

Reflection Paper No. 1: “Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith”

SACRED HISTORY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION  
AND PASTORAL STUDIES

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The concept of sacred history is one that has been used up to the present. This paper will explore this idea and contrast to it three others: secular, ahistorical and fundamentalist. I will then investigate some reasons why the Exodus experience was foundational to the identity and religious world view of the Israelites and how this happened. After this I will probe the understanding and role of election and covenant in the development of this sacred history with the concept of *hesed*. Finally, I will consider some implications that the concept of sacred history might have for religious education and pastoral ministry.

The concept of sacred history is God working through history to lead the people. A twentieth century example of this comes from Sr. Lucy, Fatima visionary, "Russia will be Heaven's instrument for the chastisement of the whole world, if we do not obtain beforehand the conversion of that poor nation," (de la Sainte Trinite 445-446). This type of statement is similar to Jeremiah's message that the Babylonian captivity was a punishment from God that the people should accept (Gnuse 109). This concept reveals God working in a particular people, using the rest of creation to accomplish certain objectives. It primarily shows the relationship between God and the people this Divinity has chosen and secondarily shows the relationship between the Deity and the rest of creation. Certain images are used to describe this relationship such as suzerain to vassal, God to people, husband to wife and mother to baby (Anderson 90).

Relationship puts the idea of sacred history in a special context that secular history fails to capture. Secular history reports the story of a people to give identity to a particular group of people and build nationalistic heroes. A few examples of groups could be Israelite, American and Irish. All history contains a story of a particular people from a

certain point of view. Secular history tells the story of a group without the relationship to divinity found in sacred history. It insists upon accurate data where sacred history does not focus on these things. The concept of sacred history does not apologize if the specifics are not an exact retelling of what happened, since it only strives to show God working in the lives of the chosen people.

The ahistorical approach focuses on how to live a moral life (Gnuse 156). This focuses on how people live and would necessitate wisdom literature and commentaries. Such a society would consist of literate people who would study, emulate the role of the teacher and tend to be introspective to ensure the life they lead would correspond to the demands of the God who called them. A society based upon this approach might miss the divine working in the lives of the chosen people. Approaching scripture in this way would tend to discount the historical context of the writings in favor of doing character studies.<sup>1</sup> This focus would gloss over apocalyptic literature and would find solace and familiarity with passages dealing with living life. They might also miss the cycle of progression in the Deuternomic History (Gnuse 104).

The fundamentalist approach has straightforward, overly simplistic leanings. I have had some interesting encounters with its adherents. The most memorable was a claim of a young Baptist, assuming the Scriptures were written in Old English, waving his King James Bible at me, clamoring that "This is the word of God, word for word as written by the Apostles." The fundamentalist approach allows individuals to interpret scripture and does not allow for an interpretive authority figure such as Church leadership.<sup>2</sup> Let me illustrate this point with two examples. The passage in 2 Tim 3:16-17 reads, "All scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching-for reproof, correction,

and training in holiness so that the man of God may be fully competent and equipped for every good work." The fundamentalist points to this passage to prove Sola Scriptura.<sup>3</sup>

The interpretation is flawed because that text does not support the idea nor is it supported in the entirety of the biblical text. A second case is the argument that there should be no speaking in tongues, quoting 1 Cor 13:8b-10, "Prophecies will cease, tongues will be silent, knowledge will pass away. Our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesying is imperfect. When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away." Those who have argued so before me, have claimed the Bible is infallible, interpreting this to mean perfect. This cannot be a proper interpretation because knowledge would also have to pass away, which clearly has not passed away in verse 12, "Now we see indistinctly, as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. My knowledge is imperfect now; then I shall know even as I am known." In both examples, it is clear the text is not read for what it says, but an idea is read into it. Fundamentalism takes for granted that the truth of the passage is clear and holds that no commentary, historical data, understanding of the culture, literary genre, intent of the writer, or any other information is needed.<sup>4</sup> This is certainly different from the approach of sacred history that uses all sources at its disposal. In this way, sacred history is very much a catholic approach.

Before God sent Moses to demand the release of the people, the deity was already at work, starting to form these people. It seems plausible to me that God started forming the people with the renaming of Abram (Butler 6-10), but a promise yet to be fulfilled.<sup>5</sup> The visible revealing of this promise would take hundreds of years. While it could be argued the creation of a Hebrew or Habiru (Anderson 37) people was visibly started over the 400 year period after Joseph's family arrived in Egypt, this seems to me only a

prologue to the Exodus experience that brought together different peoples to start to form the Israelites as a people. A principal question here is what it means to be a people. I believe a complete formation is more than simply a visible group of people. This is what we see at the beginning of the book of Exodus, as seems to be indicated by the new king's reaction to how numerous this particular people had become (Ex 1:8-10).<sup>6</sup> The common departure from Egypt after cruelly suffering under Pharaoh was the foundational experience to the identity and religious world view of the Israelites because it was out of these common experiences that the people known as Israelites were loosely formed (Anderson 67-74).<sup>7</sup> It was also significant that the Hebrew peoples moved but did not leave their God behind. Most in the ancient world believed that gods were regional (Gnuse 19). This means the Hebrews must have been pastoralists with mobile gods, which might partly account for the reaction of the Pharaoh that these people were multiplying so rapidly.<sup>8</sup> The Exodus also highlights the concept of sacred history. God fought and delivered them from Pharaoh, parted the sea, fed them with manna and quail. God was clearly caring for a chosen people, even if that people was only a loose conglomeration of pastoralists. This reflection shows me clearly how this Exodus account could be more easily written after the events than being written down during the actual events (Anderson 142-143). This would make sense with sacred history, since a user of this approach would be endeared to such a history and would be quick to preserve it since it had not been written, but was orally passed on to that point.

