. The imagery of man covering himself in clothes signifies that God restores the dignity of man. It suggests that God calls us to a new life.
- Cherubim: the name of an unearthly, winged being who directly attended to God and whose sculptures guarded the entrances of temples and palaces in Mesopotamia. The sacred author seems to indicate that man placed himself 'outside the temple' as a result of sin. i.e. man broke the Covenant that God made with Adam in the garden which caused him to flee from God's presence.

2.2.1- The religious message found in the Book of Genesis

The Genesis narratives were not intended to teach us fundamental scientific truths about the origin of man and the universe. This belongs to the scope of Modern day science. The sacred authors were influenced by the social norms of the ancient Hebrew culture they grew up in. They also borrowed elements and traditions from neighbouring cultures and people. But the Israelites experienced God's protection. He was their deliverer and guided the destiny of His Chosen people. They faithfully affirmed that their Lord was also the Lord of heaven and earth. The sacred author gave us insight into the religious viewpoints of the people of Israel. This was God's divine revelation.

The creation account: a liturgical poem

We shouldn't expect the biblical creation account to be a scientific or historical lesson on the origins of the universe and man. It was a poem that expressed the extraordinary faith that the Jewish priests found in their God. The world was created in six days to legitimize the Sabbath and celebrate it as a day of rest. The Sabbath day was therefore sanctified, and honour was rendered to God. This was a liturgical treatise (not a scientific one) to emphasise the importance of the Sabbath.

a) Drafted in different stages

The text found in the creation account (Genesis 1) corresponds to the priestly tradition and was written in exile. There is a sense that the text was written as an act of faith. At first glance it looks like poetry, like an escape out of reality: "The whole world is beautiful and perfect", but the author actually wrote it while he was in exile, living in a harsh, ungrateful world. Beyond the evil contempt and suffering, faith is affirmed in a God who desires a beautiful, just world.

b) Yahwist account of creation (Genesis 2)

In Genesis 2, the earth was represented as an oasis or a garden in the middle of the desert. Man was created to firstly cultivate the land. Woman was then created shortly afterwards. Humanity (man-woman) was created at the end. It was a means of emphasizing their dignity. It resembled a liturgical procession whereby the most important and dignified part was kept for last.

c) From the God who liberates to the God who creates

The True God that Israel discovered was first and foremost the same God who freed them from Egypt - a God who acts in history. And, once again, it was this God that the exiles in Babylon addressed in the hope of obtaining another liberation. God is able to act in history because God created history, as Second Isaiah dramatically pointed out. This is what the sacred writers intended to say in each one of these accounts:

- The creation (Genesis 1:1–31 and Genesis 2: 1-4)
 - God was the creator of the world and of history.
 - All creation was good because God created it and all partook of His goodness.
 - The Stewardship of Creation was given to man by God.

- Rest was necessary for the wellbeing of the body and dedication to divine worship.
- The creation of man and woman (Genesis 2: 7-25)
 - Man was created in God's image. Man recognised this, loved, and was aware that God calls out to His people and responds to their petitions.
 - Man was created as creator. He was responsible for the universe.
 - Man and woman shared the same dignity. Both had a common origin and a common purpose. The image of God was not that of an individual but of a couple.
 - The human family reflected God's love because it was a love that bore fruit, and a community of people united by love.
- Original Sin (Genesis 3)
 - We were all created by participating in God's goodness.
 - God gave individuals the free will to direct their lives.
 - But concupiscence existed in man, which is the inclination or innate tendency of human beings to do evil. This led them away from God as they felt compelled to live according to their own moral laws.
 - Evil did not come from God, but was the result of man's sin that led him to be selfish and proud, turning him away from God, destroying the harmony of coexistence among men.
 - Everything deteriorated when man broke his friendship with God.
 - God revealed to man his state of Original Sin and his fallen nature but He did not leave us alone. He seeks us for our own good, forgives us and offers salvation.
- Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-18)

The inspired author didn't intend to tell us a real story. It is not necessary for us to believe that Cain and Abel were literally the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was described in the image of the Canaanites and other pagans who were idolaters, selfish and violent. Abel was described in the author's own image: a shepherd, a worshiper of God and a pacifist.

- These passages attempted to explain the origins of the rupture of brotherhood among men.
- The first consequence of man's broken relationship with God was the rupture of relations between men, which led to murder.
- Coexistence and harmony amongst people is always difficult because of sin.
- God is with the righteous, regardless of their race or social status.
- God asks us to love our neighbour.
- Revenge is not permitted.

➤ The Great Flood (Genesis 6-9)

Various versions of flood accounts existed in the region of Mesopotamia. This is indicative of the possibility of a catastrophic flood having occurred in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers during ancient times, and then subsequently remembered for centuries. The sacred author used this story and wanted to point out that:

- The wages of sin was death.
- The wickedness of man called for God's judgment to be upon them.
- But God, who is patient and merciful, always saw someone or something worth saving in the midst of evil.
- The wickedness of man did not halt God's plan for salvation.
- Everything began afresh after God's covenant with Noah.

➤ The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9)

This is another example where the Bible was clearly not written as an empirical account about natural science or the history of languages. Its main purpose was to only convey a religious message. In ancient times, there existed many huge stepped structures or towers known as ziggurats in Mesopotamia. To the sacred author, these became the symbols of the fundamental sin of pride. In this dramatic account we learn about:

- The reality of a proud world where men do not understand each other, hate one another and want to remain apart, as a result of wanting nothing to do with God.

- By worshipping the "false gods" of progress and technology, this enslaves mankind today.
- Man began to rule his life according to his own specific interests. The world is then transformed into a place where no one understands each other because everyone speaks the language of their own selfishness.
- The Bible concludes by saying that "the LORD confused the language of all the earth." This means that the people were divided based on hatred, envy and internal discord.

2.2.2- The patriarchs

The stories of the patriarchs were legendary traditions based on historical fact, which were interpreted in light of faith for the purpose of teaching important lessons of life.

a) Abraham, the man who believed

- Abraham, "father of many": In the Bible, the story of Abraham teaches us a religious lesson. God called him and he responded with faith. Therefore, Jews, Muslims and Christians call him "the father of many".
- A man of faith (Genesis 12): When God called Abraham, he was very old and had no children or land. It is astonishing how Abraham was willing to begin a new chapter in his life, guided by God as he trusted in God's Word. Abraham left behind his old beliefs, his country, his people and his father's house, obeying God who promised him a son, descendants and land.
- A man of hope: Abraham overcame rigorous trials and tribulations. Hoping against all hope, Abraham discovered that God does not fail in His promises. God alone suffices.
- The Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22: 1-18): After being put to the test, Abraham realized that God, unlike the other gods of his time, did not want the blood of humans to satisfy his thirst. God wanted love and life to establish an eternal friendship. Abraham also realized that he needed to rely on his faith in God rather than focusing on his personal ambitions and endeavours.

b) Isaac: a man of God and for God

- Isaac realized that by being the son of Abraham, he was a gift from God, a "son" of God.
- In Isaac, we will always have these two impressions of him: one as a teenager about to be sacrificed and then of an old man who was tested greatly during his lifetime, almost to the point of death.
- Isaac was one of the great patriarchs of the people of God. In many instances in the Bible, God presented Himself as the God of "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." The Sacrifice of Isaac is read at the Easter Vigil, because it prefigures Jesus Christ. Isaac's silence and obedience reminds us of Christ's silence and submission on the way to Calvary. Isaac's wonderful release announces the resurrection of Jesus.

c) Jacob: the younger son obtains the birth right

- Escolhido por Deus: a Bíblia nos apresenta Jacó como um homem de uma astúcia refinada e como um escolhido por Deus para herdar as Promessas.
- Chosen by God: the Bible presents Jacob as a cunning, refined man chosen by God to inherit the promises made to Abraham. Here we learn that before God, we do not acquire His promises based on our own merits, but through the grace of His love that he freely offers us. It is God who chooses us and gives us the time to get to know Him
- Jacob's encounter and conversion (Genesis 28: 11-22 and Genesis 32: 22-31): Jacob has an encounter with God. God strengthened Jacob's faith by giving him a mysterious dream. In this dream, God makes Jacob the heir to the promises, and announces that he will be protected.
- Jacob made a vow with God. If God kept His promises, Jacob would worship Him. Jacob's conversion is symbolized by the name change that occurs. God renamed Jacob and called him 'Israel'. The name 'Israel' signifies 'he who struggled with God' and Jacob was given this name because of the encounter he had the night he wrestled with an angel of God. A change of name in the Bible signified a change of mission.
- Jacob's blessings and death (Genesis 49): While he lived in Canaan, peace and joy did not last long for Jacob. His last punishment was dying in Egypt,

far away from the Promised Land. Jacob blessed all his children on his deathbed. Jacob prophesizes that the Tribe of Judah would rule over all the other tribes and the Saviour would be born from this tribe.

d) Joseph, God's interpreter

- God was with Joseph: According to the accounts in the Bible, God did not speak to Joseph in the same way as He did with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But God was with Joseph. Joseph's story is a profound meditation on life.
- An optimistic realism: Joseph accepted life as it came with its trials and tribulations because he put God first in his life, despite it appearing absurd. Joseph was prepared for the times of abundance and scarcity; for times when he would be honoured and dishonoured. Joseph did not let anyone leave him with a sense of pride nor did he allow others to denigrate him. He did not lose hope nor succumb to discouragement.
- Joseph was a man with a good heart that everyone trusted. He forgave instead of creating deeper divisions and rebuilt his family.
- Jesus Prefigured: Joseph was Jacob's favourite son just as Jesus is the beloved Son of the Father. Jesus is the wisdom of God and the Word made flesh.
- Joseph was sold by his brothers. Jesus was sold by one of his friends and abandoned by almost everyone. Joseph generously forgave his brothers. While on the cross, Jesus forgave those who encouraged and carried out the crucifixion.

2.3- Exodus

2.3.1- Introduction

a) Based on historical facts but embellished: "An Epic about liberation"

The Book of Exodus was written in a variety of styles: in the form of narratives, laws, epic poems and prayers. Stories full of religious significance were predominant. The narrative was supported by actual facts, but these events were combined and embellished to form an epic account. It revealed the sacred author's deep faith in the special intervention of God in history.

b) The special revelation in the Book of Exodus is God

- It was God who chose Moses and revealed His name to Moses.
- It was God who guided His people through the difficulties encountered in the desert.
- It was God who established a pact or Covenant with His people.
- It was God who gave us His Law and remained faithful to the covenant, even after His people abandoned Him. «The Passover and Covenant gave birth to Israel as a Holy People of God. Israel acknowledged that everything it was and had as a people depended on this fact.

2.3.2- The wonders of Exodus

In this book, incredible occurrences appeared in the narratives that are the "works of God", manifesting His power and love for His people. Yahweh acted in such a way that the people of Israel clearly saw His intervention.

In the biblical sense, we can say that a miracle is "every occurrence that reveals the power and protection of God." God often used miracles to express His love. These miracles led the people towards a better knowledge of God - to praise and give Him thanks.

a) Prodigies and signs

- The Israelites cry out (Exodus 2:23): The Israelites cry out (Exodus 2:23): God's power was placed at the service of justice and freedom, as He remained faithful to the promises He made with His Chosen people. God was not insensitive to human needs. God did not tolerate that his "image" be profaned by oppression or sin.
- "I Am who I Am" (Exodus 3:14-15) meant: "I Am here intervening. History will explain what My name signifies. What the people will see will clearly reveal who I Am ". It was God who fought for His people. God cannot be confined to a single name.
- The plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7: 1-11; 10): the disasters that befell the Egyptians make us understand that it was God Himself who fought the Pharaoh to save His people. In these passages, the Egyptian gods were mocked. God used natural occurrences: floods, water contamination, pests,

an invasion of mosquitoes and flies, grasshoppers, frogs, dust clouds, storm, hail, etc., to reveal His power and protect His people.

- The Crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14: 19-31): For a long time, people believed that it was the Red Sea that the Israelites crossed. But appears as though the Israelites were in swampy areas that were located further up north, where they could move more easily. The marsh made it difficult for the Egyptians to pass through them with their chariots. When God created the world, God separated the waters from the land. Now He creates His people by opening the water and allowing them to pass from slavery to freedom, from death to life.
- The Cloud above the Tabernacle (Numbers 9:15): the Israelites were able to see and hear God through natural manifestations. The cloud shaded the ground. It was the symbol that God was present, shielding and guiding His people. Transfigured, God appeared in a cloud. Luke alludes to the cloud when he says that the power of the Most High would 'overshadow' Mary.
- The quails (Exodus 16: 6-13): In the Sinai Peninsula, it is still common to observe flocks of quail in spring, flying in a northern direction to spend the summer in cooler regions. They are migratory birds. Their long flights over the water would leave them weary and tired. In these circumstances, it would be very easy to capture them. The Israelites understood, through the light of faith, that there was divine intervention from God who saved them from starvation.
- The manna (Exodus 16: 13-36): On the west coast of the Sinai Peninsula, a type of shrub exists called a tamarisk. One of its characteristics is that it exudes sap droplets from its branches. These sap droplets are known by the name of 'man hu' or MANNA. The droplets solidify in the cold night and fall to the ground and need to be collected in the morning before they melt in the sunlight. The bread of heaven, a term widely used throughout the ages, is still used today by the Bedouins in the manufacture of bread. The book of Exodus described the manna as "bread raining down from heaven," that God provided to His people to satisfy their hunger. The bread that rains

down from heaven and that truly satisfies our hunger and gives us life is the same Jesus present in the Eucharist.

- Stone Tablets (Exodus 24:12): the stone was the material commonly used for recording laws. It was a way of making them public and permanent. Their permanence depended on their importance. The prophet Jeremiah says that God Himself has infused His law inside men by writing it in their hearts.
- Forty days (Exodus 24:18): The number 40 appears several times in Scripture. The prophet Elijah travelled 40 days to get to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). Christ remained for forty days in the desert (Matthew 4:2). Another number commonly found in the Bible is the number 7. "Now glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud" (Exodus 24:16). By association, this passage draws a parallel between Creation and the Covenant. These numerical symbols were derived from the religious era of the time.
- Land flowing with milk and honey in abundance (Exodus 33:3): the Promised Land is likened to an exaggerated image of abundance and wealth. But, above all, it is the sign of maternal care (milk) and the sweetness of living with God and being happy (honey) that indicates God's love for His people.

2.3.3- Moses

a) Chosen by God

Moses, who lived more than 3,000 years ago, was a shepherd, prophet, leader and legislator, with a profound knowledge of man and was, above all, a friend of God. God saved Moses' life when he was a child and instilled in him a strong sense of justice and solidarity.

b) Revelation and mission

In the fight against hatred and envy, in defence of the oppressed against the oppressors, Moses confronted both the Egyptians and his native Hebrew people. God called out to Moses and revealed His Name, showing once and for all that God is

always near us ready to redeem mankind. God trusted Moses to lead his people out of slavery.

c) Leader, Lawgiver, Mediator

With humility and an unwavering faith, Moses accepted the painful task of freeing his people. God gave Moses the strength to overcome the difficulties he faced. Moses love for the Israelites grew as if it were the children of a mother's womb. He risked his life for them and constantly asked the Lord for forgiveness, food, water and laws that would help the Israelites to live with love, harmony and justice. His patience was just as great as his strength. Moses endured insults, rebellions and misunderstandings from those very same people he had risked everything for.

d) Jesus prefigured

Moses seemed to prefigure Jesus, in light of the aspects that defined Moses' rich personality:

- Jesus, who was the ultimate prophet, fulfilled Moses' prophecies.
- Jesus, who was the lawgiver of the New Covenant and gathered all people to Himself, completely fulfilled Moses' spiritual inheritance.
- Jesus exercised his mediation between God and Man more fully and perfectly than Moses did.
- Jesus ensures the complete and total liberation of the people of God, redemption from sin and he leads us to the Father's House - the true Promised Land.

2.3.4- Passover: the Lord's passing over the houses of the Israelites (Exodus 12:1-28)

a) A spring festival

The Passover was an ancient feast held by shepherds in the spring. The Hebrews didn't want to stop celebrating this feast-pilgrimage during their enslavement in Egypt. It was celebrated every year in honour of Yahweh and held east of the Nile Delta, outside the land of Goshen where they lived. This was a place away from the cultural centre of Egypt.

b) The Passover sacrifice

There was a time when the Egyptians did not allow for the Hebrews to gather together for the celebration. God then instructed his servant Moses. The Hebrews

carried out the sacrifice of the Passover in their homes, and marked blood on the lintel and two doorposts of the door to their houses prior to the tenth plague. The Hebrews were instructed to have a meal of liberation at night and eat roasted lamb with unleavened bread. They were to do this as soon as possible to end the inhumane and unjust social situation they were living in.

Yahweh, the true God who acts in history constantly defending the weak, intervened and "passed over" (which means Passover) the dwellings of the Hebrews marked with the blood of the lamb. The Lord's passing over the houses of the Israelites freed them from death. It saved the Israelites but the Egyptian firstborns were slayed. Israel could finally leave Egypt.

c) The Feast of the God who liberates

That year, the festival in honour of Yahweh coincided with a major event that would forever mark Jewish history: their liberation from slavery. It became the feast of liberation. Israel would never forget this event. The significance and meaning of the festival would change radically. Passover would now become the festival of the faith of a people that God appeared to so that He could provide them with their liberation from slavery.

d) The Passover Meal

When the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan, Passover became a dinner involving the whole family: peaceful, religious and cheerful. Songs would be sung and long stories told about the miraculous deliverance. All praised the God who saved them. They would leave the festival with renewed faith. They lived their lives with certainty: "God frees us from slavery today, the same way he did so with our ancestors".

e) Jesus, the Paschal Lamb

Jesus celebrated his Passover, his passage from this world to the Father, with a dinner held among friends. In this farewell supper, Jesus became the Paschal Lamb. The Last Supper was the fulfilment of the Passover of the Exodus. God, who freed his people that Passover, now frees everyone from the slavery of sin through the death and resurrection of Christ. At the Last Supper, Christ anticipated the offering of Himself to the Father on the cross for our salvation.

2.3.5- The Crossing of the Red Sea: the path to freedom (Exodus12: 31-15; 21)

a) Faith in a God who saves

"Do not be afraid, be firm and you will see the victory the LORD will give you"
This is Moses' response to the fear of the Israelites. It is a wonderful example of pure faith in God. Moses invited them to fully trust in the power of God that they couldn't see.

God is "the One who saves." In this instance, He was the saviour to a people on the brink of death, present in each person that cried out to the Lord. He was present in those who let the power of God be implanted inside them so that they would be saved.

b) A turning point

The sacred author probably exaggerated the facts surrounding the events of the Exodus due to his memory magnifying and embellishing the events as a result of the joy he felt. But it was through his faith that the true meaning and significance of what happened is understood and "seen as an admirable feat by God for the poor and persecuted".

The importance of what occurred and why this event happened was for the Israelites proof that "the strong hand of the Lord" acted against the Egyptians. The Israelites therefore believed in the Lord.

c) Baptized in Christ

Christian baptism is the sacrament of a new life. Through baptism we come to a full fellowship with God and a communion of life with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptized Christians, submerged in Christ, born of water and the Spirit, pass from death to life, from sin to grace, from darkness to light, from slavery to the freedom God gives His children.

Our commitment should be to help others break free from the shackles of slavery and lead them to freedom that faith, hope and love provide together with social development, respect for human rights, etc.

2.3.6. The Covenant on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-24)

a) The definition of God's Chosen People

- God's Chosen People were those who He regarded as His own: David was said to be "a man after God's Own heart." God revealed His love to his privileged children. God chose His people and loved them, even though they didn't deserve this love. The Israelites were the people who recognised God and to whom God spoke.
- Kingdom of priests, God offered the people of Israel the calling of being the manifestation and sign of His salvation before all the nations of the earth. Israel would fulfil this mandate through liturgical worship, the teachings transmitted from generation to generation and the testimony of a life lived in accordance to the Law of the Covenant.
- Holy nation, God wanted Israel to be a "Holy" people. In other words a people "consecrated" to serve God, receive His Word and do His Will. Moses transmitted God's words to the people and the people accepted it.

b) The great manifestation of God on Mount Sinai

The ancient pagan myth of the mountain, revered as the home of the gods, was transformed into the historical certainty that God truly intervened on Mount Sinai, and it was there where God had an encounter with His people.

c) The Ten Commandments - the Law based on love

The Ten Commandments were the law for the community. They dealt with the relationship between God and man and one another. The Commandments were illuminated by a hope and faith that everyone in the community shared, and by love which was the soul of the Covenant. The Commandments are not a complete catalogue of rules but are profound guidelines, essential for man's relationship with God and with one another.

d) A message of liberation

Israel was a nation that was released from enslavement, to then serve the Lord. The Commandments, which are at the heart of the Covenant, were also messages of liberation:

- It liberated the people from worshipping the false gods that could not save them (1st and 2nd Commandment).
- It provided the people with the freedom to serve, praise and sanctify God's name, instead of being served by God's name (3rd and 4th Commandments).
- It provided the people with the freedom to live completely fulfilled lives without causing serious harm to others (5th to 9th Commandment)
- It freed the people from the shackles of greed and envy - evils that are capable of killing love (10th Commandment).

e) I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it

Jesus completely fulfilled the Law of Mount Sinai, as He pointed out at the Sermon on the Mount and He summarizes the law based on these two commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself". The Ten Commandments should be regarded as a continuation of God's plan of liberation from enslavement that Israel received in the old Covenant and that continues to the present day.

f) Israel celebrated the mystery of the Covenant

God took the initiative to communicate His love for man. He wanted them experience a new way of living and being. It was a commitment of life in common; of a relationship maintained with loving fidelity between God and his people.

The people were called to a positive response to God's invitation. The most important sign of the Covenant was blood (for the Hebrews, blood signified the beginning of life). When Moses, the Mediator, sprinkled the altar (representing God) with blood and the assembled people with the blood of the Covenant, it signified that God and His people were united in the same life.

g) The Covenant reached the heart of the people

The prophets preached and affirmed that the Covenant God had with His people is still present. It is at the forefront of every conversion that takes place. This is a grace, and its source is the love that God has for His people.

h) The New Covenant and the Blood of Jesus

The blood of Jesus, sacramentally present on the altar, shed for the forgiveness of sins and for the liberation of man, is the "blood of the New and Eternal Covenant."

The blood of Jesus is offered to the Father as a sacrifice of thanksgiving and communion, to effectively communicate the fact that love unites man with God and one another. The Eucharist is the sign of the New and Eternal Covenant.

2.3.7- The idolatry of the people (Exodus 32)

a) The golden calf

The bull symbolised fertility and strength for the Egyptians, with whom the Jews had lived. Israel asked for "a god to lead them forward". They felt more secure by having a tangible image of their 'god'. This way, they believed that God was with them. To the Israelites, the calf represented a god who gave life and defended the people with power. In reality, the golden calf represented a betrayal of the True God.

b) "This is your God, Israel, He who brought you out of Egypt"

Breaking the Covenant was the first act committed by the people. Disobedience of the Lord's command not to worship graven images led the people to idolatry.

c) The prohibition of making graven images

The reason why the Israelites were prohibited to make images that supposedly represented God was due to the risk of them believing that God was truly in that image. Images possessed the power of God. That is what the neighbouring populations living around Israel believed.

d) Modern day idols

Idols still exist today. They are not fetishes from the past. Idols are the things of life that capture the heart of man and makes people forget about their ultimate destination which is to be with God. Idols can be the unbridled lust for power, wealth, luxury, pleasures and the political and social ideologies that alienate man of God.

e) The supplication of Moses

Moses' prayer of supplication was a beautiful prayer of intercession on behalf of the guilty people. It was addressed to God with sincerity, faith and trust. Moses interceded. God "repented" of the threat and punishment that should have been delivered upon the people as a result of their sin. Aaron apologized and disagreed with the people. The Levites carried out Moses' orders.

f) Punishment and Forgiveness

The claim that God punished the children for the sin of the parents, to the third and fourth generation, should be understood in light of the Babylonian exile that occurred. People remained outside their native land for generations. This was because of the sins of their descendants.

But the inspired author also affirmed, through faith, that God's love and power reaches man up to and beyond "the thousandth generation." God does not want the evil in the world that destroys man. Besides this, God does not punish us according to our sins we commit. He desires for all sinners to convert and live, because He is merciful and faithful.

g) God's encounter with man

Mount Sinai was a meeting point between God and man. God dwelled on high, in the mountains. When the people of Israel entered the desert, the 'tent' would substitute the mountain. The cloud descended upon it. The tent guarded the Ark of the Covenant and the manna, and thus became a "meeting place" between God and man.

Reflection:

- 1) The book of Genesis is a confession of faith by God's chosen people, and not a book that teaches us scientific truths about the origin of man and the universe. How do you understand the story of creation from a biblical viewpoint?
- 2) Reread the passages found in Genesis 2:7-25 about the creation of man and woman. What strikes you the most in this passage? Do you understand the meaning of the following statement: "the image of God was not an individual but a couple"?
- 3) Which aspects attract you the most about the life and history of each of the patriarchs of the Old Testament: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph?
- 4) How do you understand this statement from God: "I Am what I Am"?
- 5) Many wonders and signs from God are recorded in the book of Exodus. How do you interpret and approach the wonders and signs from God that occur in your daily life?

- 6) Moses was a man chosen by God. Which aspects of Moses' story strike you the most? How do you live your life as a chosen one of God?
- 7) The books of Genesis and Exodus refer to the existence of many idols among God's Chosen people. What are the modern day idols that exist among people nowadays? What are the idols in your life? Do they separate you from God?

TABLE 3 - THE PENTATEUCH: LEVITICUS, NUMBERS AND DEUTERONOMY

3.1- LEVITICUS

3.1.1- Introduction

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were formed by tribes. These tribes descended from the twelve sons of Jacob. One of the tribes was the tribe of Levi, who was one of the twelve sons of Jacob. All the people who were part of the tribe of Levi were called Levites.

The tribe of Levi was of great importance in the history of Israel from its beginning. In Exodus, the main characters - Moses and Aaron, were members of this tribe, and led all the people of Israel out of enslavement in ancient Egypt, to the land of Canaan.

Moses became the spiritual leader and lawgiver of the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert, and received the tablets containing the Ten Commandments from God. He also received instructions about the laws and rules of conduct which would orientate Israel for centuries to come.

With the conquest of Canaan, the tribe of Levi was the only tribe not to receive any part of the land, which was a specific and defined area. Instead, the Levites were given isolated cities located in the regions belonging to all the other tribes.

The Levites were given the duty of priesthood by God (Aaron and his sons). They praised and worshipped God, having been singers and instrumentalists (this was in the time of King David). They were tasked with the tidying and maintenance of the tabernacle and the temple. They acted as guards, porters, bakers - everything that was related to the tabernacle or temple was the responsibility of the Levites. It was forbidden for someone from another tribe to do this work, as God designated it to the Levites alone.

Moses also appointed his brother Aaron as high priest, and appointed his descendants, and only his descendants, as those who had permission to perform sacrifices and enter the tabernacle, and come into the presence of the Ark of the Covenant. Their priestly functions were non-transferable.

The Ark of the Covenant was under the care of the Levites, until a Philistine attack resulted in its capture. The Philistines, however, allowed the Israelites to take

the Ark of the Covenant back and it was under the care of the Levites in the tabernacle of the city of Shiloh, until David ordered it to be brought to Jerusalem.

3.1.2- A Ritual for Priests

The Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26) was composed in Jerusalem before the exile. The priests of Jerusalem wanted to codify the traditions that took place in the temple, all of them centred on worship, to emphasise that God alone is Holy, Totally unique. The Laws for Burnt Offerings (Leviticus 1-7) and the Laws of Purity (Leviticus 11-16) were compiled after the exile, as was the Law on Daily Offerings (Numbers 28-29). Thus, the Code provided rules for priests, families and social life. It also indicated how the people were to celebrate festivals during the year.

The rituals were necessary: since man was mortal and his existence therefore temporary, reverence needed to be expressed through concrete gestures. When someone was preparing to meet God, it required a performance of the rituals. The encounter with God, for those in Israel who believed in God, was a very important part of their life. Their rigor, in how they carried out their rituals, was a manner of expressing the reverence they felt in the presence of God's Holiness.

3.1.3- How to read Leviticus today

Our world is very different from that described in Leviticus. The rules, rites and rituals in the Book of Leviticus reflected a culture from the past. As we see in the Letter to the Hebrews, many of the requirements were eventually replaced. Man lives in a world where everything proclaims God, because everything is a sign of God. We realize that life events (birth, illness, love, etc.) are occasions for an encounter and communion with God for those who believe in Him.

a) The sacred

The sacred, in all religions, represents a kingdom of divinity, completely separate from the profane (*pro fanum*: being in front of a sanctuary). Israel extensively participated in this understanding of God. God was holy, or in other words, totally "Other".

b) The priest

The priest was responsible for bridging the distance between God's Holiness and man. To do this, he needed to enter the sphere of the sacred, which was achieved through consecration. This essentially represented a separation: a separation of the faithful from the profane that allowed them to devote themselves to worship and temple activities.

c) Sacrifice

This word did not signify "deprivation" but "transformation." Sacrifice means "to make sacred": whatever was offered to God belonged to the domain of God. And in return, the priest conveyed God's gifts to the people: forgiveness, counsel and blessings.

d) Jesus Christ is the mediator

The concepts and notions, as mentioned above, became completely transformed with Jesus Christ. In Him, the sacred became profaned. It was no longer possible to distinguish between these realities: everything became sanctified through Him. Jesus Christ was the only priest, the perfect mediator. His sacrifice became the only sacrifice necessary (See the Letter to the Hebrews).

e) Be Holy for I am Holy

In the Book of Leviticus, chapters 17-26 contain the so-called "Holiness Code". God, who was the Holy One of Israel, communicated his holiness for His people who had the duty, in turn, to sanctify God's name. This God is Holy; i.e. the totally "Other", distinct from us. He is the living God, He is the Life. And this explains the mysterious respect that blood and sexuality provoked within the people.

f) Blood represented life

Blood was seen as sacred because it represents life, life that comes from God and that runs in our veins. Therefore, shedding man's blood was prohibited. Drinking the blood of an animal was prohibited. On the contrary, the offering of blood sacrifices was a way to recognize this gift of life that God gave man. In these sacrifices, it wasn't the animal alone that was offered to God but warm blood; i.e. the animal's blood. Blood signified life that was offered.

g) Sexuality took on a sacred character

Beyond the taboos (that existed), sexuality became an incredible feeling of participating in the transmission of the life that comes from God. This explains its sacredness as expressed in Leviticus.

h) Pure or Impure?

The understanding of what is pure and impure forms part of our moral understanding. In the Bible, as in other religions, this understanding was based on the idea of what was taboo or sacred. A person became impure when coming into contact with mysterious forces that could cause harm. Therefore, a ritual was required to "purify" the person to get rid of that bad force.

3.1.4- The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16: 2-22)

In the major Jewish feast known as the Day of Atonement or forgiveness, the high priest sacrificed two goats as a special offering to God: one was sacrificed in the temple, and the other was abandoned in the desert. The Jewish ceremony was a ritual and sign of sincere confession on the part of the people done in reparation for sins that were symbolically transmitted into the live goat that was then driven into the desert. Christians know that only Christ can truly forgive sins. We receive this grace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation through the ministry of the Church.

a) Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur

Once a year, the high priest entered behind the temple veil or Holy of Holies to obtain the forgiveness of sins on behalf of the people of Israel (Leviticus 16: 29-34). It was the solemn Saturday when penance would take place and God bestowed forgiveness, releasing the people from their sins.

b) The Appointed Festivals (Leviticus 23: 1-43)

Israel did not delay in giving a historic-religious significance to their feasts and festivals. Chapter 23 provides a compilation of the liturgical calendar. The festivals in the Bible, reminded the people of the wonders that God had done on behalf of His people. They were a celebration of the "memorials"; in other words, vivid and effective memories of God's action in history and daily life - always present to save the people and mankind.

c) The Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25: 8-38)

Israel celebrated the Year of Jubilee every 50 years. In the Jubilee Year, the liberation of the people of Israel was symbolically enacted. The land lay untilled. There was the forgiveness of debts and slaves were freed. Through these actions, it prevented slavery and misery from becoming the permanent situation of any family or individual in Israel. It signified a very serious effort on behalf of the people to correct the injustices accumulated over a period of 50 years.

3.2- NUMBERS

3.2.1- Introduction

In the Hebrew tradition, this book was known by the name 'Desert', precisely because it recorded the people's long wandering in the desert. But in the Greek translation, the book received the name of 'Numbers' because of the censuses present in the book, especially in Chapters 1-4 and 26.

The book is closely linked to the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. The order of the book was based on the geographical area of the land, this being the desert between Mount Sinai and the steppes of the Moab region, and the book was chronological.

Numbers covers the last twenty days when the Israelites were at Mount Sinai, which was the preparation for their departure from Sinai, (Numbers 1-10;10), the thirty-eight years wandering in the desert near Qadesh-Barnea, between Mount Sinai and the region of Moab, (Numbers 10: 11-21), and six months spent in the plains of Moab (Numbers 22-36).

a) Preparation and difficulties

The final events that occurred before the Israelites' departure at Mount Sinai are described: the census done on the basis of those men who were fit for war; the experiences of the various tribes in the camp; a number of requirements placed on the Levites and other laws; the celebration of Passover and God's manifestation in the cloud that covered the Tabernacle.

The Israelites began their march through the desert soon afterwards, under the direction of Moses' father-in-law, who knew the area well because he was a resident of Sinai.

The book then presents the difficulties the Israelites encountered in crossing the desert, especially the murmurings and lamentations of the people complaining about the difficulties of the journey, including the lack of food. Because of this, the book presents a series of requirements on the food offerings at some of the sacrifices and the violation of the Sabbath.

b) Description of several stories

The story of the prophet Balaam then follows where, instead of cursing the people of Israel, Balaam blessed them. The idolatry of the Israelites, caused by women from Moab and Midian, is then described; the divine punishment threatened on the people and Phinehas loyalty and bravery that he showed towards God. Phinehas was Aaron's grandson. A new census took place to divide the Promised Land. The story of Joshua is then told; the victory over the Midianites; the divisions in the Transjordan region; a retrospection of the different stages that took place as the Israelites wandered through the desert and the division of Canaan. The book ends by describing the cities of refuge which were set aside for those murderers who had unintentionally killed. The rules of inheritance for married women is also mentioned at the end.

c) An ideal Israel

The book presents Israel wandering through the desert as the ideal Israel. The silence and solitude of the wilderness favoured an encounter with God. The prophets see this moment in history as a time where Israel and God alone lived through the unforgettable experience of love.

But the desert was also a place of trial and temptation. In the desert, Israel learned what it was like to become poor and be aware of their humble conditions, experiencing how their lives depended on God. Everybody needed silence and detachment from the world in order to meet God. The people of Israel wandering in the desert would become a symbol for everyone who lives their life seeking God.

The Book of Numbers also tells us about the complaints and revolts that the people manifested in various forms while they were in the wilderness: murmurings, discouragement, the rejection of Moses' mediation, disbelief, etc. In the author's theology, the desert was the place where God dwelled and walked with His people, but it was also a place of sin, ingratitude and rebellion against God.

3.3- DEUTERONOMY

3.3.1- Introduction

Forty years had passed since Jehovah freed the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Because the people wandered all those years in the desert, the Israelites were still a nation without its own territory. However, they were finally at the gates of the Promised Land. What was stopping them from taking position of it? What problems would they face problems and how were they to deal with them?

Before Israel crossed the Jordan River into the land of Canaan, Moses prepared his people for the great task ahead. How did he do this? By delivering a series of speeches that raised the spirits of the people and persuaded, counselled and warned them. He reminded the Israelites that God Alone deserves worship and that they should not imitate the neighbouring nations and serve false gods. These speeches make up the majority of the biblical book of Deuteronomy.

Written entirely by Moses, except for the last chapter, the name of the book was of Greek origin that signified the second law hence the name Deuteronomy, or a second statement of the laws that were already promulgated (Deuteronomy 17, 18).

The speeches contained in this book generally reinforce the idea that serving God is not just following His law. Moses emphasized obedience as a result of love: "You shall love the Lord your God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." The "path of the blessing or of the curse" was also emphasized where God warns the people to following His Commandments, by which the people would be either blessed or cursed. But if they repented and put their hearts into following God, He would feel sorry for them and forgive the people and a blood sacrifice would be required, usually the death of those who "sinned" against Him or Israel, and after such a sacrifice, the rest of the people would be forgiven. The "wrath of God" against the "rebels" is confirmed in a number of passages found in Leviticus, Exodus and Numbers.

The book is the conclusion of a long history, where the principles stages can be summarized as follows:

- In the Northern Kingdom before the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C, it was evident that the old law given by Moses did not fit very well with the realities present. Israel became an organized nation and was no longer a

nomadic nation. And so, gradually, this gave rise to other laws and customs, which would later form the heart of Deuteronomy or the Second Law.

- After the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C, some Levites took refuge in Jerusalem where Hezekiah reigned. The Levites took with them those laws and organized and completed them.
- Under the wicked reign of Manasseh, the book disappeared into obscurity.
- While repairs were taking place at the temple by order of King Josiah in 622 B.C, the high priest discovered the "Book of the Law," which would be the core of what was to become the Book of Deuteronomy. King Josiah made the book the "Book of the Covenant" and it was used as a basis for major reforms that took place in the nation.
- Finally, after some amendments, this book became part of the great amalgamation of holy books that occurred around 400 B.C: the LAW in five volumes known as the Pentateuch.
- Since Josiah was aware of being faithful to Moses' law, he recited them from his own lips, announcing them as if it were a speech he was pronouncing before his death.

3.3.2- Moses first speech (Deuteronomy 1: 1-4; 4: 9)

In his first speech, Moses recalled some of the experiences that occurred in the desert, especially those that would eventually assist the Israelites in preparation for their possession of the Promised Land.

Moses recalled the victories that God had given to the children of Israel before they crossed the River Jordan. He did this to give the Israelites courage as they were ready to conquer Canaan on the other side of the river. The land that they would be occupying was full of idolatry. So this strong warning against idol worship was most appropriate from Moses.

3.3.3- Moses' second speech (Deuteronomy 5: 1-26; 19)

In his second speech, Moses recalled the moment when the Law was given to him on Mount Sinai, and repeated the Ten Commandments. He then reminded the children of Israel of an important lesson that they learned while in the wilderness:

"Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In the situation they found themselves in, the people of Israel needed to "keep the whole commandment." (Deuteronomy 8:3; 11:8).

3.3.4 - Moses third and fourth speech (Deuteronomy 27: 1-26; 12)

In his third speech, Moses declared that the Israelites would have to write the Law on great stones after crossing the Jordan, and he also proclaimed the curses that would result from disobedience to the Laws, and the blessings that would occur were they to be obedient.

The fourth discourse began with the renewal of the covenant made between God and Israel. Moses again warned against disobedience, and urged the people to "choose life." (Deuteronomy 30; 19).

a) Moses' speeches, laws and counsels

As the Israelis settled in the Promised Land, they needed laws to govern their lives. These laws not only regarded worship but were also related to judgments, government, war and their social and private lives. Moses recapitulated these laws and emphasized the need to love God and obey His Commandments.

b) A book about memoirs and love

In addition to the four speeches he made, Moses spoke about the leader who would succeed him, and taught the Israelites a beautiful song of praise to God. He warned them of the dangers of infidelity. After blessing the tribes, Moses died at the age of 120 years and was buried.

This book was a fervent meditation on Israel's past. The words "Remember" and "Love" are the key words found in this book. Israel remembered its incredible past. They guarded the story in their hearts - of the wonders that God did for each and every one of them. This made them love God with all their might.

c) Hear, O Israel (Deuteronomy 6: 4-19)

The beginning of chapter 6 became the prayer of all the Jews and was at the heart of their faith. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God is one" It is this fundamental statement that ties in with the passage: "You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength".

d) Open your hand to the poor (Deuteronomy 15: 7-8)

If anyone among you is poor, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward them. Rather, be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need (Deuteronomy 15: 7-8).

The Bible affirms that a relationship exists between poverty and fraternity. Moreover, the presence of any poor person before a believer should compel him to assist that poor person. By helping the poor get out of their situation of poverty, that they are able to live a life with dignity.

e) My father was an Aramaic nomad (Deuteronomy 26:5)

The people of Israel entered the Promised Land. They were slaves before, but now they were free. They used to work for others; now they were able to work for themselves. At the annual Jewish harvest festival of thanksgiving, the Hebrew people would recite a "creed" (Deuteronomy 26:5), which told the story of their salvation, and they offered the first grain to God, before the fruits of their labour reached the family table.

Reflection:

- 1) The books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy have a lot of rules and laws for God's Chosen people. Do you think that these rules and laws stifled the religious freedom of the people?
- 2) How do people perceive the existence of laws and regulations in today's world? Are these laws effective in regulating the ethical behaviour of people in favour of the common good?
- 3) How would you describe the time "wandering in the desert" that the people of Israel lived through? Do you think that modern society spend enough time in quiet reflection to foster a meaningful encounter with God in their daily lives?
- 4) Review the content of Moses' speeches. What are the most important themes found in each of them?
- 5) The Bible affirms that there is a relationship between poverty and fraternity. Why is it so difficult for us to grasp this in modern times? What is your relationship with the poor?

TABLE 4 - HISTORICAL BOOKS: JOSHUA, JUDGES AND SAMUEL

4.1 Introduction

In this TABLE we will study the Historical Books, specifically the Book of Joshua, the Book of Judges and the Books of Samuel.

The sequence of books in the Bible contain many historical traits, and interest in history was already very evident in the books of the Pentateuch. It is customary to regard the set of books that follow the Pentateuch as 'Historical books'. However, we are only able to record the History of Israel - in the modern sense of the word - from the time they settled in Canaan onwards.

We have to understand how the Israelites recounted their history and most importantly, what their purpose was. The writers of these accounts were not historians, in the sense of how we understand History in this day and age. They did not set out to satisfy our historical curiosity by providing us with precise historical details and accuracy. They intended to emphasize that God intervened in history and saved Israel. More than just giving us historical narratives, the main purpose of the authors was attempting to discover how the Word of God was transmitted through these events.

For example: archaeological discoveries indicate that Jericho was in ruins when Joshua conquered it, but we need to bear in mind that the sacred author was not a news reporter, documenting a battle. The authors were prophets who sought the meaning of the event. The authors did not seek to reconstruct the facts with pin point precision. By meditating on the past, they shed light for the present and hope for the future.

The Historical Books tell us how the promise of salvation, made by God to His people, was fulfilled. The sacred writers affirmed that God was faithful to His promises, but the people often fell back into sin. This is the most important aspect of biblical history.

The Historical Books include the following books:

- a) **Joshua:** It described the entry of the Jews into the land of Canaan, as a people who would formally take possession of the inheritance assigned to them. It was

a symbolic construction, and did not represent the actual historical events in their entirety, as seen in the book of Judges

- b) **Judges** revealed a more dispersed entry of the tribes into the land of Canaan, and a longer timeframe that it took for the tribes to conquer and occupy the whole territory. On the other hand, the book described the events and insecurities of life that these tribes faced during a period of time that was still distant from the outset of the monarchy.
- c) **Ruth** was probably a piece of historical fiction set in the time of the judges, but above all it was a book against xenophobia that marked the later periods in the history of Judaism.
- d) **Samuel**: It was the most conclusive and formal historiographical account of this period, already initiated in the books of Joshua and Judges. It included the important set of books: 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. Its final drafting seemed to have been inspired by Deuteronomist influences that are clearly evident in the text. It was intended to be an 'examination of conscience' of Israel's national history, in light of the divisions that occurred with the ending of the united monarchy.

The books 1 and 2 Chronicles recount the entire history of Israel from the beginning, through genealogies and historical summaries, recalling some overlapping episodes and other complementary details that had already been narrated in the Deuteronomist narratives.

4.2- Joshua

a) The Promise and its realization

The Israelites flight out of Egypt required a complementary event to complete it: the entry of the Chosen people into the Promised Land. Both actions were carried out through God's initiative: God who is faithful to His promises. There was only one army: the people of God. Joshua (who, like Jesus' name, means "God saves") was a national hero. With faith and hope in God's promises, this eventually enabled them to occupy the land after slow progress.

The book of Joshua related directly to the Exodus. The people of Israel, pilgrims in the desert, arrived at the Promised Land. The land needed to be conquered and

distributed among the tribes. Joshua was chosen by God to carry out both these tasks. The tribes' progress was slow, and occurred in massive and scattered waves. The conquests, achieved through skirmishes and guerrilla warfare, were laborious and bloody. "God saves". Unity is strength.

Thus, the book remains completely relevant today. We discover an eternal message: God is always faithful to a plan of salvation. He leads us through the Church which is his true kingdom on earth. His presence among us enkindles our courage and our responsibility, as Christians, to fight for the genuine freedom and dignity of man. The Church represents the people united by faith in Christ, who in the midst of the world, were chosen by God and advance towards Him.

b) The Crossing of the Jordan

The crossing of the Jordan was narrated in a way to emphasize its parallels with the crossing of the Red Sea: Jehovah stopped the River Jordan's course, just as He dried the Red sea. The Ark of Jehovah guided them on their path, just as the pillar of cloud and fire did so in the desert. Joshua played the same role as Moses did in Exodus. Similar to the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, the entry into the Holy Land was proof of God fulfilling His promise (Joshua 3: 14-17).

God instructed Joshua to circumcise the sons of Israel a second time (Joshua 5: 2-5). The manna ceased to fall when the people entered Canaan. Passover was celebrated after the second crossing, and the covenant of Sinai was renewed (Joshua 5: 9-11). This event seems to prefigure baptism, the true entrance into the kingdom of God - our Promised Land.

c) The conquest of Jericho

The sacred author reformulated ancient traditions and summarized the long years of Jewish advances and conquest into a narrative that mixed elements of national epic and religious commemoration. The author sought to demonstrate that all the people of Israel were unified by their faith in God, and participated for the common good. (Joshua 6: 1-20).

d) Hymn of faith and victory

The account was a hymn to the God of hosts. The sacred author wanted his audience to express and reinforce their faith in God. Jericho would always be the

symbol of the uselessness of resistance offered by the powers of evil, before the conquering force and transforming power of God.

e) The anathema

The "people of Sinai" could not worship or tolerate the idols in the territory that they were conquering. The most effective way of exterminating the idols was to exterminate those people who adored these false idols. The divine curse was for the Israelites an act of worship in service to the true king (Joshua 6:21).

When Jesus came into the world, He would teach us that man was above idols and ideologies, and that the most effective method was not to exterminate, but to convert and save. In God's eyes, there are no Jews or Gentiles but only mankind, who are all His children who are called to Christian living.

f) The assembly of the tribes at Shechem

The assembly of all the tribes of Israel at Shechem was of great religious importance. In Shechem, the LORD, who manifested Himself in Sinai, was welcomed as God of all the tribes. They accepted His law and became more aware of being the people of God. God kept his promise: land and liberty. The people agreed to obey and only serve this One True God. The people's faith bore testimony to the Covenant that God made with them. This testimony was recorded on a large stone, in words that would be engraved into the hearts of every member of the people (Joshua 24: 1-28).

4.3- Book of Judges

The basic source for the book of Judges was a collection of loosely connected stories about tribal heroes who saved the people in battle. These events were preserved in the traditions of different tribes, and happened after Joshua's death up to the rise of the monarchy. The sacred author used these ancient accounts and stories that were not necessarily linked to one another. These accounts were organized as a continuous story and by doing this, the author wanted to emphasize that the story belonged to God. Samuel (1200-1040 B.C), the most exalted of all the judges, did not feature in this specific book.

a) The dangers that Israel faced

The groups of Israelites that were scattered throughout the land of Canaan were exposed to threats on two fronts: the neighbouring peoples who plundered their

fields, trying to grind the Israelites into submission, (Amalekites and, above all, the Philistines); and the seductive attraction of idolatrous worship that occurred in Canaan. False idols and the forces of life and fertility were commemorated in festivals held in the countryside.

b) Chosen by God

The judges were leaders and heroes, chosen by God to save the people of Israel from the oppression they faced from their enemies in order to restore normality. They were instruments of God's faithfulness to His Word.

c) The Lord frees and saves us

The book of Judges is an invitation to discover the significance and meaning of history rather than just being a report of all the details of what happened. It is a story where the same thing is repeated seven times: "Israel sins and God judges, the people convert and God liberates and saves them".

By reading this book today, it helps us to understand that God always rescues those who call out to Him, however hopeless their situation may be.

4.3.1- GIDEON: resistance and acceptance

Gideon was the judge who delivered the children of Israel from the Midianites. The Midianites were Arab nomads from the Syrian and Arabian deserts. These people oppressed Israel, stealing their crops and also their animals. They had invaded the central part of Palestine, and in one of their attacks, they killed Gideon's brothers in Tabor.

Then Gideon had an experience with God, where the Angel of the Lord called him to make him the deliverer of Israel. Gideon's calling follows the pattern of other biblical characters: Moses, Saul and Jeremiah. God calls. Gideon refused. God insists. The challenge appeared humanly impossible. Therefore, the Lord promised His presence and His help (Judges 6: 11-16).

a) You cannot serve two masters

The first mission that the Lord entrusted to Gideon was to remove the idols from the hearts of his people. This was the real evil that was destroying the faith and unity of Israel; Israel became easy prey to foreigners. Gideon felt that he had the

obligation to destroy the holy place and false idol that his family worshiped. His own father converted and discovered the impotence of the idols (Judges 6: 25-32).

b) A sign and the Lord's victory

Gideon asked the Lord for a sign of His blessing and commitment. When he received a sign from God, he no longer doubted. God made Gideon trust in Him more than Gideon's own resources (Judges 6:36-39). The victory over the Midianites was literally deafening. Three hundred men, armed only with torches and trumpets, caused a much superior army - in terms of weapons and numbers - to retreat. The victory was recognized by all as being the Lord's victory (Judges 7: 16-21).

4.3.2- SAMSON

The threat of the Philistines: the Philistines were seafarers who came from the island of Crete. Around the year 1200 B.C, they reached Palestine. Their culture was Mediterranean, and they knew how to work with iron. Weapons and chariots gave them an advantage over the neighbouring peoples. The tribe of Dan was seriously threatened.

Samson was a Nazarite (from the Hebrew nazir נזיר meaning "consecrated"), and the term described a person who made a vow to God to be at His service for a certain period of time or for his entire life.

According to the Bible, the most common physical mark or symbol of this person's separation from the rest of the world was the use of uncut hair and abstinence from the consumption of wine and other foods made from grapes. Men and women could both take this vow.

The story of Samson's birth had similarities to the stories of other biblical heroes such as Isaac, Jacob, Samuel and John the Baptist. His mother, who was barren, conceived Samson as a gift from God, and she consecrated him to God as "nazir" (Judges 13: 1-25). Samson was therefore a servant of God; a national and religious hero; a gift of God to his people in danger and capable of continuing the story of salvation.

He was from the tribe of Dan and the thirteenth judge of Israel. The Bible says that Samson was the judge of the people of Israel for twenty years (Judges 16; 31), from approximately 1177 B.C to 1157 B.C.

He was distinguished by having superhuman strength that, according to the Bible, was provided to him by the Holy Spirit of God while he remained obedient to the LORD of Hosts. He easily overpowered his enemies and was able to do deeds that were unachievable for ordinary men.

But Samson led the life of a bad Nazarite. He broke all his vows: drinking wine at banquets; eating food that was contaminated after coming into contact with a dead body; he got involved with foreign women and allowed them to cut his hair.

According to the biblical text, Samson fell in love with Delilah, a Philistine woman, who betrayed him and delivered him to her nation's leaders, after learning that Samson's hair, was the source of his superhuman strength. After being blinded by the Philistines, Samson was made a slave.

It took Samson a long time for him to realize his importance. He realised this, paradoxically, at the end of his life, when he no longer seemed to have any strength left. It is then when Samson converted. His conversion and faith led to a miracle occurring. At the point of death, Samson began to retrace his steps back home where he discovered who he really was and what his true mission was supposed to be. In this way, his life and death are inscribed in the history of salvation (Judges 16: 23-31).

4.4- The Books of Samuel

The Book of Samuel can be divided into two parts: the first part tells us about the institution of royalty and the second part presents David, king of Israel.

This story, a very human story, as told in the pages of the Books of Samuel, covered a period of about 100 years (1070-970 B.C). It was a story made of 'flesh' and 'bone', of hugs and stabs in the back, of friends and faithful servants, of traitors, cowards and scheming individuals. In this story there were many cases of love, failures and triumphs, tears and joy, prayers and celebrations, sins and examples of deep faith. It is a human story we can all relate to.

a) A Priest, judge and prophet

Samuel managed to fulfil many different functions. He was a priest. He was a judge, in the sense of having been chief governor (1 Samuel 7: 15-17). But above all, he was a prophet, the first of the great prophets that would leave their mark in the path of biblical history.

A song of thanksgiving celebrated his coming into the world. His death was a period of national mourning. Between these two extremes, he lived the austere and honest life of a man who was strong and vigorous and rooted in tradition. He brought about a new era at the expense of his own sacrifice.

b) A mother consoled

The Book of Samuel book begins with a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Shiloh and the description of a family drama. Hannah was sterile. She felt rejected by God and was despised by her husband's second wife. She suffered and prayed. She made a vow: to consecrate the fruit of her womb to God.

The weakness of this troubled woman serves to make us understand that every child is a gift from God. Hannah's fertility - like so many other women of the Bible - was the result of God's power and of prayer (1 Samuel 1: 1-28).

c) The call from God

Although Samuel had been consecrated to the service of God, he had not received any mission. He would have to be called. This call certified him as a prophet (1 Samuel 3: 1-20).

Reading this page of Sacred Scripture, we need to understand that every person should hear and decipher God's call in their life and follow it as hard as it may appear. It is not important to feel as though you are called to accomplish something in life and know that others need and want your help?

d) The desire for a monarchy

The Israelite tribes sensed the risk of becoming dispersed. It became necessary to unite them. From having been nomadic shepherds, the Israelites became farmers. They lived through alternative periods of peace and war. Their most powerful enemies were the Philistines. When the Philistines threatened the Hebrews' existence, the desire for a monarchy arose. The people demanded a king. They preferred the stability of a royal institution that would govern them instead of living their lives out insecurely just on faith alone. God acted condescendingly. Israel was given a king, just as the other nations had (1 Samuel 8: 1-22). The first king was Saul, then David, and so on, until the exile (1050-586 B.C).

e) Royalty: a sign and promise of the true Kingdom

The reign of David would be the sign and promise that one day, God himself would establish His Kingdom on earth in the form of the Messiah. His Kingdom would be a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace.

The books of Samuel were not just the biography of a king loved by God and by men, but above all, it was a "messianic" message and the promise that God's Kingdom would truly come to the world.

4.4.1- Saul: chosen and rejected

The prophet revealed the Divine Will to Saul: although he was of modest origins, Saul was chosen by God for a mission that brought with it a great responsibility (1 Samuel 10:1). After an initial period of confidence, God "regretted" having chosen Saul, and rejected him (1 Samuel 13: 10-14).

It is interesting to observe how the prophets suddenly appeared during the times when the kings forgot about God: Saul had Samuel; David had Nathan; Solomon had Ahijah; Ahab had Elijah; Jehoram had Elisha; Hezekiah had Isaiah; Zedekiah had Jeremiah. Neither fear, nor youth would impede the prophets from intervening and make the kings hear the voice of God.

4.4.2- David

Abraham, Moses and David are the most important figures who played a part in the history of the people of Israel: the seed of the people was Abraham; Moses was crucial for their birth as a people; and David and his kingdom marked for their 'Golden Age'.

David's story began when God elected him. Samuel anointed David, the youngest in a family of eight (1 Samuel 16: 1-13). In this way, we are reminded of how throughout the Bible, God loved the humble, unassuming and simple.

a) The shepherd fights the warrior

David's battle against the giant Goliath presents us with an important lesson: man's strength has no value before God. The intentions of this well-known story were to show us that God chose a new liberator to be a leader of his people Israel (2 Samuel 17: 1-57).

b) Magnanimous forgiveness

David had the opportunity to kill Saul in the camp where he slept. This episode revealed David chivalrous and noble heart. He knew that the king was God's anointed one. David refused to lay his hands on Saul to harm him. The author exalts the sacred dignity of the king with this generous gesture on the part of David. The book was compiled in honour of this (1 Samuel 26: 6-25).

c) The death of Saul and Jonathan

Saul last battle was against the Philistines, and he died with his son Jonathan, who was David's best friend (1 Samuel 31: 1-13). The news soon arrived to David. From his heart sprung a song that expressed an intense affection and sincere admiration towards his friend Jonathan (2 Samuel 1: 19-27).

d) David anointed king

In Hebron, David was elected king of Judah. All the tribes of Israel came to Hebron to see David. David made a covenant with them before the Lord, and was anointed king of Israel. He was 30 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for 40 years (2 Samuel 5: 1- 5).

e) Jerusalem: City of David

David and his men conquered Jerusalem in a lightning quick and brilliant military action. Soon it became the capital of the kingdom and its symbol. "There he built his house" (2 Samuel 5: 5-12). Thereafter, the name of David became synonymous with Jerusalem. Solomon was born in Jerusalem. David fled Jerusalem with tears in his eyes as his son Absalom persecuted him. David died and was buried in Jerusalem.

f) The transfer of the Ark of the Covenant

Jerusalem, without the Lord, was nothing. David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The ark, a symbol of Israel's faith, would become an effective symbol of the Israelites' union around Yahweh and their king David. Jerusalem, a holy mount, would replace Mount Sinai (2 Samuel 6: 1-19).

g) Nathan's prophecy

The prophet's voice answered the King's concern about building a house or a temple for God. The prophet announced to the King that, instead of building a house

for his Lord, it would be God who would build a "house" for David. He added: the king will be "Son of God" (2 Samuel 7: 1-17). At the prophet's announcement, David responded with a beautiful prayer (2 Samuel 7:18-29).

It is evident that the king had an essential role: he was responsible for the nation's salvation before God. Political and religious unity would be built around this premise.

h) I have sinned against the Lord!

David's sin teaches us to position ourselves properly before men and before God (2 Samuel 11: 1-27).

David was impressed by Bathsheba's beauty as he saw her bathe, and he seduced her. He was successful in his seduction, which usually occurred with the kings in primitive societies, although his act was considered an offense against the Law of Moses and a sin before the eyes of the God of Israel.

In covering up his wrongdoing, David committed another sin by leaving Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, exposed in battle, reducing his chances of surviving that eventually led to his death (2 Samuel 11). Bathsheba was pregnant with David child and, after the death of her husband Uriah, she became one of David's wives.

Because of this transgression, Nathan boldly accused the King of sinning against God. David cried penitent tears of sorrow and, with profound lucidity, declared "I have sinned against the Lord!" (2 Samuel 12: 1-25). God forgave (Psalm 51). His forgiveness annulled the death sentence that the King merited. However David's baby son, fruit of this adulterous relationship, died as a consequence divine judgment of David's sin (2 Samuel 12: 15- 18), which left David feeling deeply dejected. However David remained in a state of great worship before the Lord, in honour of His justice.

David would have four more children with Bathsheba, including Solomon who succeeded David to the Throne of Israel (1 Chronicles 3-5).

i) Administrator and politician

David began to organize the kingdom. Diverse positions were assigned: military chiefs, high priests, secretaries and a ministry of information. Through successful campaigns and battles, David managed to bring more tribes into his kingdom and others populations were subjected to him. By being the king's vassals, they could also be part of the Covenant of God.

j) A lamp that does not fade

David's reign was so great that the Israelites always remembered it as the ideal reign, and a symbol and prefiguring of the Messianic kingdom that they were waiting for. God did not let David's light go out. He decided who David's successor would be: David's son Solomon.

At the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus, we remember that " he shall be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David".

Reflection:

- 1) Do you understand how God remains faithful to his plan of salvation throughout history? Do you perceive this in your daily and family life? What are the signs that give you this assurance?
- 2) Which aspects stood out for you the most in the Book of Joshua? Why?
- 3) Read and reflect on this following excerpt from Joshua 24: 14-24. What do you choose? What do your family choose?
- 4) Do you understand how God elects or chooses people to save his people throughout history? Do you perceive this in your daily and family life? Who are the people that have helped you be more faithful to God?
- 5) Which aspects stood out for you the most in the Book of Judges? Why?

TABLE 5 - BOOK OF KINGS: THE NORTHERN KINGDOM AND THE SOUTHERN KINGDOM

5.1- Introduction

In this table, we will review the two books of Kings that continue narrating the history of Israel, which was briefly interrupted in the Second Book of Samuel. They consist of the same content contained in two volumes. An unknown author, between the years 561 B.C and 539 B.C, wrote these books. According to the original text and the ancient Hebrew tradition, these two books constituted one work, which describes the history of the Hebrew monarchy from Solomon's ascent to the throne up to the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.

We can clearly distinguish three parts:

- Solomon's reign (970-931 BC.);
- The history of the Kingdom of the North (Israel) and Kingdom of the South (Judah), told from when the Jewish kingdom became divided after King Solomon's death, up until the fall of Samaria - the capital of Israel, that was conquered by the Assyrians (721 B.C); and,
- The history of the kings, following the division of Israel into the two kingdoms, up until the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (587 B.C).

Due to the misfortunes that gradually befell the people of Israel, this Book describes the conduct of the kings of Israel and of Judah, because the fates of all the people were mirrored in the behaviour of the kings. The reality was that most of these kings did "what was evil in the sight of the Lord".

By describing the different practices that took place, the book mainly refers to the tolerance and acceptance of false worship to foreign gods (1 Kings 11: 1-10, 1 Kings 14: 22-24); but it also describes the acts of worship to Yahweh, held in sanctuaries outside Jerusalem (1 Kings 12: 26 - 33). The worship of false idols was Jeroboam's sin, frequently referred to in: (1 Kings 13:34; 14, 16; 30; etc.).

The Deuteronomist account upheld the centralization of worship in Jerusalem. Therefore, in addition to David, as "founder" of the temple of Jerusalem, and Solomon

as its builder, only Hezekiah and Josiah were praised because they were religious reformers in the Deuteronomist sense.

Therefore, the books of Kings, seemingly of little importance to the religious thought of Israel because of the historical themes found in these books, ended up being at the centre of one of the most important and significant theologies found in the Bible.

The second book of Kings tells the story of the prophet Elisha (Elijah's successor) and the kings of Israel and Judah, continuing the events described in the first book of Kings. It mentioned the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel that had Samaria as its capital, which fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C, and the miraculous resistance of King Hezekiah at the siege of Sennacherib. It ends with the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon in 586 B.C., which led to the Jews being taken as slaves to Mesopotamia, as prophesied by Jeremiah.

By being more than just a detailed account of events, these books provided a critical reflection on the history of the people and the kings who governed them: fidelity to God leads to blessings; Infidelity leads to curse, to ruin and exile (cf. 2 Kings 17: 7-23).

a) The temple and the prophets have an important role in this story

The temple was the common meeting place for all the people in their encounter with God. Josiah's reforms sought to bring all the people together again to worship in the temple (2 Kings 22; 23).

Prophets were those individuals who kept the consciousness and awareness of the people alive - the watchmen of social relations and vocal critics of the political action of the kings. Their intentions and priorities were to instil a sense of respect for justice and the law within the people. The prophets were just as occupied with religious issues as they were with moral and political issues, because everything was submitted before God, the only true king over the people (Isaiah 6:5; Isaiah 44:6; Zechariah 14:16).

b) Infidelity, punishment and hope

There were wonderful moments, such as the construction and dedication of Solomon's temple. There were great figures like Elijah and Elisha. There were

reformers and pious kings like Jehoshaphat, Josiah and Hezekiah. The great prophets of Judah and Israel emerged.

But the essence of the books of Kings was to describe the nation's gradual decay. By the end of the book, the destruction was complete. The King, temple and the holy city ceased to exist. The harsh reality was banishment of the people to a foreign land. Although Israel had been unfaithful to the Covenant, the punishment they experienced was a call to conversion and hope.

When the dream of temporal kingship failed, it was up to the poor to spiritualize the Kingdom of God. A poor man would save men from sin. The hope of a temporal kingdom was changed to a hope in the Messiah to come.

5.2- SOLOMON: two significant names

David and Bathsheba's second son received two names at birth. His mother called him Solomon, which signified 'rich in peace'. The prophet Nathan called Solomon by the name of Jedidiah, which meant 'Yahweh's favourite'. What was to follow would confirm Bathsheba's rationale behind the name she chose for her son: her son would become a king who was more pacifist and opulent than being a believer. "The favourite of the Lord" would often be unfaithful to his Lord.

a) Some of Solomon's characteristics

He was wise, starting off as a prudent young man who did not aspire for riches but for wisdom to enable him to rule. Advised by Nathan, the king was known for his wisdom and sense of justice.

The Lord was truly with him. His reputation of being a wise king spread widely among his contemporaries. The wisdom that Israel gained under his rule was welcomed and several books in the Bible, although written centuries later, bear his name. Solomon promoted the writing of literature and was open to foreign trends.

As a politician, Solomon managed to hold onto the areas conquered by David, but he did not expand these areas. Solomon was not a warrior. He preferred a peaceful coexistence with neighbouring lands and trade relations. To achieve these ends, the king married many foreign princesses and as a result, he had an astounding number of wives and concubines. The management and governance of the land was developed.

The country was divided into twelve districts, responsible for providing the necessary labour required to undertake great projects.

A fleet of ships that sailed the seas was established to bolster the economy. The wealth that came from trade with Egypt and Syria eventually landed up in Jerusalem. The economy flourished, but the people did not enjoy the benefits. The expenses of the royal palace were exorbitant. The people were overwhelmed and burdened with taxes that gradually impoverished them, while increasing the treasures and wealth in the palace. Thus the newly created monarchy, instead of uniting the people, slowly caused divisions as a result of the abuse of the royal court and the foreign religious customs of the king's wives and concubines, which were contrary to the faith of Israel.

As a builder, Solomon went ahead with one of the requests that David had left him with – to build the temple. Solomon was a great builder and excessive. He embarked on this project with great enthusiasm and built one of the most beautiful and famous temples in the world. He also built a luxurious palace and fortifications of the city. The temple was completed and was the pride of the people of Israel and their faith. But in Solomon's later years, he was led astray into idol-worship by his many wives practices that were contrary to the original faith of Israel. The prophets had to fight against these religious practices for many years.

Solomon organized his court in the style of the Pharaoh in Egypt. The scribes played an important role in the court. Trained in the art of writing, they were also wise men who learned the art of guiding their lives righteously. Solomon's wisdom was considered a gift from God. The Jewish sacred history or the Yahwist tradition is undoubtedly a result of his work.

b) You cannot serve two masters

Solomon probably did not deserve all the prestige and fame that history ascribed to him. He sacrificed his faith for the splendour of the court and sacrificed the freedom of God's people to the tyranny of his personal tastes. The conclusion is this: "You cannot serve two masters".

Taking advantage of the division of the kingdom, Solomon exploited his people and managed to contain the rebellion that was arising among the people, and that eventually ignited when the king died. Solomon's son, an inept politician, caused the

division of the kingdom into two. The Northern tribes were separated. The unified kingdom of Israel lasted only 70 years.

5.3- The sacred history of the Southern Kingdom (Yahwist tradition)

a) Origin

The story was initiated by the scribes and the wise men in King Solomon's court. This tradition continued with its first successors in the kingdom of Judah. It is called the Yahwist tradition, since God is referred to by the name of Yahweh (the Lord) from the onset. The author collected traditions with different origins: records from the kingdom and also stories about the clan chiefs who formerly lived in Canaan.

The inspired author was able to make a unified, coherent story out of many different stories where, as a believer, he was able to discern and understand God's intervention. Moreover, through the use of theological rather than strictly historical accounts, the author revealed the origins of the world and man by emphasizing the unity of God's plan.

b) In support of kingship

The Yahwist tradition focuses on the notion of kingship, and it was through this that God's promise to the patriarchs was realised. The king, son of David and Son of God, was the subordinate of God and a catalyst for political and religious unity in the nation. But at the same time, the Yahwist criticizes kingship and called it to order: the king was not an absolute monarch, but was the service of God and his people.

c) Some characteristics of the Yahwist tradition

- Good narrator: the author was a wonderful storyteller. The written accounts were very much alive, personal and full of rich imagery. God was often represented as a man (anthropomorphism). In the creation account, God appeared alternately as a gardener, potter, a surgeon and tailor. It was the author's way of speaking about God and man, and reveals the inspired author as a profound theologian.
- A God who was very human: God walked with Adam as a friend (Genesis 2), God invited Himself to Abraham's home to eat with him and God traded with Abraham (Genesis 18). Man experienced familiarly with God and found Him in everyday life.

- A God who was different from the others – the Master: He commanded or prohibited (Genesis 3:16). God’s blessings made His people happy and through Him, this happiness would eventually be extended to the people of all nations (this is an amazing example of universalism for the era when the account was written).
- A God who is always ready to forgive: Man was encouraged to respond to this call from God and obey Him. Man's sin consisted of the desire to supplant or replace God. This sin would bring a curse upon man: Cain, the flood, the tower of Babel. But God was always ready to forgive, especially at the request and prayers of intercessors like Abraham (Genesis 18) and Moses (Exodus 32: 11-14), and always ready to renew His blessing.

d) The Kingdom of Judah

- Geographical location

Judah was a small kingdom located between Israel and the Philistines, occupying the hills around Jerusalem and the Negev Desert. The people based their livelihood on agriculture, the cultivation of grape vines and olive trees, livestock and especially sheep farming. They also traded with Assyria and Egypt.

- The Political Situation in the Kingdom of Judah

In the political arena, the Kingdom of Judah suffered from the changes that were taking place around it. During much of this period, the great powers, Egypt and Assyria, were not very strong.

Political and military activities were concentrated in the territory of Canaan: struggles, alliances, defeats, victories, between the small kingdoms of Judah, Israel and Aram-Damascus.

- The Political Situation abroad

From 745 B.C. the nature of the political situation changed direction with the rise of Assyrian dominance. To resist their assault, Aram-Damascus and Israel formed an alliance and attempted to force Judah to join them. It was the Syro-Ephraimite War around the time the great oracle Isaiah lived. The young king of Judah, Ahaz, instead chose to ask the king of Assyria for help. This Assyrian king then proceeded to enter and take Damascus in 732 B.C and Samaria in 722-721 B.C.

e) Judah between 721 and 587 B.C.

- Despite Isaiah's advice, Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, established complex political alliances with Egypt and with a king of Babylon, who rebelled against Assyria for a certain period of time. In the year 701 B.C., Sennacherib, the new Assyrian king, launched a campaign against Judah. Hezekiah strengthened his capital and built a tunnel under the city to provide the city with fresh water. Sennacherib surrounded the city but was unable to take Jerusalem and lifted the siege.
- Manasseh, a violent and wicked king, reigned for 45 years, submitting himself to the king of Assyria, Ashurbanipal. But at the end of his reign, things begin to change: a new dynasty appeared in Babylon; the Medes, in present day Iran, acquired power; Egypt reawakened as a regional power.
- Josiah reigned in Jerusalem for about 30 years. During his reign, in the year 622 B.C, a scroll containing various laws of the ancient Northern Kingdom was found in the temple, which would become Deuteronomy. This document would provide the basis for reform that Josiah undertook for political and religious purposes (2 Kings 22-23). A new generation of prophets - Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk and especially Jeremiah – preach during this period of time in history.

f) The Fall of Nineveh

In 612 B.C., Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, was conquered. All the populations of the Middle Eastern region applauded the fall of the enemy. They did not realize that in actual fact, power had only changed hands and now had a new owner. The first concern of the triumphant general, Nebuchadnezzar was to launch a campaign against Egypt.

g) The Conquest of Jerusalem

In the year 597 B.C, Jerusalem was conquered, and its inhabitants and the king were deported. Among those deported was a prophet priest called Ezekiel. Nebuchadnezzar installed a 'puppet' king in Jerusalem. But shortly after the Babylonian monarch left Jerusalem, the new king formed an alliance with Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar was furious and returned to take the city back to destroy it, burning

down the temple and the Ark of the Covenant, and deporting the inhabitants to Babylon. And thus ended the kingdom of Judah.

h) Literary Activities and Developments in the Kingdom

The Levites from the North took refuge in Jerusalem and they brought with them literature from their kingdom. Among this literature was: the sacred history of the North (Elohism tradition), the set of laws and the oracles of the prophets.

But for a century, all this literature remained dormant and unread in the library temple, only being discovered in the time of Josiah, who made it the basis of his reforms.

The southern scribes merged the two stories together: the Jewish history (Yahwist) and North (Elohism). This fusion of books, at times referred to as the Jahwist (JE) source, was a common heritage shared between both the Northern and Southern tribes.

Through Josiah's reforms, this led to the formation of the Book of Deuteronomy. In light of the teachings found in Deuteronomy, this initiated the development of the traditions about Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. Finally, the oracles of the prophets - Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Jeremiah - were written. Many of the Psalms were composed and the reflections of wise men continued being written down, especially after the death of the holy king, Josiah.

i) Characteristics of the Deuteronomist

The author did not only seek to teach, but to convince and lead the intended audience to obedience. There are numerous repetitions and they emphasize, for example: The Lord is your God; Listen, remember Israel; Keep the commandments, and the laws and customs.

The "you" and "we" is undoubtedly the sign of a two-stage process involved in its compilation. In the present book, this confirms that the people were seen as one (hence the use of the word "you") and that all the people collectively retained their unique identity (hence the use of the word "we").

j) Some central ideas:

- The Lord was the only God of Israel.
- He chose a people. In response to this election, the people should love God and keep his commandments.
- God provided the people with land, but with the condition that they remain faithful to Him, "remember your covenant with God".
- The people remembered the Word of God and heard it, especially in the liturgy. They formed an assembly, called by God, just as it had been at Mt Sinai.

5.4- The sacred history of the Northern Kingdom (Elohists Tradition)

a) Origin

The Northern tribes separated from Jerusalem and from their king, David's successor. But they possessed a common history and the same traditions as the tribes in the south. Like in the kingdom of Judah, but two centuries later - perhaps around 750 B.C., these traditions were written down to compose the sacred history of the North. It is known as the Elohist tradition, because God was often referred to as Elohim. It began with the account of the covenant with Abraham.

b) Different contexts

Although dealing with the same story as written in the South, it was distinct because of different contexts:

- Political divisions soon assumed the character of a religious schism. They were tempted to worship Baal, or at least accept God and Baal.
- The North could not count on their king to uphold the true faith, and their king was not a descendant of David, and he was not concerned with the degradation of the national faith and the progressive increase of paganism.
- It was the prophets who enthusiastically reminded the people that only one covenant was possible: that Covenant God made with His people.
- The sacred writers who told this story, sought the thoughts and wisdom of prophets and sages.

c) Characteristics of the Elohist tradition

- God was distinct from man: the Elohist avoided speaking of God in the same terms used to describe man. God, Who is incomprehensible, was revealed through dreams. When God spoke personally, He did it in the form of a theophany and other splendid appearances: as a Cloud, as in the burning bush and Mount Sinai. It was impossible to create an image that truly represented God's divinity and essence.
- The moral sense: The Elohist tradition focused on questions of morality, and the grave consequences of sin was emphasized. The importance of fulfilling the Covenant was reiterated. Moses' Law focused less on worship practices and more on moral aspects. It instructed the faithful about their duties to God and neighbour.
- True worship was obeying God and respecting the Covenant, and refusing to worship false gods. There was only One True God and He did not tolerate competition from false idols. The "fear of God" was meant to compel the people to remain faithful to the Covenant. (Fear did not mean being afraid of God, but having respect combined with confidence in order to fulfil the moral norms dictated by God).
- A line of prophets: the real servants of God were not kings or high priests, but the prophets. Moses was the quintessential spokesman (prophet) of the Lord. The legacy of his actions and teachings are continuously present.

d) The Northern Kingdom of Israel (935-721 B.C)

- Geographical Location

The northern kingdom occupied the hills of Samaria, with green valleys and some plains. The capital was Samaria. Trade relations with the Canaanite princes of the North (present day Lebanon and Syria) were convenient and well established. This explains, in part, their economic and religious situation.

- Economic situation

The prosperity of the Kingdom of Northern Israel was evident in the description of Samarian houses described by the prophet Amos (Amos 3:12; 5:11; 6:4). Walls were adorned with ebony and ivory. But all of this came at the price of social injustice, where many people got rich by exploiting the poor.

➤ Religious Situation

Israel had more contact with the Canaanites than Judah did. Israel was in contact with those Canaanites living in their territory and the princes of Tyre, Sidon and Damascus. Israel suffered the temptation of trying to worship Yahweh, while serving Baal. To prevent his people from going to the temple of Jerusalem, Jeroboam made two idols in the form of bull-calves in Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:26.). Jeroboam devised this cunning plan for the people to worship at these places and he strategically placed them at the northern and southern ends of the country. But since the bull was a symbol of Baal, the danger of idolatry was great.

➤ The Political Situation in the Northern Kingdom of Israel

The monarchical system, established by David and Solomon, continued in Israel. But kings were not the legitimate descendants of David. Of the 19 who ruled, 8 were assassinated. The king was not, as in Judah, a unifying force for the people neither was he their representative before God. In Israel it was the prophets - Elijah, Elisha, Amos and Hosea – who represented this role, often opposing the kings.

➤ The Political Situation abroad

Israel was intensely involved in the politics of the time. Egypt was in a state of decay. The powerful Assyrians made frequent forays into Canaan. Aram- Damascus became at times an enemy, then an ally of the Northern Kingdom. In 732 B.C, Assyria conquered Aram- Damascus and in 721 B.C. occupied the city of Samaria. Some of the inhabitants were deported to Assyria. It marked the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

➤ Literary Activities and Developments in the Kingdom

From the 9th century B.C, the traditions about Elijah, found in the books of Kings II, and I, were recorded and around 750 B.C the narratives of Elisha (2 Kings 3:9). The words of Amos and Hosea were also written down. The sacred history of the Northern Kingdom, which we call the "Elohism tradition", was also compiled around the year 750 B.C.

Finally, a set of laws was formed to adapt the old law to the new social situation. Heavily influenced by the message of the prophets, especially Hosea, these sets of laws would become the core of Deuteronomy.

5.5- Prophets

a) Being a Prophet

A prophet was not someone who prophesied about the future, but someone who spoke on behalf of God, someone who was introduced in God's plan of salvation: "For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7).

b) Individuals of their time

The prophet was also able to see what the obstacles were that hindered God's plan. Far from being a dreamer out of touch with reality, the prophet had an acute sense of what was going on at the time. The prophets cried out against injustices and encouraged the faith and hope of the people. For each difficult situation they faced, the prophet had a timely word.

c) Discovering the Word of God

The prophet discovered the Word of God in his calling and during his life. A prophet's calling was crucial: it was an encounter and experience with God. It could have been a visit to the temple, as in Isaiah's case; in continuous prayer, like Jeremiah; or an unhappy marriage or relationship, like Hosea.

In this light, life, with regards to both major political events and in everyday life, enabled the prophets to discover the Word of God and read the signs of the times. From this moment onwards, everything would signify and speak of God in the prophet's life.

This teaches us to read the Word of God and apply it in our lives. This can be challenging at times.

d) Announcing the Word of God

The prophets expressed themselves through the Word: oracles (or statements made in the name of God), exhortations, stories and prayers. But the prophets also expressed themselves through actions. The prophetic gestures revealed the Word of God and its execution. If the prophets spoke words of exhortation, threats, censorship or promises, it was always done with the objective of bringing the people back to a relationship with God. The oracles fundamentally announced God's plan of salvation. The prophet hoped against all hope.

e) To awaken and unify the people

The prophet's role was not to "anticipate" and "predict" the future. The prophet was called to devote himself to "see" and then "say" what God's plan was. If they appealed to the past at times, it was to assure the people that God will continually renew its support for His people and open up a new future for them.

The prophets vigorously denounced injustices, idolatry and all those things that could derail God's plan of salvation. Through their insight, they did not need to pull any weapon against adversity. Their lucidity and clairvoyance enabled the prophets to grasp beforehand future disasters that would befall the people. This was in light of how the prophets discerned the present.

The prophets' purpose was to awaken, lift and support the people and encourage them to be faithful to the Covenant.

5.5.1- Prophets from the Southern Kingdom

5.5.1.1- Isaiah

a) Poet, politician and prophet

Isaiah preached in Jerusalem between 740 and 700 B.C. He was a great poet and intelligent politician, but above all he was a prophet. Isaiah had a great influence on the people of his time. Two centuries after he preached, some of his disciples still appealed to the memories of Isaiah and added his teachings to theirs.

Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish his various works in this book: Isaiah 1-39 was, in part, Isaiah's work; Isaiah 40-55 can be attributed to one of Isaiah's disciples during the period of exile (Deutero-Isaiah or 2nd Isaiah); Isaiah 56-66 can be attributed to a disciple after the return of the exiles (Trito-Isaiah or Third).

b) The political situation

The political situation in Isaiah's day was very complex. The two kingdoms of Jerusalem and Samaria enjoyed prosperity (at least for the rich who exploited the poor!). But the Assyrian threat was ever present. In 734 B.C, the kings of Aram-Damascus and Samaria wanted to force Jerusalem to enter into a coalition against Assyria. This Syro-Ephraimite war was the context when Isaiah's most important prophetic utterances occurred.

c) Isaiah's calling

Isaiah's vision of God, as told in Isaiah 6, reveals his calling and commission. Upon arriving at the temple, he experienced God's presence. Isaiah became aware of how he was nothing more than a man and thus a sinner, and he felt lost. But God sustained and purified Isaiah. Isaiah realised that the greatest sin is pride (wanting to be sustained by depending on oneself alone, and replace God by thinking that anything can be done without God). Isaiah realised that faith meant surrendering completely and humbly to God with confidence in His promises.

d) A rock on the pathway

God was like a huge rock on the pathway. The people had to choose: pride meant colliding with the rock and encountering death (Isaiah 8:14-15); faith meant relying on this rock and building one's faith upon it (Isaiah 10: 20-21). The rock also represented the Messiah (Isaiah 28:16). Even though this preaching caused many men to harden their hearts, (instead of converting them as the prophet intended to do), this led the formation of a small group of believers (Isaiah 6: 9-11).

e) The attitude of King Ahaz

Isaiah was from Judah. In his eyes, the king - son of David / Son of God, was guarantor of the people's unity and faith. The king was their representative before God. This is why King Ahaz's lack of faith deeply affected Isaiah and hurt him. (734-727 B.C.) This king, maddened by the Aram Damascus-Syrian coalition, sacrificed his son to false gods (2 Kings 16:3), therefore threatening the promise that God made to David.

f) His young wife was pregnant

Isaiah's role was to announce how God keeps His promises despite everything that happens. His young wife was expecting another child. And Isaiah put all his hope in this child, the little Hezekiah – the sign of Emmanuel "God is with us" (Isaiah 7). When Hezekiah became king, he became a son of God. Isaiah joyfully sings about the era of peace that he catches a glimpse of (Isaiah 9) and he celebrates, in advance, the coming of the true Son of David, Who will come one day to establish universal peace (Isaiah 11).

5.5.1.2- Jeremiah

a) The situation

Jeremiah lived through the terrible tragedy that befell his people in 597 B.C, shortly followed by the events of 587 B. C. He foresaw these events and tried to prepare the carefree people, and they persecuted him. Jeremiah, a timid and weak man, spent his life preaching the religion of having faith in God, of having inner fidelity and of the Covenant written in the heart.

b) The call of the prophet

Jeremiah's call to be a prophet was a story of extraordinary sincerity. The prophet, using a first person narrative by writing from the "I" point of view, revealed how God called him, how he resisted the call and how he got confirmation from God for the mission he had been given. God promised Jeremiah protection. Jeremiah was called to be a messenger of God; it was an unexpected commission, but was destined to be Jeremiah's call, already from the time when he was in the womb (Jeremiah 1: 4-19). The word of God felt like an uncontrollable fire within Jeremiah "You overpowered me and prevailed" (Jeremiah 20:7).

c) The start of his mission

Jeremiah began preaching during the time of King Josiah. His preaching was not that different from the prophets that came before him. He warned his people to be aware of the path they were on and being led astray. The people had abandoned God; they needed to return to God to be converted.

d) The political situation

In 605 B.C, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar arrived in Jerusalem and conquered it. Jeremiah knew that the enemy would come from the North, from Babylon. He prophesied the disaster that would befall the people and prepared them. Jeremiah gave "meaning" to this destructive event before it occurred. This allowed the people living in exile to have a sense of faith and hope, without drowning in misery. Because of Jeremiah, they were able to find a new meaning to life.

e) Prefiguring Jesus Christ

Jeremiah lived through the drama of the destruction of his people. He wanted to remain with those until the end who were suffering because of their infidelity. Persecuted by kings, high priests, false prophets and even his relatives, he was

arrested, tortured and knew how it felt to be called a traitor of his homeland. He experienced the failure of his preaching to the end.

He died in forced exile, and witnessed the apostasy of many of those exiled with him. But his teachings and words remain. The prophet endured unbearable suffering with admirable patience and fortitude. This is why Jeremiah is regarded as one of the figures from the Old Testament who prefigure Jesus Christ the most. This was emphasized in a strikingly similar, profound and vivid manner.

f) Prophetic Acts

Like all the other prophets, but even more so than the others, Jeremiah preached through his actions as much as the words he used to preach. These symbolic events were very often more than just occurrences with no significant meaning. The prophet's actions brought to life what was prophesied in the past.

In this sense, the gestures of Jesus Christ at the Last Supper were also prophetic acts.

g) The Book of Jeremiah

The Book of Jeremiah was a collection of many writings. It was not compiled at once, but gradually. They revealed the teachings and sayings of the prophet and presented his biography: a painful story, possibly written by Baruch, who was Jeremiah's secretary and devoted friend.

These words and this biography were saved from the catastrophe that befell Jerusalem, and became a treasure for the exiles: all that had been said was fulfilled. The Jews in exile meditated upon these words and saw them as a new message from God. The key themes of these texts are highlighted below:

➤ True religion

The people practiced their faith in the correct way: they venerated the Ark of the Covenant; they went to the temple; offered sacrifices; respected the Sabbath and circumcised their sons. They went through the motions as they carried out these practices, and their hearts were not in it. The people believed that by respecting and adhering to these rituals, God would protect them and the holy city of Jerusalem.

The people carried out these rituals out of obligation to guarantee protection, and dispensed of their love for God. Jeremiah prophesied that God would destroy all these false and empty acts of worship: the Ark of the Covenant (Jeremiah 3:16), the

temple (Jeremiah 7: 1-5; 26) and Jerusalem (Jeremiah 19); because what God requested was not an external circumcision of the flesh, but of the heart (Jeremiah 4:4; 9:24-25). Jeremiah's chastising seemed so blasphemous to the people that he barely escaped death at their hands. In this way, Jeremiah prefigured Jesus' chastising of those who worshipped God only with their lips and not their hearts.

➤ **The New Covenant**

Jeremiah 31 marked the culmination of the message of this book. It preached hope in the face of desperate situations: God forgives and everything is made right. Jeremiah announced a new covenant that was different from a renewed Covenant.

It was a new Covenant, because God's Law would not remain outside of His people, carved in stone or written in a book, but would be an inner strength infused into the human heart, making it possible for man to love. It would be new because God would offer His forgiveness in a definitive way. Man would be members of God's People because they would be "forgiven". Jeremiah did not specify how and when this would occur.

We know that this occurred in reality when Jesus drank wine and said, "This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.

5.5.2- Prophets from the Northern Kingdom

5.5.2.1- Elijah

a) God is Yahweh

Like Nathan in Jerusalem, Elijah did not leave any of his prophecies in writing. Elijah was, along with Moses, a great and influential figure of Jewish law. Luke presented Jesus as the new Elijah. The meaning of his name was revealed on Mount Sinai, where he had to take refuge. It means: My God is Yahweh!

b) Confronting idolatry

Elijah appeared in the ninth century B.C during the reign of Ahab (874-852 B.C). Ahab married Jezebel, daughter of the king of Tyre. This union contributed to the prosperity of Israel; But Jezebel brought the pagan religion of her people with her, where Baal and other false gods were worshipped. The people in the Northern Kingdom worshipped God but served Baal. In this situation, Elijah became the man of

God, a prophet who went before the king and warned of punishment that would follow due to the sin of idolatry: a devastating drought.

c) Faith without divisions

Elijah led the sacrifice on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) forcing the people, and King Ahab himself, to choose between the living and personal God who intervenes in history, or the deified natural forces and false gods i.e. Baal. We should emulate Elijah and have faith in God without needing to see Him to believe, just as God requests.

d) Elijah's relationship with God

His vision of God (1 Kings 19), like Moses, is the model of the mystical life. But Elijah was still a man and, like us, was sometimes discouraged and afraid. In his prayer, like Moses, Elijah did not ask for mystical graces, but spoke to God about his mission. Elijah did not encounter God through deified forces of nature, but through silence. God manifested Himself in a gentle breeze (1 Kings 19: 11-14).

e) Defender of the poor.

Elijah defended the poor before the king and powerful people (as in Naboth's vineyard, 1 Kings 21). Ahab, advised by his wife, bestowed absolute powers upon himself; killing with impunity to unlawfully obtain whatever he desired. Elijah made King Ahab reflect on his crimes and he prophesied a curse on Ahab - a pronouncement of judgment. The king then repented and received forgiveness from God.

f) His universalism

Elijah emphasized a belief in God, without divisions, and being led by the Spirit; he freely encountered Gentiles (Elijah and the widow at Zarephath: 1 Kings 17). But he requested that the pagan woman show unconditional faith in the One True God.

g) The ascension of Elijah (2 Kings 2)

Since the whereabouts of his grave was unknown, Elijah was believed to have ascended into Heaven to be with God. Luke alluded to this text in his account of the Ascension of Jesus (Acts 1: 6-11).

Elisha, who saw Elijah ascension into Heaven, received Elijah's spirit to continue his mission. The Spirit of Jesus was received by the disciples when they witnessed him ascend into Heaven.

5.5.2.2- Amos

a) Complying with justice

Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa, near Bethlehem, and was sent north by God during the golden age of Samaria under King Jeroboam II. A popular preacher who spoke freely, he was struck by the luxury of the houses, but especially the injustices committed by the rich (Amos 2: 6-16, 8: 4-8).

b) The Prophet

Amos was a prophet. He spoke about his calling on two occasions (Amos 7:10-17; 8: 3-8). A prophet was an individual who entered into God's plans. The prophet subsequently saw everything in this light, by trying to decipher God's plan in his life and experiences.

c) Social Principles

His social principles were based on the Covenant: " Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the LORD has spoken against you—against the whole family I rescued from Egypt: From among all the families of the earth; I have been intimate with you alone, therefore I will punish you for all your sins." (Amos 3: 1-2). When God punishes, it is to lead people to conversion. Amos foresaw how a small group of people would be spared from disaster (Amos 3:12), which allowed for some hope (Amos 8: 11-12).

5.5.2.3- Hosea

a) To love with love

Hosea was a native of the North. He preached around the same time as Amos. He discovered the love of God because of a personal event he experienced. Hosea loved his wife, who behaved in an inappropriate manner. With love, he was able to restore his heart, which was divided.

This is how it is with God: God loves us, not because we are good, but for us to be good (Amos 1-3).

b) A covenant between spouses

God loves us as a husband loves his wife. This topic is often found in the Bible and gives new meaning to faith: the Law of Sinai is presented as a loving agreement as a covenant between spouses (Amos 2:21-22). Sin is like adultery, a prostitution of love.

c) My people perish

Hosea clearly presents the sin of the people: "Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed" (Hosea 4: 1-2). Israel's heart was divided by idolatry: "My people perish for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). To know the Lord really means to imitate Him, to love others as He has loved us.

d) I desire mercy

The prophets understood the falsity of worship that was merely external, and did not come from the heart. Therefore Hosea emphasized: "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). The prophet called all to conversion and fidelity by trusting in God's mercy. "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him" (Hosea 14:2, 14.5).

Reflection:

- 1) What are the aspects that stood out the most for you in the Books of Kings? Why?
- 2) Did you know about the background and history of the prophets? Do you consider yourself a prophet today? Do you call for justice and peace? Do you foster the faith and the hope of your family and your church community?
- 3) Are you able to apply Jeremiah's statement to your daily life today? "Lord, you enticed me, and I was taken in. You were too strong for me, and you prevailed" How does it apply to your personal life, marital life, family life and community life?
- 4) The prophet Elijah perceived the manifestation of God in a gentle breeze. How do you perceive God's manifestation in your life?
- 5) The prophet Hosea said: "My people perish for lack of knowledge" about God and the truth. Does this statement apply to modern day life? Can you give examples where this is evident in society?

TABLE 6 - EXILE AND PERSIAN DOMINATION

6.1- Introduction

The exile profoundly affected the people of Israel, although its duration was for a relatively short period of time. From 587 B.C to 538 B.C, Israel was no longer independent. The Northern Kingdom had disappeared in 722 B.C, with the destruction of its capital, Samaria. And a large part of the population was dispersed among other peoples who were also dominated by Assyria; the Southern Kingdom also ceased to exist tragically in 587 B.C. with the destruction of its capital Jerusalem, and part of its population were deported to Babylon. Those who remained in Judah and who went into exile both carried the same image with them - of a city destroyed and its institutions shattered: the Temple, their worship practices and traditions, the monarchy and the Priestly class. Some people as well as others, in their own unique way, lived the experience of pain, of longing and of indignation. They felt culpable for the disaster that befell the kingdom of Judah.

The writings that appeared in Judah, during the period of exile, reveal the intensity of the suffering and desolation that the people faced. This is expressed in the books of Lamentations, Jeremiah and Obadiah.

The exiles in Babylon also reminisced about their land before the exile: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?"(Psalm 137).

This experience was lived by those people who stayed and those who left, as a trial, punishment and recognition of their infidelity to the Covenant with God. Little by little, the people regained their trust in God who could save His people, and who would lead this exodus back to Zion, as stated in Isaiah 2, "God will return the land again to the people as it happened in the past" (Ez 48).

In fact, in Isaiah 2, the people already had a glimpse of liberation that would come in the form of Cyrus, king of Persia. He would be the new ruler, not only of Judah and Israel, but of the whole Middle East region. Would Cyrus be the "anointed one," the saviour of the people of Judah and the exiles?

Jeremiah preached in Jerusalem, encouraging submission to Babylon. Whether the nation was free or under political submission did not matter to Jeremiah. What mattered to him was that it was a just society, spiritually free, serving the True God by practicing righteousness. Jeremiah was considered by many people as being a 'traitor of the homeland'. His voice, in the form of writings, would be locked away in a clay cistern.

6.2- The Exile in Babylon (587-538 B.C)

Ezekiel was taken into exile and deported with his brothers. They secretly prepared flags to welcome their brothers who would come to free them. In 587 B.C., they arrived, not as liberators, but as an exhausted horde worn out after having walked 1500 kilometres, following a blind king, whose empty eyes were imprinted with an awful image that would be the last thing he would ever physically see - his children being beheaded.

a) Psychological and moral shock

The people suffered a terrible psychological and moral shock. They also suffered in the flesh. During that period of history, capturing a city and deportation meant: women were raped, children thrown against the rocks, impaled or quartered alive, bulging eyes and heads cut off. The echoes of this suffering can be read in Psalm 137.

b) In Babylon

Life in exile in Babylon should not be likened to the conditions of living in a concentration camp. The Jews enjoyed relative freedom (which did not exclude the imposition of taxes).

Ezekiel could freely visit his compatriots. The people could keep themselves busy with agricultural activities if they wished. At the end of exile, some chose to stay in Babylon, where they formed an important and prosperous group of individuals.

c) A lost people

The people lost everything that their lives had centred around:

- The land that had been a tangible sign of God's blessing for his people.
- The king, through whom God conveyed this blessing, who ensured the unity of the people as their representative before God.

➤ The temple, the abode of God's presence.

Their losses seemingly included their God too, who would have appeared as having been defeated - according to the mentality of the time - by the god Marduk from Babylon.

d) The miracle of the exile

The great miracle of the exile was how this catastrophe, instead of ruining the faith of Israel, actually led to the revival and exaltation of the same faith, and purified it. This was due to a few prophets, such as Ezekiel and one of Isaiah's disciples and some high priests. They encouraged the people to review their traditions to discover in them a source of hope that they could depend on.

d) Judaism

Together the people developed a new, more spiritual form of living out their faith and expressing it. But there were no more temple and sacrifices? Instead they began to gather on Saturday to celebrate God and meditate on his word. But there was no longer a king? God now became the only true King of Israel! But there was no longer land? The circumcision in the flesh would represent a reign of spiritual dimensions from then onwards.

Therefore, the exile would give rise to JUDAISM, that is, a way of living the Jewish religion both in Jesus' time as in the present day, either in Israel or anywhere else in the world.

e) Contact with Babylonian culture

The city of Babylon and its traditions impressed the Jews. The great sacred avenue, surrounded by temples, culminated in a great "ziggurat" (a kind of stepped pyramid) or tower of Babylon or Babel.

Every year, long poems were recited in celebration of the New Year. The Enuma Elish, or epic of Gilgamesh described how Marduk, the god of Babylon, created the world, and saved humanity from the flood. The Jews also discovered the thoughts of the Babylonian sages about the human condition.

To reconstruct the history of their people and their origins, the Jews assimilated many elements from Babylonian culture, but interpreted them in light of their faith in the one True God, who acts in history.

f) Cyrus, chosen by God

In 539 B.C., Cyrus took control of Babylon without needing to resort to battle or combat. It probably occurred with the complicity of the Babylonians, who were tired of the inability of their king Nabonidas.

Cyrus was the king of a small region of Persia. He gradually expanded his kingdom as he conquered the land of other kings, and eventually took Babylon. His prodigious rise was accompanied by the passion he had for the Jewish exiles. Isaiah referred to Cyrus as the Lord's "anointed" one. "Might Cyrus have been appointed by God to free us?"

Thus, the great Cyrus, who was a pagan and polytheistic, entered into the history of the people of Israel by the hand of the Most High, with the mission of bringing the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem: "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 45.13).

g) The Declaration of Cyrus

In fact, in 538 B.C, Cyrus signed a decree allowing the Jews to return to their country. He also granted "war reparations" which was a considerable amount to enable the Jews to rebuild their nation.

The Jewish nation mattered to Cyrus for his political and military ambitions as well. It was important that Israel remain absolutely faithful to him, as it was an outpost of his empire that bordered with Egypt. The nightmare had ended for the Jewish people. A large number of them return to the "Promised Land".

h) Literary Activity and Developments

The Jews had lost everything after having been outcasts. They were left with their traditions, which they now read a thousand times with passion. The prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah preached, one at the beginning and the other at the end of exile. The priests collected the legal traditions that had been written in Jerusalem at the end of the kingdom of Judah, including the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26).

Once these traditions were accepted with new adjustments, they would become the Book of Leviticus. To maintain the faith and hope of the people, the priests, once again, lead the people back to their origins. This retelling of the story is

known as the Priestly tradition, being the fourth document that constitutes the Pentateuch, as previously mentioned.

This period of time gave rise to some of the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 137, 44, 80, 89) as a call to the faithful God. In Jerusalem, some of the Jews who had escaped exile, expressed their complaints in Lamentations, falsely attributed to Jeremiah.

6.3- Priestly History

a) The priests in exile

The exiled people lost everything and were in danger of being assimilated into foreign societies and disappearing, as occurred with the Northern Israelites 150 years before, who were exiled to Assyria.

Some prophets, and especially the priests, helped the people remain strong during these difficult times. They formed a strong group in Jerusalem, who were well organized and deeply pious. It was they who kept the faith of the exiles alive, managing to adapt their religion to the difficult situation they faced, with the hope of a new future.

b) New methods, new meaning:

- The Sabbath sanctified time.
- Circumcision was a mark to indicate 'belonging to the people'.
- The assemblies (or synagogue) where they prayed and meditated the Word of God, replaced the sacrifices of the past.

c) Priestly Source (P)

In this context, the stories of the past were re-read to discover an answer to the questions that troubled the people: Why God's silence? How was one to believe in the True God in the context of the Babylonian world that celebrated the god Marduk as the creator? What role did the nations have in God's plans?

This tradition also invites us to extend these reflections to the context of the modern world we live in. We can discover how to live our faith and answer the questions the world poses to us.

d) Characteristics of the Priestly Source

- Style: the style was dry. The priest was not a storyteller. He liked to focus on numeric values. He often repeated the same event or occurrence twice: for

example: the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14, 16, 22, and 29), the creation account (Genesis 1), the construction of the sanctuary (Exodus 25, 31, 35, 40). The vocabulary used was often technical.

- Genealogies were frequent. This was important for an exiled people rooted in history, and that related this with the story of creation (Genesis 2-4; 5:1) (Numbers 3:1).
- Worship was paramount. It was organized by Moses. Aaron and his descendants, who were responsible of ensuring that it was done properly in pilgrimages, festivals, sacrifices, and in the temple – seen as a sacred place of God's presence. The priesthood was an essential institution that guaranteed the existence of the people and replaced the king and the prophet of the Yahwist and Elohist traditions. God announced that he would make Israel a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19: 5-6).
- The laws were usually presented in some of the accounts. This way, how they relate to historical events in light of the significance of the laws, gave them a sense of their significance. For example, the law of fruitfulness and fecundity (Genesis 9:1) in light of the flood; the law on Passover (Exodus 12:1-14) connected to the tenth plague of Egypt.

6.4- The Prophets of the Exile

6.4.1- Ezekiel

a) Exiled Prophet

Ezekiel was part of the first group of deportees from 597 B.C (2 Kings 24: 10-17) and prophesied between 593 and 571 B.C. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel came from a priestly family, but was more influenced by his environment and devoted more importance to the temple. In his first vision, he refers to the "glory of God", that left the temple to follow the faithful in exile. God lived among his people.

Because of Ezekiel's actions, the Judean exiles were not mixed up with the traditions and false worship practiced by the people of Babylon. They kept the traditions of their parents, and maintained their faith in the One True God.

b) The true worship of God

Ezekiel preserved the traditions of how the priests taught the law, or in other words, "took the catechism" to the people. He proclaimed the importance of worship in the life of the people of God and aspired to rebuild the temple. But at the same time, he broke away from the idea that God's presence was linked to a sacred place. He also knew that there is no true worship of God unless one does so with a changed heart, which is the gift of God's love.

c) I will give you all a new heart

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel denounced the infidelity of Israel as the source of the disasters that befell them. But he was certain that the faithfulness of God did not depend on the loyalty of the people. It was possible to be reborn. The embers remained alive under the ashes. Dry bones could regain life. The breath of God gave encouragement to a broken people. God was capable of a new creation: "I myself will make a covenant with you and you will know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 16:62). "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you "(Ezekiel 36:26).

d) Individual responsibility

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel's faith came from the heart. Ezekiel enthusiastically proclaimed how each individual would receive according to their works. This doctrine of individual responsibility will develop progressively and lead to the hope of a future where God's justice is applied to everyone.

e) An eccentric individual

Ezekiel had a sense of the theatrical and he did not hesitate to resort to eccentric gestures. To mimic and represent the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the misfortunes of deportation, he remained lying on the ground for seven days. He was mute as he drew the map of the city of Jerusalem on a block of clay and laid siege to it. He would remain motionless as if he were a paralytic. Finally, he rationed food and water, and asked for his food to be prepared using human excrement (Ezekiel 4).

f) A Literary talent

Ezekiel put his imagination and his literary talent to the service of his prophetic mission, evident in the four main views of his work (Ezekiel 1-3; 8-11; 37:40-48). He

was a true master in the art of parables and a lot of his imagery would later be reflected in the writings of the New Testament.

g) A watchman who was responsible for his people

The impression we get of Ezekiel is that he was a prophet who watched out for his people; the wartime watchman - responsible for his people. He raised his voice to warn others, but it was up to each individual to take responsibility (Ezekiel 33: 1-20). If everyone sinned, the shepherds of the flock would be held as most culpable. But the Lord Himself would take care of his flock. The final words of the book summarizes the prophet's message: "God dwells among His people" (Ezekiel 48: 35).

6.4.2- Second Isaiah

a) An unnamed prophet

Almost 200 years had passed since the death of Isaiah. The Jewish people were in exile. Between 550-539 B.C. before Cyrus victory, another prophet, perhaps a distant disciple of Isaiah of Jerusalem, spoke on behalf of God to the Jews who, like him, lived in Babylon.

His words, collected in 16 chapters (40-55) are full of hope. Tradition includes them as an extra part of the "Book of Isaiah".

b) The voice that cried out

He was exiled, despised, humiliated, having lost everything, manipulated without any hope, and working abroad; yet he still sang to the God who does wonders, with such a compelling voice that it gave a sense of hope to all the people. This was something admirable!

Where did this disciple of Isaiah, simply known as "the voice that cried out" find the strength? In his faith in God. God was the same One who brought his people out of slavery in Exodus, and would therefore also be able to free the people from exile. God was the force that would save them because He is faithful and loved them more than a mother loves her child.

c) "The Book of Consolation"

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1). Second Isaiah begins with this cry of comfort to a people who were groaning in exile: it ended the era

of slavery. It was a joyful announcement of God's Presence, which set in motion their new Exodus.

The prophet saw God walking in the middle of his people to their definitive destination. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3). Centuries later, John the Baptist would repeat these words to lead hearts to conversion (Mark 1:3).

d) The great and powerful God

The Israelite exiled in Babylon felt overwhelmed by discouragement and sadness. They did not have the strength to start over. They had no temple or palace or king. On the contrary, their enemies possessed a brilliant culture, great power and offered splendid worship to their gods.

The comparison was inevitable: Was Yahweh inferior to the Babylonian gods? This brought about a religious crisis in the people. But the prophet proclaimed his faith aloud- his faith in God the Creator and eternal ruler of all the gods, the only True God. God sees everything and can give new strength to all those who believe in Him (Isaiah 40: 25-31).

e) The New Exodus

The prophet presented the return from exile as a "new Exodus" and stated the reality of God's love, using beautiful imagery. This new exodus would be accompanied by greater wonders than Israel witnessed in Egypt. There was an insistent and tender call to trust in God to grasp his people with the "right hand". "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

f) Cyrus, the "messiah"

Here is a good example of how different interpretations can be applied to history. Cyrus conquered Babylon for the purpose of territorial expansion. He himself interpreted this event as a call from Marduk, the Babylonian god. For Isaiah, it was the God of Israel who called Cyrus, marking him with the anointing (Isaiah 41:1-5). It is faith and only faith that allowed Isaiah to discern the significance and meaning of the events.

g) The Servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 42-52)

In the Book of Consolation, we find the so-called "Songs of the Servant of Yahweh", in which it presents God offering the oppressed people salvation, through their Messiah's redemptive suffering (His Anointed One, His Christ).

These songs were a response to the despondency of the people and their desires for revenge and violence, which they saw as the only means of obtaining their liberation.

h) Who was this servant?

This servant was undoubtedly the personification of the people of Israel - humiliated, despised and condemned to death. Misfortune befell the people, and they could no longer do anything but to make sense of it all.

This example of 'servant' helped the first Christians understand the mission of Christ and the Paschal Mystery. It seems clear that these prophecies, transcending the limits of space and time, mysteriously point to Jesus.

6.5- Israel under Persian control (538-333 B.C)

Cyrus' Declaration allowed the Jews to return to the land of their ancestors and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1: 2-4). This way, the Persian king put an end to 50 years of exile in Babylon. It is estimated that about 50,000 Jews returned to their homeland in two great migrations.

a) The first wave of returnees

In 538 B.C. the first wave of returnees arrived, led by Sheshbazzar, and present in this group were many priests, some Levites, slaves and temple servants. Those people, who were not religious and in a good financial situation in Babylon, chose not to return.

b) Difficulties with the Samaritans

Resettlement in Judah was difficult. The territory was under the control of the Samaritans, who watched the arrival of the former owners of the land where they had settled. The Samaritans wanted to help the Israelites rebuild the temple, but the Jews refused because their religion was not pure. The Samaritans would later oppose the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, in the times of Nehemiah. These difficulties, combined with drought and lack of money, brought the building of the temple to a

halt. It was during this period that one of Isaiah's disciple, called Third Isaiah, preached.

c) A New Migration

In 520 B.C., in the reign of Darius, a new wave of migration, led by the royal prince Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua, arrived from Babylon. They faced the same problems mentioned above, but with the direction and support of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the temple was finally rebuilt in 515 B.C.

d) Joyous celebrations

The "second temple" was completed. The older members in the population recalled the splendour of Solomon's temple. This second temple was much simpler, but the important thing was that it was rebuilt. It became a symbol, the flag of a religious people that recognized and appreciated the presence of God and celebrated his second act of liberation. The second temple of Jerusalem was the strength and the vital centre of the new nation.

e) Nehemiah rebuilt the walls

The two missions of Nehemiah (445 and 432 B.C) allowed for the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem to occur and marked the independence of Samaria. By this time, the prophet Malachi tried to rekindle the faith of the people.

f) Ezra's Mission

At the end of this period, Ezra received the responsibility from King Artaxerxes to reorganize and reform the Jewish faith. With much hardship, he managed to restore the purity of the faith, dissolve marriages with non-Jews and impose, as state law, "God's law of heaven." This law was undoubtedly the Pentateuch that Ezra compiled together from different traditions.

g) Liturgy of the Word

All the people gathered in the square and asked Ezra to bring the book of the Law of Moses. Ezra opened the book in front of all the people and praised the Lord, Almighty God. All the people raised their hands and answered, Amen, amen. The Levites read the book of God's Law, clearly explaining its meaning and significance in a way that made the scriptures understandable (Nehemiah 8: 1-10).

This solemn worship was one of the most important moments in the history of Israel. It marked the official birth of Judaism. The meeting was not about blood

sacrifices, but about the reading of the law and prayer. This gave rise to worship in synagogues.

h) The Jews throughout the world: the "Diaspora"

In Babylon, many Jews remained and they formed a lively community. The existence of another Jewish community, this one in Elephantine (Egypt), was also well documented. The Jewish community of Alexandria in Egypt was also important. Therefore, there was a dispersion (diaspora in Greek) of Judaism. The centre of Judaism was still Jerusalem, but other important centres would be established in the world.

i) A common language: Aramaic

This language, similar to Hebrew, was the international language of the Persian Empire for trade and diplomacy. In Judea, the language gradually supplanted Hebrew, which became a mainly liturgical language.

In the times of Christ, the people spoke Aramaic and did not understand Hebrew. This common language, and the diaspora, contributed towards making the Jews more open to universalism.

j) Literary activity and developments

In those times, some prophets preached. Prophets like Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Abdias and especially the Third Isaiah. But this period of time was marked by the influence of the scribes and sages. Some scribes, such as Ezra, reread the Scriptures and compiled them in organized books (Pentateuch).

The sages collected theological reflections and stories from the past and produced great works like Ruth, Jonah, Job and Proverbs. The Psalms were collected to form a book.

6.6- The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

a) A century of history

A century passed, from the time of Cyrus' Declaration, which gives freedom to the exiles in Babylon (538 B.C) until the end of Nehemiah's mission (432 B.C). These two books deal with the return from exile and the reorganization of the Jewish community around the temple and the law. Two characters stand out: the scribe Ezra and Nehemiah, who was cupbearer to the king of Persia.

b) Reading of the Law

Judaism was born from the call of the people, who wanted to be instructed through the reading of the Word. The people wanted to be reassured that when everything fails, the True God remains.

In these books we find the people of Israel again heading towards a new stage in their history. They were led by priests and Levites and encouraged by the sages and the last line of prophets. The Jewish community built their faith on piety and silence.

6.6.1- Ezra

a) A scribe with authority

At every important moment in the history of Israel, there was always a man who was chosen by God and who knew how to unite the people, to succeed in the difficult task of forming a holy people; that is, a religious nation and a national religion. We are reminded of Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, other leaders and prophets.

Now it was Ezra's turn. He was a priest and scribe whose mission was to apply the Law of Moses, according to Jewish tradition. Ezra, which means "God's help" was the secretary in charge of Jewish affairs in the Persian court. His prestige and authority were indisputable among his countrymen.

b) A lover of the Law

During the Babylonian exile, the priests, who were unable to perform their sacred duties as they had done in Jerusalem, dedicated themselves to the study of Scripture. The sacred books were their new temple. A school of scribes was created, who were interpreters of the law. These scribes would become increasingly important, and we encounter them often in the Gospels.

Ezra was the director of this school of scribes, and was likely to have been the definitive "editor" of the Pentateuch. His love of the law was a mixture of sincere devotion and a passion to study it.

c) An organizer

Around the year 430 B.C, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, in the name of King Artaxerxes, to enforce the Law of Moses as state law. A brilliant and logical man, with an uncompromising sense of honesty in compliance with the law, Ezra always led the way.

Ezra gradually organized the Jewish people around the law and the temple. His ardent faith and the necessity of safeguarding the Jewish faith and the traditions of the new nation, explained the intransigence of the reforms and the isolation he imposed on Jews, including the obligation for all men to separate themselves from their wives and children if they were foreigners.

d) Judaism

The community celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, confessed their sins and were committed to the law of the Covenant. Three principle elements arose that were fundamental to Judaism: the Jews as God's "chosen People", the "temple" and the "law".

e) The risks of the system

Ezra's endeavours were effective. A strong organization favoured the development of faith in the people. But it also had its risks:

- Theocracy: religious and political matters were mixed together, and became governed by the Law of Moses.
- Clericalism: priests directed the religious, political and social spheres of everyday life.
- Phariseeism: the renewed observance of the law eventually became hollow, external acts that drowned out true piety.

f) Jesus and Judaism

The strict observance of the law was, at first, a measure of protection against the influence of the pagans, but with the passage of time, a 'wall' began isolating the Jews from other people.

In the reforms that took place, Judaism did not know how to deal with the teachings of the prophets, who now included all the other nations as constituting the people of God.

Jesus would confront the scribes of his time, attacking the errors and excesses that they had fallen into. He elected and sent his disciples to go out into the world in fraternal service to others, and condemned the hypocrisy of the self-righteous.

6.6.2- Nehemiah

a) A Jew and a king's cupbearer

In the Persian court of Artaxerxes I (465-423 B.C), Nehemiah, who was a Jew, was the king's cupbearer who served drinks. Poisoning was a common threat that kings faced. Thus, the duties of a cupbearer were only given to those individuals that the king trusted. Nehemiah was an elegant, sociable young man who was friendly and knew how to gain the confidence of the king. His bright future was assured.

b) An urgent mission

Unexpected news arrived from distant Jerusalem: the city, that was constantly attacked by its enemies that surrounded it, was in ruins. Nehemiah was deeply affected by this news. One of the most deeply rooted convictions of his faith was that God directed all the events of history. Nehemiah thinks that this news may be a call from God. He reflected, prayed and decided to change his plans.

Thereafter, his eloquence, his optimism, his skills in dealing with people and cheerfulness, would no longer be used for his personal interests but to serve his people and the Lord with all his body, soul and might.

c) Rebuilding Jerusalem

Nehemiah asked the king permission to excuse himself from the court and go to Jerusalem. The king not only allowed this but gave Nehemiah the authority and financial means to achieve this.

In 445 B.C, Nehemiah made his first trip to Jerusalem. He walked along the walls and recognised that rebuilding them was the most urgent task. The walls symbolized unity and guaranteed peace.

d) Supporting justice and solidarity

Nehemiah appealed to the people and they responded by giving a wonderful example of solidarity. But unscrupulous abuses committed by some individuals who took advantage of the circumstances to enrich themselves, endangered the solidarity.

Nehemiah, who committed himself and his own personal wealth to this endeavour, could not tolerate such perversions, and quickly acted to defend the poor. He denounced the abuses that the rich committed.

e) That all may be one

Nehemiah, who called for the cooperation of everyone, not only rebuilt the walls but the community of Jerusalem. Therefore, this wise and thoughtful man, sensitive to the economic, political and social conditions of his people, fulfilled his mission.

Faith and trust in the Lord that he always prayed to, helped Nehemiah overcome the difficulties he faced. Nehemiah teaches us to discover and discern the will of God in our daily lives and trust God to enable us to accomplish the great task of "uniting the scattered".

6.6.3- Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66) – The Prophet of the Returnees

a) A people without hope

The last 11 chapters of the Book of Isaiah form a mosaic of anonymous prophecies, probably written by a group of Isaiah's disciples, who possibly lived in Jerusalem between 539 and 460 B.C

During this period of time, it is probable that neither Ezra nor Nehemiah had yet arrived in Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and organize the people's lives.

b) The plight of the people

The returnees had to confront the populations from neighbouring countries so that they would be able to settle in their homeland again. Discouragement was rife and some individuals took advantage of the situation to enrich themselves at the expense of others. There was no solidarity among the people and worship was reduced to hollow, external rituals mixed with pagan practices.

c) Optimistic Prophets

This group of prophets brought with them the light that they derived from their patriotic enthusiasm, their faith and hope, despite the difficult and sad reality they faced. The prophecies always had an optimistic tone to them and this helped brighten the difficult situations they faced in their return.

Jerusalem was the centre of the universe, the city of God, the capital of peace. This image was reiterated in the Book of Revelations, with the heavenly Jerusalem, the final city of the children of God. The 'messianism' revealed by these prophets is a synopsis of triumphal messianism, from the powerful king who was presented by first

Isaiah, to the humble messianism of the Servant of Yahweh, as mentioned in Second Isaiah - the bearer of joy and peace.

d) The fasting that the Lord desires

Israel's religiosity benefitted from prophetic teachings that were more spiritual and practical. What mattered was the reality and experiences of everyday life, where man was encouraged to work, love, forgive, respect the rights of others and fulfil their duties.

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loosen the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked not turn your back on your own flesh and blood "(Isaiah 58).

e) The Lord will dawn on you

Chapters 60, 62, 65 and 66 are a hymn to the New Jerusalem, as a symbol of humanity transformed by God into a righteous people, peaceful and happy. God will mean everything to everyone and all the people will feel like children of God, without any hate or cowardly ambitions. The people of God will incorporate the best of all nations, its noblest sons.

This is the plan that God has entrusted to the Church, to be executed over the centuries. The liturgy of the Feast of the Epiphany reminds us each year, "Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all to see".

f) The mission of the prophet and the Messiah

He was "anointed" by the Spirit, which means he was consecrated to bring to fruition an extraordinary objective: to bring joy to those who do not have joy.

Jesus, in the synagogue of Nazareth, used these same words that expressed his mission (Luke 4: 18-21). It scandalized his compatriots who did not understand how close God is to the poor.

Reflection:

- 1) The prophets, chosen by God, had a well-defined mission to perform together with the people of God. Make a short summary about the profiles and characteristics of each of these prophets.

- 2) Why was the land, the king and temple the most important things in the lives of the people of the Old Covenant?
- 3) Reread how Judaism came about. What were the main features of Judaism since its inception?
- 4) You were shown how there are three Isaiahs in the book of Isaiah. What are the chapters that correspond to each one? What is the specific message in each one of them?
- 5) How do you understand and interpret the importance of Jerusalem throughout its history?

TABLE 7 -THE GREEK PERIOD AND ROMAN DOMINATION: WISDOM BOOKS

7.1- Introduction

In this period of history, the Jewish people in Palestine were subjected to foreign invasion and domination by the Greek, Egyptian and Roman empires.

7.1.1- Greek Domination: Alexander the Great

In the space of ten years (333-323 B.C), the young King Alexander of Macedon, who had conquered Greece, created an empire that stretched across the Middle East, conquering Egypt and the Persian Empire that reached the borders of India.

Victory after victory enabled Alexander the Great to establish a vast empire that consisted of over 70 cities. Greek culture was spread throughout this empire together with its art, its swimming pools and stadiums. A sense of unity was fostered by the use of a common language: Greek. In 323 B.C, the young king died in Babylon. He was 33 years old

a) Israel under Ptolemaic rule (333-198 B.C)

After Alexander's death, his generals divided the empire into three parts, creating dynasties that were known by the name of their kings: the Antigonid Empire in Greece, the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt and the Seleucid Empire in Syria (thus controlling the territory from the Mediterranean to India). The Ptolemaic kings of Egypt dominated Palestine for more than a hundred years but they let the Jews live in peace and respected their traditions.

It was during this period of time in history that the version of the Old Testament emerged, in the form of the seventy books, also known as the Septuagint. Many Jews settled in Alexandria (Egypt). Over time, they forgot how to speak and read in Hebrew which had been their mother tongue, and only used Greek. This is why the ancient Jewish scriptures were translated into Greek and the Septuagint was widely used in the early Christian communities.

b) Under the control of the Seleucids (198-63 B.C)

The heirs to Alexander's empire entered into conflict between themselves. In 198 B.C, the Seleucid war elephants destroyed the Egyptian army and Palestine was under the dominion of its northern neighbours. For Israel, this marked the beginning of

the era of martyrs. The Syrian kings wanted to impose Greek culture and religion upon them by force. In 167 B.C, Antiochus IV suppressed Jewish rights and freedoms. He prohibited the Sabbath, defiled the temple by installing a statue of Zeus inside it, and prohibited the observance of the law and circumcision, by threatening the people with the death penalty.

c) Maccabean Revolt

The conditions imposed by the Syrian kings led to a spirit of revolt developing among the Jews. A Jewish priest sparked the revolt against the Seleucid Empire by refusing to worship the Greek gods. He killed a Hellenistic Jew who stepped forward to offer a sacrifice to an idol. A guerrilla warfare was waged by and Maccabee (the hammer), together with his brothers, led an army of Jewish dissidents to victory over the Seleucid dynasty. He liberated Jerusalem, restoring worship at the temple. Judas Maccabees was succeeded by his two brothers, followed by others who took the title of king. But this dynasty, called the Hasmonean dynasty, degenerated and lost its power. Because they were divided, they needed to establish a pact with the Romans.

7.1.2 - Under Roman Rule

In 63 B.C, the Romans occupied Palestine. Israel would be subject to the Roman until the revolt of 70 A.D and 135 A.D.

a) The Jewish sects

- Pharisees: Pharisees meaning “separated ones”, were pious Jews from the time of Ezra, who wanted to rebuild the nation based on spiritual values. The Pharisees were deeply religious, committed to the practice of the law. Because of their intense piety and knowledge of Scripture, they became the spiritual consciousness of Judaism.
- Essenes: they were also pious men. During the Maccabean revolt, they took refuge in the desert near the Dead Sea, where they formed a community of the new Covenant, preparing the coming of the Messiah through prayer and meditation. They were uncompromising and broke with the Pharisees because they considered them weak.
- Sadducees: were a group of high priests. They engaged with the Hasmonean dynasty and were willing to defend their power through

whatever means necessary. The majority of the high priests forming the basis of the Sadducees were much more pious than the priestly aristocrats in this Jewish sect, and related more to the Pharisees.

b) Literary activities and developments

- During this period of time, the prophet known as Second Zechariah preached.
- The last of the wisdom books were written: Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Tobias, The Song of Songs, Baruch, Wisdom.
- The Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek: the “Seventy”.
- The persecution by Antiochus and Maccabean Revolt were recorded in various writings: Esther, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and the development of a literary genre that was beginning to appear among the last prophets: the apocalyptic. The Book of Daniel is the only apocalyptic book of the Old Testament.
- The last of the Psalms were composed.

7.2. A Prophet from the Greek period: Second Zechariah

a) The faith in danger

Biblical scholars and historians divided Isaiah into three parts, and Zechariah was divided into two parts. Chapters 9-14 were written by a prophet from the time of Alexander the Great. The unknown author of these chapters lived in a historical context different from the first part of the book of Zechariah.

Israel lost its autonomy again, probably under Greek rule. The faith suffered. The prophet warned his people of the danger of being rejected by God once again.

b) The announcement of the Messiah

The prophet proclaimed the Messianic hope, which was the anticipation of a Messiah or ‘anointed one’ of God who would restore the kingdom. This was the source of encouragement and hope for the people who were suffering. “Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey's colt. "(Zechariah 9:9).

c) The image of the Messiah

The image of the Messiah, as portrayed by the prophet Zechariah, is unique in the Bible. He presents us with a humble Messiah, announcing peace to all nations (Zechariah 9:10), a shepherd who does not abandon his flock (Zechariah 11:17), the suffering servant, whom they have pierced (Zechariah 12:10) a real Messiah, son of David and Son of God who will reign over the whole world (Zechariah 14: 9).

The New Testament directly quotes or alludes to Zechariah's writings more than any other prophet. Zechariah announced the Messiah in a manner that fit the description of Jesus: as humble and simple, where the reign of truth, justice, love and peace would prevail.

7.3. Wisdom Books

a) Origin

The reflections and thoughts of the wise have probably accompanied humans since their beginnings. Over the ages, certain historical periods favoured the collection of the reflection of the sages, and bolstered further developments in wisdom and understanding.

The origin of the reflections of the sages in Israel was traditionally associated with Solomon (1 Kings 3:4-15; 5:9-14), who became the prototype of all the Sages. So it is no wonder that certain works in the sapiential or wisdom genre were attributed to Solomon, despite him having had nothing to do with their composition. It was the ancient custom of *pseudepigrapha*, which occurred in many instances in the Bible.

During the post-exilic times, there was renewed fixation and interest in the religious and cultural heritage of Israel. This was necessary to preserve the cultural and religious identity of the people who were a relatively small population. It revived a sense of hope in a better future for the people of Israel, in the face of threats from other dominant cultures like that of the Babylonians, and later the Greeks.

In this regard, the passage found in Nehemiah 8: 1-8 is symbolic, in which priests and Levites instruct the people about the law of God. The men of temple worship became men of the Word of God. The prophets were already beginning to disappear. God's Will was sought in His Word expressed in written texts. Therefore,

those responsible for this task dedicated themselves to study, reflection, culture and education.

Lay scribes appeared during this period of time where intellectuality was needed and necessary to foster further development of the reflections of the sages. This used to be the privileges of state officials.

In its study and search for wisdom, Israel was not entirely original. This small population knew how to assimilate the wisdom of neighbouring populations, especially that of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and adapt it from the perspective of their own religious experience.

b) But what is wisdom?

Israel, since its inception as a people, sought the meaning of their lives and reflected on the great problems of life. They tried to discover what would lead them to life as opposed to death. It became a reflection on the human issues they faced: life, death, love, suffering, evil, the relationship with God and with others and social life.

The sages of Israel modelled their reflection on these issues, in light of their faith in the One True God. The truth of all wisdom was God. The only way to obtain this wisdom was to have a close relationship and total respect for God, which the Bible calls the fear of God.

This wisdom was not achieved by human effort. It was a gift and communication with God. It was understood as the very creative action of God.

In the area of wisdom and how it was understood, the centre of interest and attention shifted from the people to the individual; from History to everyday life; from Israel's specific and unique situation to universal human condition; from the historical vicissitudes of the people of the Covenant to existence in the enigmatic world of creation; from the prodigious interventions of God to the relationship between cause and effect; from the sphere of law and worship to the world of free choice and personal initiative; from God's authority to the sphere of experience and human tradition; from the oracles of the prophets, proclaimed as the word of God, to the use of all the resources of reason and prudence to enable one to guide and orientate his own life; from the imposition of the Law to the persuasiveness of counsel and exhortation; from punishment, presented as an external penalty, to negative consequences resulting from a wrong choice or a foolish act.

Unlike the prophetic word, wisdom demanded the effort of all the abilities and gifts that the human being could deploy (Sirach 15: 14-20; 17:1-14). Like the Law, prophecy and history itself, wisdom arose and developed from the human experience

Wise was the individual who knew how to adapt to this cosmic system, to discover its operating mechanism and enter into its essence. "Foolish", or even "wicked" referred to those who were not interested in doing this.

The world that the wise man sought to understand was the same one created by God, a world that was not fundamentally hostile, because it was created good from the beginning (Genesis 1); a world where man submitted himself to God and made master of himself (Genesis 1: 3-31). The main concern of the sages was the personal fate of individuals.

The sages' insistence with the idea of the fear of God, became prevalent, especially in the later period: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Proverbs 1:7). Without the fear of God, any form of wisdom loses its very foundation and therefore its validity for enabling one to walk the straight path of a good life and conduct.

In summary, through the application of intelligence and reflection, wisdom constituted the dominant mentality of post-exile Judaism, reviving and updating both Israel's unique heritage as the people of the covenant, and broadening their human experiences, common to the other people of the Middle East region.

This theology of wisdom prepared the scene for the New Testament, where Jesus appeared as the one who was "wiser than Solomon" (Matthew 12:42), and "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24-30), the only means of salvation for all (John 14:6), because He is the uncreated wisdom that incarnated within humanity.

c) Who were these wise men of Israel?

The sages in Israel formed part of the spiritual guides of the people, like the high priests and the prophets. The master, the elder and the father were the most common types of figures. They taught the disciple, the young and the child.

Biblical tradition has depicted Solomon as the quintessential wise man, and therefore most of the wisdom literature and poetic books were attributed to him.

d) What did they intend to do?

The sages wanted to learn how to conduct their lives correctly and tried to teach that to the people they lived with. They strived to find harmony and a sense of what the world was about that would allow them to lead a successful life. They used their own experiences, observations, reflections and faith.

e) How did they teach?

The sages did not force or impose themselves upon anyone. They urged and persuaded the people. They invited others to see, hear, prove and judge so that at the end, those who listened could think and decide for themselves. Their approach and principles were open. These included questions and interrogations; the encouragement to discover; at times it created problems and conflicts. They used adages or sayings, fables, poems, enigmas, and prayers of wisdom.

The task of the sages of Israel resembles, in some respects, the thinkers of today who reflect on the lives of the people of our time. The lessons they learn are elaborated by personal experiences that they live through and the experience of others.

The sages were led by faith and engaged in the mystery that surrounded the world and man. They discovered how God spoke to man since the beginning of creation. They affirm that the "fear of God" is the beginning of wisdom. This is not fear as we understand it, but respect, loyalty and trust in the God who sustains man.

They foreshadowed Christ, "the wisdom of God." Perhaps the most important contribution of these Sapiential or wisdom books is how they refer to the wisdom of God as a gift and communication of His mystery. The "wisdom of God" is fully communicated to us in the person of Christ.

f) What are the Wisdom Books?

These books are:

- **Job:** it presents the problem of suffering in a poetic style. The Book of Job was probably a parable or allegory.
- **Ecclesiastes:** no one knows for sure who wrote it. It describes the instability and insecurity of this present life, but also many good things that come from God.

- **Proverbs:** part of this book was written by King Solomon - King David's son. The author speaks of a God who is creator and just, merciful and ineffable.
- **Song of Songs:** means "the quintessential song" or "The most beautiful of songs." It is a song of love, written in an oriental style. It uses the example of the love between a husband and wife, but intends to show the love of God for His people, who He made a covenant with.
- **Ecclesiasticus:** also known as "Sirach". It was written around 120 B.C. It emphasizes the value of God's law.
- **Wisdom:** it was written by a Jew who lived in Egypt. The author's name is not known. It speaks of the immortality of the soul and man's eternal destiny.
- **Psalms:** Psalms means "Praise". The Psalms were written to be sung. Altogether there are 150 Psalms. Most of them were composed by King David. The Psalms are a book of special characteristics, although included in this group of books.

7.4- Job

This was a book written between the fifth century B.C and third century B.C. Its main objective was to question the theology of the times when it was written, where suffering was considered a direct result of personal sin of those individuals who were suffering. It was generally thought that faithfulness to God was rewarded in this life with material and household goods, with good health and a long life. In contrast, infidelity was punished by failure and various misfortunes of life. Faith in an afterlife was absent in this story.

The book presents Job, a man who was truly faithful to God and even mentioned as a model for the angels. However, mysteriously, he was severely tested by the loss of his property, his children, health and dignity.

a) How does one understand such a thing?

- The plight of the innocent: Job's plight represents the suffering that people experience for no justified or apparent reason. Job believed in God, in a fair and all-powerful God. He suffered and did an examination of conscience

(about justice and love of neighbour). He judged himself as having been innocent.

- The teachings of that time: his friends were responsible for presenting Job with the traditional teaching of that time: "If you suffer, it is because you have sinned." They draw the conclusion that Job cannot be innocent and present themselves to him to declare this judgment on behalf of God.
- Strife with God: Job's cry was a cry that cursed the day he was born, as his birth marked the beginning of all the misfortunes he was to suffer. Job's case was that of a man who suffered from being innocent. Reinforced in the belief of his innocence, he left his friends and went to find God. He pleaded to God, not because of his suffering but because of his innocence. He accused God of destroying rather than taking care of his creatures. Job got to a point where he wished there was a neutral judge between them. This was not a dialogue but a monologue. God remained absent and silent.
- God's response: Finally, God's answered Job and led him to a personal encounter with the Lord. As Job examined himself before the presence of God, he stopped believing that he was innocent. Yahweh showed him that He was present in everything. God does not destroy, but loves his creatures. This was not an answer to the problem. On the contrary: this mystery overwhelms him. But Job, who stood before God, prostrated himself in worship and found rest in God's mysterious presence.
- Job's final response: In his final response to the questions he sought to find answers for, Job recognised the necessity of his knowledge of God. Job knew about God in theory and told his friends about Him. An encounter with the living God enabled him to recover the correct attitude he had before the presence of God. Loosened from his sense of innocence, Job prostrated himself before the mystery of God. Job sought God in his struggles and misfortunes. In the end, Job felt like it was God who found him. For Job, this encounter signified discovering the unfathomable mystery of God. The only approach possible for a believer to have is an attitude of complete trust in God.

- Conclusion of the book: At the end of the book, Job eventually recovered his property and wealth. It was a sign that Job was right to trust God all along, despite his misfortunes. At the same time, the book judged Job's friends in a negative light.

b) Conclusions for today's society

- Loyalty: Job was a man who remained faithful throughout his life. He fed his loyalty with a search of the truth without compromise. Job expressed his selfless and free love. He managed to arrive at the point of silent adoration before the mystery of God, despite having experienced rebellion and faced accusations.
- He did not run away or drown in his misery: Job's attitude teaches us a lot about how to deal with life's difficulties without running away from them or drowning in despair. It shows us how we shouldn't resort to misguided, empty solutions or answers when dealing with our problems. And our loyalty to God should never waver, especially when our support structures collapse or are not there for us when we need them to be.
- Job still loved despite everything that happened: if we lose our health or the understanding of our friends; do not feel or experience God's presence or understand His ways but still faithfully continue on our path towards God, we bear testimony to God's love. It reveals a love that is selfless and detached from the things of the world.

7.5- Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes is similar to the book of Job, since both deal with the question of suffering.

a) The preacher's book

The name Ecclesiastes is Greek and probably means "member of the assembly." It renders the Hebrew word Kohelet, which translated as "preacher." The author identified himself as Solomon, but this attribute was merely literary fiction on part of the author, who put his reflections under the patronage of the most illustrious of all the sages of Israel. The book appeared to have been written during the period of Greek rule, before the resurgence of faith and hope at the time of the Maccabees.

b) The critique of traditional wisdom

As in the book of Job, Ecclesiastes represented the clearest example of opposition to traditional wisdom. The author wondered about what the meaning of life was, and discovered the difference between what faith affirmed and what the eyes saw. The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes did not see or experience the traditional teaching of retribution, which promised a prosperous life for the just and threatened the ruin of the wicked.

c) The vanity of human affairs

The book does not have a specific objective, but presents variations of a single theme: the vanity of human affairs, which is affirmed from the beginning to the end of the book. Everything was seen as being false: science, wealth, love and even life itself. This was nothing more than a series of inconsistent activities that were unimportant (Ecclesiastes 3:1-11), which concluded with aging and death (Ecclesiastes 12: 1-7). This equally affected the wise and foolish, rich and poor, animals and men (Ecclesiastes 3:14-20).

d) Making the most of the little things in life.

The author was pessimistic about life, because everything in his eyes was regarded as being bad. Following this view of reality, he gave advice on how to enjoy the little things in life, knowing that they were gifts from God. "You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth." (Ecclesiastes 11:9).

Conclusion: in the end, the author affirmed: "Fear God and keep his commandments, For God will judge every deed, along with every secret, whether good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Ecclesiastes influenced ecclesiastical literature that highlighted the "contempt for the world." The book also taught a lesson about detachment from earthly goods, and that by denying the happiness that riches bring, it prepares oneself to become "the blessed poor" (Luke 6:20).

7.6- Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs contain the extremely rich wisdom traditions and writings that the Jewish people stored among themselves, throughout their difficult and painful lives, especially in exile. As stated in its introduction, the Book of Proverbs intended to teach how to attain wisdom, discipline and lead a prudent life, doing what was right, just and dignified. In a nutshell, it taught how to apply and provide moral instruction to others.

The term 'proverb' was derived from the Hebrew word "Meschalim", that signified "they who speak in proverbs ". The book consists of nine collections of proverbs, the oldest being attributed to Solomon. There is no unity with regards to the literary and doctrinal aspects of this book. In a generic way, it taught the art of living a good life, highlighting the concern for the simple and poor, that was especially important for young people who still had a lot to learn about life. The proverbs intended to instil a strong sense of moral character in the youth, guided by wisdom and filial piety and encouraged to avoid laziness, wine, bad company, women of ill repute, foul language and iniquity.

These moral aspects may seem only natural and irreligious; but there is no doubt that religion was the basis of all the lessons of morality found in Proverbs. Therefore, "the fear of the Lord" from the outset became a crowning of wisdom and a source of happiness (Proverbs 1:7; 31:30) that form the basis of this book, despite the lack of direct references to the law, worship and Covenant, which were fundamental notions in the Hebrew religion.

a) Wisdom from Israel and abroad

The book of Proverbs falls under the literary genre called wisdom, due to its form, structure, the purpose and the teachings it presents. It constituted a very diverse collection of wisdom sayings from Israel and abroad.

b) Human Wisdom

This was not addressed to the people as a whole but for each individual. These teaching of the sages assisted the people to conduct themselves properly in the diverse situations they faced: life in society, justice, government, commerce, labour and rest, joy and suffering.

c) Practical wisdom on situations, relationships and values

The sages would sing out with joy in being wise. Wisdom surpassed all values. Their writings reflected a lively interest in honesty, fairness and justice.

They taught how to appreciate self-control, moderation in speech and humility when dealing with people. They firmly condemned envy, contempt and taking advantage of the poor. They ardently praised love, friendship and honesty.

d) Theological Wisdom

These were not irreligious or secular teachings; and were intended to be practical truths. Out of every seven proverbs, one was explicitly religious. The sages bore in mind man's limitations and how life was often a mystery. But they had confidence and faith in God. The sages' confidence in the order found in the world was a sign of their confidence in God as the righteous creator. The fear of God was the foundation of wisdom.

7.7- The Song of Songs

The book Song of Songs signified "the most beautiful of songs." The book was a love story about the love that King Solomon had for a young Shulamite woman, a shepherdess who was also a keeper of the vineyards.

It was a series of poems which celebrated the mutual love shared between the two, together with its carnal intensity and realism.

This collection of songs celebrated legitimate human love - love that consecrates the union of spouses. The theme was religious, because God blessed the marriage. During a period of history where women were often the slaves of men, these love songs were extraordinary, with the freshness of a love that did not exclude difficulties.

The explicit descriptions of carnal union was an Oriental form of expression and should not shock us or lead us to wrong conclusions; They were vivid descriptions to emphasize how much God loves humanity.

a) Origin and author

The book was attributed to Solomon. This was the custom, as already mentioned and it reflects how King Solomon was held in high regard as a wise man and poet and remembered in the form of poems written about his life. Song of Songs was

actually compiled much later after the time of King Solomon. The book undoubtedly presented some love poems that were of popular origin and sung at dusk. But there is also evidence of the hand of an author who not only collected but recognised the importance of these poems.

b) The Love of God and his people

Although the text never mentions God's name, Jews and Christians regard these love songs as being an expression of God's relationship with His people. "The joy that a husband finds with his wife, God will also find with you."

St Paul saw a profound symbol of Christ's love for his Church in the Song of Songs. St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Jesus and many other mystics used of the language of the Song of Songs to express the mystical experience of His holy love. And this was normal, because human love is a reflection of God, for "God is Love".

7.8- Ecclesiasticus or Sirach (deuterocanonical)

The Greek translation was "Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach". The Latin-speaking Christians referred to this book as "Ecclesiasticus", as it was used to teach the good customs and traditions to catechumens preparing for baptism.

It was the book of "Ecclesia" (Church). This book was similar to the book of Proverbs, but revealed a more advanced phase of reflection on the part of the Jews. The Jews did not include this book in their canon of inspired books.

It was written by Ben Sira in Jerusalem around the year 190 B.C. Hence the name "Sirach". The author's grandson translated it from Hebrew to Greek in Alexandria. The original Hebrew text was lost.

a) Purpose

Ben Sira knew the sacred books well and the Law and religious traditions of the Jews. He wrote this work to defend the cultural and religious heritage of the Jews from the influences of Greek culture. Greek culture fascinated many of the Jews and foreign rulers wanted to impose it on them. But with his book, Ben Sira not only managed to save the spiritual treasure of his people, but helped shape the personality of those who would defend the faith during the Maccabean revolt.

b) Content

The author taught about the rules of a good and moral life necessary in the relationships with family and with outsiders, the elderly and the youth, with masters and servants, with women, and with God.

He recommended virtue and pointed out acts and duties that would develop these virtues: piety towards parents, patience in suffering, helping the needy, offering hospitality to others, composure when eating, silence when necessary and all things done in moderation.

He denounced harmful behaviours like laziness, deceitfulness, neglect and moral laxity. He included a hymn about the fear of God (Sirach 1: 9-20), as beautiful as the hymn about love found in 1 Corinthians 13, and also included songs of wisdom.

7.9- Wisdom (deuterocanonical)

The Book of Wisdom (or Wisdom of Solomon) is one of the longest deuterocanonical books in the Bible. It has 19 chapters. It is usually attributed to Solomon, but studies indicate that it was written by an Alexandrian Jew in the last decades of the first century B.C. It was the final book of the Old Testament to be written, and its attribution to Solomon is therefore fictitious.

The objective of this book was to strengthen the faith of the Jews living in this region. It intended to prevent them from adopting the foreign religion of the neighbouring populations of this region. Many Jews lived in this rich city founded by Alexander the Great (who died in 323 B.C). The author praised Jewish Wisdom, that came from God; and wanted to emphasize how Jewish wisdom, culture and religion was not inferior to the Greek culture and religion which dominated Alexandria.

Alexandria was an important political and cultural centre for the Greeks, and approximately 200,000 Jews living among its inhabitants. Greek culture, together with their philosophies, customs and worship, (besides their hostility that sometimes included persecution), were a constant threat to the faith and culture of the Jewish people who lived in Egypt. To prevent themselves from being marginalized in society, many Jews abandoned their own customs and even their faith, losing their identity to conform to an idolatrous and unjust society.

The author of the Book of Wisdom, profoundly nourished by the sacred scriptures and the historical consciousness of his people, confronted this situation by writing this book with the intentions of strengthening the faith of the people and activate a sense of hope, recalling the historical and religious heritage of their ancestors.

He taught about true wisdom that leads to a righteous life and to happiness. This was not a culture gained from the reflections and ideas of man, but came from the wisdom of God that opposed idolatry and unjust life that was born from it.

This divine wisdom masterfully guided the history of God's people, revealing that true happiness belongs to those who are friends of God. In other words, the author wanted to show how wisdom and a sense of accomplishment in life was not only the fruit of human effort, but was first and foremost a gift from God bestowed upon those He loves.

a) Division of the Book

The book is divided into three parts:

- The first part covers chapters 1-5: wisdom is presented as a source of happiness and immortality;
- The second part covers chapters 6-9: these chapters reflect on the origin, nature and characteristics of Wisdom. This second part ends with Solomon's prayer when he asked for wisdom;
- The third part covers chapters 10-19: these chapters presents wisdom and justice playing out in history. This third part is subdivided into 3 parts:
 - 10-12: Wisdom saves the righteous and punishes the unrighteous;
 - 13-15: Idolatry is the path that opposes wisdom; and,
 - 16-19: Recollections of the story of Exodus, with a stark contrast between the fate of Israel and the fate of the Egyptians.

b) Christian Interpretation

It was the Book of Wisdom that mentioned, for the first time and in an explicit way that: "God created man for immortality" (Wisdom 2:23).The Book of Wisdom originated within the Greek cultural environment, where Platonic philosophy included the idea of spiritual immortality, without the necessary link to the material element.

A new path is opened to wise reflection on the fate of the dead: after death, the faithful soul will enjoy eternal happiness with God, while the wicked will receive due punishment (Wisdom 3: 1-12).

7.10 - Book of Psalms

It is the longest book in the Bible and consists of 150 (or 151, according to the Orthodox Church) psalms and prophetic poems, which are the heart of the Old Testament. It is the great synthesis that brings together all the themes and styles of that part of the Bible, used by ancient Israel, as a hymnal in the Jerusalem Temple. Today, they are used as a form of prayer or praise in Judaism, Christianity and also in Islam (the Koran in chapter 17, verse 82, refers to the psalms as "balm").

This fact, common to the three Semitic monotheist faiths, is unparalleled, as the Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe in the Psalms, which were written in Hebrew, and then translated into Greek and Latin.

a) The origin

Most of the psalms were attributed to King David, who wrote at least seventy three psalms; twelve psalms were attributed to Asaph; the sons of Korah wrote nine, and King Solomon at least two. Heman, the sons of Korah, Ethan and Moses wrote at least one psalm each. However, fifty one psalms were anonymous works.

b) Songs of Praise

The psalms were initially transmitted via oral tradition, and eventually written down. This began with the collection of Israeli traditions by the prophet Ezekiel during the Babylonian exile (VII-VI centuries B.C).

c) Spanning a long period of time

The time frame when the psalms were composed spanned a long period of time. It represents a time gap of approximately one millennium, from around 1440 B.C., when the exodus of the Israelites occurred, until the Babylonian captivity. These psalms enable us to draw parallels with historical events, especially the life of David, when, for example, he fled persecution initiated by King Saul (Psalms 18, 52, 54) and when David fled from his own son Absalom (Psalm 3), or when he repented for the sin he committed with Bathsheba (Psalm 51).

The Psalms were poetry, which was the most appropriate way to express the author's feelings on the reality of life permeated by the mystery of God, man's ally. It was God who took part in the struggle for life and freedom.

Thus, the psalms also invite us to focus our attention on life and history. In them we find God always present and willing to be our ally to help us walk our path in the struggle to build a new and better world.

d) The Psalms are prayers

The Book of Psalms was one of the most cited books by the writers of the New Testament. Jesus himself prayed the psalms, and his life and actions brought full meaning to the sense that those prayers already had.

The psalms became the prayer of the new people of God, committed to Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, in view of the construction of the Kingdom.

The prayer known as the Rosary, with its 150 Hail Mary's, was formed by analogy with the 150 psalms of the book.

Another popular manner of prayer was to organize Psalms based on their intended purposes. In other words, psalms were to be recited on certain occasions, such as festivals, during illnesses, harvest or funerals. St. Arsenios of Cappadocia would say a psalm as a prayer with a certain purpose in mind.

These are prayers that raise awareness and engage us in our struggles, without allowing laziness, individualism and alienation to deter us.

e) A collection of religious songs

As in other cultural traditions, Hebrew poetry was closely associated with music. Although the psalms were also recited in the form of readings, given their literary genre, they were referred to as "Tehillim", a Hebrew term for "songs of praise" and the Greek "psalmoi", i.e. "chants accompanied with the psaltery"; or prayer sung and accompanied with musical instruments. The psalms became the liturgical hymnal used in the temple of Jerusalem, which were then transferred to the Jewish synagogue and the Christian liturgies.

In the Catholic Church, the 150 psalms were at the core of daily prayer - the Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office that was developed by Benedict of Nursia.

f) The different types of prayer found in the Psalms

➤ Prayers of worship to God the Savior and Creator: the theme of worship appears in most of the psalms. It was one of the essential requirements when the people presented themselves before God.

➤ Prayers of worship to God who was present and close to the people: God's House was found among the people (in the form of the temple at Jerusalem), and God dwelled in their hearts (through observance of the Law)

➤ Prayers of hope: God was seen as the Ultimate Sovereign King, who would establish a kingdom of righteousness as the King-Messiah, and not as an earthly king.

➤ Prayers of supplication and thanksgiving: both were essential to God's people.

➤ Prayers for life's problems: prayers for a variety of struggles and circumstances that reflected the human condition.

➤ Songs for Pilgrimages and Festivals: The Psalms were recited during the Three Pilgrimage Festivals to Jerusalem.

g) Spiritual Value

The Psalms were recited by Christ and the Virgin Mary, by the apostles and the first martyrs. The early Church recognized the Psalms as being a perfect form of prayer and they were the Church's official prayer. The Psalms resonated with believers from all generations, as a universal echo expressing the attitude that every individual should have before God.

h) A New Sense and Meaning

In the New Covenant, the believer praises and gives thanks to God, who reveals the secrets of the person's inner life. The believer is redeemed through the blood of the Son of God, then infused with the Holy Spirit. Supplications become more ardent, in light of how the Last Supper, the Cross and the Resurrection taught man about God's infinite love, the universality of his people, the seriousness of sin and the glory promised to the righteous.

Thus the hopes and expectations, as sung by the psalmists were realized in the form of the Messiah who came into this world and reigns forever, and all the nations are called to praise and worship Him.

Reflections:

- 1) What are the Books of Wisdom? What are the important aspects of each book?
- 2) What do the Books of Wisdom teach us in general?
- 3) What is wisdom? How did the sages of Israel shape the people's faith in one True God?
- 4) What does the Book of Job teach us, especially in our modern times?
- 5) Why is the Book of Psalms considered a "prayer book"? What are the different types of prayer found in the Psalms?

TABLE 8 - DEUTEROCANONICAL BOOKS

8.1- What are they?

As mentioned earlier in this study, the canon of the Bible is the collection or list of books that the church recognizes as being divinely inspired by God. These books are therefore called canonical books.

The canon applies to the whole Bible, not just part of it. There are 73 books in the Catholic Bible, and 46 books constitute the Old Testament and 27 books constitute the New Testament. In summary, it was up to the Catholic Church to determine which books were divinely inspired and which books were not. The Church received this authority from Jesus Christ Himself, and the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the Church did not undertake this important task in an arbitrary manner, but did so through the application of internal and external criteria. This enabled the Church to discern and discover the rule of faith and truth in a particular book.

For various historical reasons, there are seven extra books in the Roman Catholic canon that do not form part of the Hebrew and Protestant canons of the Bible. These books are: Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, parts of Esther and parts of Daniel. These books are referred to as "deuterocanonical" by Roman Catholics and "Apocryphal" by Protestants.

The word "*deuteros*" is from Greek meaning "second". These books were given this name because although they had been included in the canon defined at the Council of Carthage in the fourth century A.D, they were only officially declared as of sacred origin by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. In fact, these books already existed in the Greek version of the Bible, called the Septuagint; but were not a part of the Hebrew text.

These books had always been part of the Hebrew Scriptures, translated in Greek probably around 250 B.C, and known as the Septuagint. The Septuagint was the most common version used by Greek-speaking Jews and early Christians. The process of recognizing the Deuterocanonical Books as divinely inspired was considered a necessity of the Catholic Church to officially declare what was already considered Scripture by the early Church.

The three books - Tobit, Judith and Esther - share a common feature that should be characterized before we move on to a particular analysis of each.

They were not merely historical works. The intentions of the authors were clear: they wanted to make use of historical elements as a framework to incorporate religious teachings. Therefore the content of these books – whether based on historical facts or partly fictitious, embellished or represented in poetic form, only served to present these teachings.

These books were written in the literary genre called Midrash, which were stories that may have had a historical basis to them, but where the main emphasis was on the religious message and meaning of the stories. This was revealed through God's actions as He defended the faithful, and highlighted the edifying and moralizing aspects of the events described in a way that would inform the reader.

It is impossible to know when these stories actually occurred and they did not refer to all of Israel, but only a person at times, family (Tobias) or city (Judith). These books can be regarded as "edifying narratives" that revealed God's actions in the life of a person, a family or a city that relied on Him.

8.2- Book of Tobit

When the Book of Tobit was written, the exile had ended many years before. The author of this story, reread the history of the patriarchs and derived an edifying narrative from it, set during the time in exile.

a) A call to be faithful

The people were discouraged and reached the point of living isolated from other people. Even the dead were abandoned. Selfishness and fear had diluted the unity of faith and hope of the people of God.

The author of Tobit wanted to revive his people, reminding them that God cared for them all and had not forgotten His promises. God was present in each person's life but hidden. They needed to know how to discover Him. Despite all the misfortunes and struggles, God would continue rewarding the faith of the believer.

b) Family Virtues and works of mercy

It was an edifying narrative that highlighted the duties to the dead and the importance of giving alms. The sense of family was expressed with emotion and charm.

The ideas on marriage developed in this book were well ahead of its time, and foreshadowed the Christian concept of marriage.

The book invited the faithful to acknowledge the providence of God in everyday life, and the proximity of this good and faithful God.

c) A story of two faithful people with much in common

Tobias and Sarah, two faithful people, were struck by misfortune: Tobias was blinded by sparrow's droppings; Sarah experienced the sudden deaths of seven successive husbands before the marriages could be consummated, which terrified and humiliated her.

In their grief, Tobias and Sarah returned to prayer. The author informs the readers that their prayers were answered; an angel was sent to bring them healing. However, Tobias and Sarah did not know how their stories would end and their continuous loyalty was a testimony of their courage. The healing occurred, and their loyalty was demonstrated in the midst of the joys and sorrows of family life.

Tobias and Sarah trusted in a God who was merciful and also fair. In return, they acted with mercy and justice towards God and toward each other by strictly observing the law, offering their hospitality, alms giving and respectful love within the family.

The book shows that although divine fidelity may be hidden at times, humans are ministers of divine providence, and common day occurrences become the contexts where God's faithful care manifests itself.

8.3 - Book of Judith

The Book of Judith, more than just telling a story, was intended to be an edifying narrative to sustain the faith of the people and encourage resistance, possibly during the persecution of Antiochus IV.

Judith was a widow who lived in a small town, unarmed and defenceless against a powerful enemy. This eloquently symbolised the situation Israel found itself in, ravaged by the influences of an invading Greek culture, and that sparked the Maccabean revolt in the 2nd century B.C.

a) Judith

She personified Jewish wisdom, which confounded the Babylonian and Greek culture, and her story bore many similarities to the liberation of the Jews as told in Exodus.

Judith resembled Delilah as a type of woman who used seduction to overcome the enemy. Her physical attraction, used as a weapon of seduction, was combined with her irreproachable conduct and an unwavering trust in God.

b) History

An Israeli city was under siege of Holofernes, commander-in-chief of the Assyrian army. The leaders of the city despaired of God's help and declared that if liberation did not arrive within five days, they would surrender.

Upon hearing the decision of the elders, a beautiful widow, who was an observant Jew, rebuked them for their lack of faith. Judith prayed, putting herself and her destiny in God's hands. She armed herself with her weapon – her beauty. God worked through her beauty, and Judith beheaded Holofernes and freed her people.

The message of this book is that victory comes not from human power, but by the power of God. God frees the faithful when they trust in Him and do things in the way he requires.

Judith's method of obtaining liberation may seem foolish from a human point of view. But the story of Judith shows that the real fools are those who put their trust in the power and weapons of men. Holofernes whole army was defenceless against the divine weapon - the beauty of a faithful woman.

c) The God of Judith

The God that Judith believed in was "the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, saviour of those without hope" (Judith 9:11), and the "Lord heard their prayers and helped them in their distress" (Judith 4:13).

d) It is God who acts and saves

In the final chapter of the Book of Judith, there is a song of thanksgiving and hymn of praise celebrating the feats of this courageous woman. She becomes a symbol of resistance against the ambitions of domineering rulers. She is the glory of Jerusalem, the joy of Israel, and pride of her nation (Judith 15:9). But they know that it

is God who saves. He chose the weakest means in order to achieve this: by the hand of a woman.

8.4- Book of Esther

Although this book contained many elements of literary fiction, the starting point of the story may have been historically correct: a religious persecution unleashed against the Jewish people.

The author, through the means of Esther, takes us to the Persian Empire, where a minority of Jews in the diaspora lived the anguish of persecution. This was Israel's situation during Hellenistic control and the tyrannical rule of Antiochus IV.

a) Leader of the Liberation

Esther is mentioned at the beginning of the book, but only from the perspective of describing her beauty that won her favour. But she experienced a gradual process of identification and empathy with her people who were in danger. She becomes a symbol of resistance, active against injustice and embodies the solidarity of a faithful woman concerned with the fate of her people. From being a weak orphan, she became the leader of the liberation of her people.

b) The God of Esther

When Esther prayed, she approached "God who is above any man" and said: "I do not bow down before anyone but before you, my Lord. Protect me, because I am alone and have no other defender but God". God would enable her to intercede for the people, taking away her fears and making her an instrument to save those who were threatened with death.

c) The Festival of Purim

At end of the Book of Esther, it is revealed how the Festival of Purim will always commemorate the event in which the Jews were freed from their enemies, and "the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy" (Esther 9:22).

The feast of Purim is characterized by a public recitation of the Book of Esther twice, the distribution of food and money to the poor, the exchange of gifts, and consumption of wine during the celebration meal (Esther 9:22). Other customs include the use of masks and costumes, and public celebration.

8.5 – 1 and 2 Maccabees

The books of Maccabees tell the story of the Jewish people during their time of oppression under the Syrians, especially by King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 B.C), who wanted to force the people to practice pagan laws and reject the law of God.

Mattathias, who was a priest, emerged as leader of a guerrilla army. He fought against the Syrians together with his sons John, Simon, Judas, Eleazar and Jonathan. The Maccabean Revolt arose as a result and lasted from about 175 to 163 B.C, already on the threshold of the arrival of Jesus.

a) 1 Maccabees

The author, who wrote this book around 100 B.C, was a Jew and a fervent nationalist, favourable to the Maccabean dynasty. He tells the story of Mattathias' first 3 sons: Judas (3-9), Jonathan (9-12) and Simon (13-16). He wanted to tell a sacred story in line with the judges and first kings. He portrayed God freeing his people and saving them from the misery they found themselves in.

Judas Maccabeus stood out as a new Joshua: he sought to recover the people's independence, land and worship practices. Fear did not hinder him. He was convinced that his power and strength came from God. His faith was clear and decisive: "God is on our side."

b) 2 Maccabees

This book was not a continuation of 1 Maccabees, and 1 Maccabees was written prior to 2 Maccabees. The author wrote for the Jews of Alexandria, and his intention was to awaken a sense of unity that would compel them to form a community with their brothers in Palestine.

In recounting the exploits of Judas Maccabeus, the author pointed out that it was God who gave them the victory; hence the prayers before each battle and the miraculous interventions that occurred.

The total commitment that they had to their faith led many to bear the ultimate testimony of their love for God: martyrdom. The martyrdom of the elder Eleazar was well known (2 Maccabees 6: 18-31) and especially the martyrdom of the seven brothers (2 Maccabees 7).

Faith in the resurrection of the body is affirmed for the first time here (2 Maccabees 7:9 and 23-29) and in the passage of Daniel 12:2-3. This was related to the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes. The martyrs were resurrected to life by the power of the Creator and in return for their loyalty.

The book highlights the merits of martyrs (2 Maccabees 6: 18-20, 2 Maccabees 7:41) and the intercession of the saints (2 Maccabees 15: 12-16).

8.6- Book of Baruch

A disciple of Jeremiah, Baruch is traditionally recognized as the author of the deuterocanonical book, which bears his name.

In the book of Jeremiah, Baruch was presented as "scribe" or "secretary" of the prophet (Jeremiah 36: 4-32) and closely linked to some of the most important events of his life (Jeremiah 32: 12-16). Jeremiah and Baruch were forced to take refuge in Egypt. (Jeremiah 43:1-7).

These writings received the name 'Book of Baruch' from Baruch 1:1-3 onwards, where the author presented and described some snippets of the history of the outcasts of Babylon, after the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

But the name given to the author of these writings was certainly a pseudonym, a very common practice that has occurred in the field of literary throughout history, and also in the biblical world.

This notion becomes even more likely, in light of the fact that this book does not date back to the period of the Babylonian Exile, though some of its sources and narrated episodes are situated in this context. By gathering these elements together, an anonymous author, who concealed his real identity behind the name of Baruch, composed this work from different sources containing different literary genres.

There were signs of influences from Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, who were the prophets of the Exile. This was based on the topics addressed and the literary forms and genres that the author used. It was similar to the kind found in wisdom books, and even apocalyptic.

a) The Organization of the Book of Baruch

The book has six chapters, and the authorship of the first five was traditionally attributed to Baruch, while the authorship of the sixth was attributed to Jeremiah. We point out its structure:

- Historical Introduction (Baruch 1:1-14): Besides presenting the book and its author, it described the effect that its reading had on the king, the noble and all the people.
- Confession of sins, in prose (Baruch 1:15 and Baruch 3:8): it is nothing more than a type of "penitential memorial" held by those exiled in Babylon
- Exhortation on wisdom, in poetry (Baruch 3:9 and Baruch 4:4): is composed of a type of exhortation, along the lines of wisdom writings, and an oracle on the restoration of Jerusalem and the return of the people (Baruch 4:5 and Baruch 5:9).
- Letter of Jeremiah (Baruch 6: 1-72): in the form of a message addressed to the Babylonian exiles, the prophet criticized idolatry, urging them not to worship the false idols of the city where they had been deported to.

b) God does not abandon his people.

The book's objective was to reveal the religious life of the Jewish people and their worship practises, and preserved the religious sentiment of the Israelites dispersed throughout the world, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of almost all its institutions.

It described how they kept their awareness alive - of being a people loved by the One True God. At the same time, it revealed their thoughts and awareness of the disasters that befell their nation: the people did not attribute it to Yahweh's infidelity; on the contrary, they recognized that misfortunes and evil originated through their own fault: they found themselves in this difficult situation because they despised the word of the prophets, rejected justice and true wisdom.

But alongside the awareness of their sins, the people maintained a sense of living hope because they believe that God does not abandon His people and would remain faithful to His promises. If there was true repentance and conversion, they could rely on divine forgiveness: they would be reunited in Jerusalem again, which would always be the city of God.

c) False gods

The letter, from the sixth chapter of the Book of Baruch, is a letter that takes us to the pagan temples, whose idols were dusty and eroded by termites. These idols, presented in an attractive and grandiose manner, did not have life, nor were they able to produce life: "They can neither save anyone from death nor rescue the weak from the strong, nor restore sight to the blind, nor save anyone in trouble, nor take pity on a widow, nor be generous to an orphan. These wooden gods overlaid with gold and silver are about as much use as rocks cut out of the mountain side. Their worshippers will be confounded! So how can anyone think or say that they are gods? (Baruch 6: 35-39).

8.7- The Book of Daniel

The prophet Daniel (whose name signified 'God is my judge'), is the main character of the book. It was written around the year 164 B.C, during the persecution of Antiochus.

Because of the uniqueness of its style and content, there have been various speculations about the book's origin over the years. As in the case of other ancient writings, there is no consensus on the origin of the text.

For some people, they regard it as apocalyptic writing that arose in the second century B.C, at the time when King Antiochus IV wanted to eliminate the culture, customs and religion of the Jews, and who persecuted those who refused to subject themselves to the standards and customs of Greek culture.

In order to get a correct understanding of this book, it is important to read it along with the books 1 and 2 Maccabees. The book was the work of a teacher of the law, and he unified various accounts that were dispersed.

The dates indicated in the book do not match up in many instances and neither with history as we understand it today. It appears as though some ancient traditions, whose content is difficult to specify or date, were used to compile this book at a later stage.

a) The Purpose of the Book

The purpose of the book was to maintain and strengthen the faith and hope of the Jews who were persecuted by Antiochus Epiphanes. Daniel and his companions

were subjected to the same trials: the abandonment of the requirements of the Law and idolatrous temptations. But they emerged victorious with the help of God. The same thing would happen to the people if they trusted God.

b) First part (chapters 1-6)

The book of Daniel consists of two distinct parts. The first is a narrative table. It taught how those who remain faithful to God always triumph over pride and human wickedness.

God never abandons His people amid difficulties (such as persecution, poverty, oppression, any form of slavery, when human rights are trampled, etc.).

c) Second part (chapters 7-12)

It described various visions. It is apocalyptic in genre. This second part contained a message that complemented the first part. It taught that if there were faithful individuals who died in terrible torments, their reward would be life after death.

This clearly affirmed the belief in the resurrection of the dead and how each person would receive the reward of eternal life, according to their works. Reference was made to the Son of Man (Daniel 7:13) and to His definitive reign over all the nations.

Reflections:

- 1) What are the Deuterocanonical books? Can you name them?
- 2) How do the Deuterocanonical books reveal God's action in the lives of those who trust in Him?
- 3) What are the virtues highlighted in the book of Tobit? How do they apply to our lives?
- 4) What is the main message emphasized in the book of Judith? Why is this message important these days?
- 5) Do you approach life the same way Esther did?
- 6) What are the most important aspects emphasized in the Book of Maccabees?
- 7) What are the most important aspects emphasized in the Book of Baruch?
- 8) What are the most important aspects emphasized in the Book of Daniel?

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