I reflect upon the story filled with elections with reverent awe. I consider the elections of Abram (Gen 12), Isaac (Gen 21), Jacob (Gen 25 & 32), Joseph (Gen 37-50) and Moses (Ex 3). God's call of Moses in the burning bush was a continuation of an

election of a peculiar people that God brought to fruition in time. These series of divine elections make the concept of sacred history believable, defensible and very attractive to me. It shows me how God must have planned it from the start. If there was no plan at the outset of this story, I do not believe it could have happened as it did. This divine choosing naturally follows into the suzerainty covenant and the Hebrew concept of hesed (Anderson 90, 277-278).<sup>9</sup> I am deeply moved in my faith by the idea of covenant,

"The suzerainty covenant...is made between a great king (suzerain) and a vassal...As the subordinate party the vassal is under obligation to obey the commands of the suzerain, whose words are spoken with majesty and authority...The most striking aspect...is the attention given the king's deeds of benevolence on behalf of the vassal, deeds that evoke a response of grateful obedience (Anderson 90)."

The relation between the suzerain and vassal shows clearly that there is a giving and receiving by both parties. The king provides protection and comfort and receives obedience. The idea of hesed seems to summarize all that is contained in God's election of and covenant with the people. This idea of enduring loyalty is summed up in the scriptural phrase, "I will not leave you nor forsake you," (Jos 1:5; Heb 13:5; Dt 31:6). Hesed is shown in profit and punishment, blessing and curse. Even when the entire intelligentsia of Israel was carried off to Babylon with Jerusalem left in ruins, Jeremiah brought God's message that this was punishment for their sins. Their divine king had not abandoned them! These ideas show clearly the relational aspect of sacred history uncovered at the outset of this reflection. The relational aspect of sacred history makes it so unique, useful and practical.

Given the unearthing of such findings through this short reflection on the concept of sacred history, I see certain applications for both religious education and pastoral

ministry. Teaching is a big responsibility, as St. James makes clear in writing, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers; you should realize that those of us who do so will be called to the stricter account" (3:1). Because of this, knowledge of sacred history is imperative in order for me to instruct more authentically students in the teachings of the Church. This approach would lead to more orthodox personal beliefs and would be a superior guide, for all, since we are learners of God's truth. For example, my comparison of the three alternatives to sacred history has made it clear to me that a proper Biblical exegesis cannot be replaced to teach the truth of the Catholic faith so that we all can have a stronger, more sure, Biblical understanding of our faith. We live in a Protestant country that always challenges a proper understanding and interpretation of sacred scripture and need to understand correctly proper methodology in scripture study.

Pastoral ministry could also reap benefits rapidly, armed with the insights gained from this short reflection. Religion is one thing that could float one into heaven and drive another into despair, depending upon the understanding. Armed with this knowledge, I can be of great assistance to those who come to me for my advice and opinion. I am very active in the Church and have been for many years. For that reason, people tend to look up to me as someone who understands of what this Catholicism and Christianity consist. They come believing I understand how to live the faith. For this reason, they come to me for advice. I take this ministry very seriously. These people are looking for spiritual direction. Can I truly give them useful information that will aid them in their search to live out their imitation of Christ in a more genuine way? This knowledge of hesed will equip me to comfort those who are hurting and scared. Religion has a way of being able to scare people into submission, paralyzing them into hesitancy and inaction. Christianity

is not a religion of hesitancy. 'He who hesitates is lost,' as the old saying goes. In a practical example, I have known some people who are frantic in their practice of the Catholic faith, not wanting to sin for fear of offending God. The study of the election, suzerainty covenant, and God's *hesed* toward us is settling. This knowledge could free those I assist to serve God from a grateful heart instead of being motivated by fear of offending God and entertaining thoughts of hell. This is a very practical knowledge, considering St. John's wisdom, "Love has no room for fear; rather, perfect love casts out all fear. And since fear has to do with punishment, love is not yet perfect in one who is afraid" (1 Jn 4:18). I am much better equipped to be able to direct souls, both formally and informally, as a direct result of this study. This realization surprises me and I am glad I have had a chance to do this study and write this paper.

In this paper, I have examined the concept of sacred history in several different terms. A comparison was done of sacred history to secular, ahistorical and fundamentalist approaches. Then I investigated some reasons why the Exodus experience was foundational to the identity and religious world view of the Israelites and examined how this occurred. I then examined the understanding and role of election and covenant in the development of this sacred history and was inspected with the concept of *hesed*. I finally questioned myself on some practical implications of this short reflection that the concept of sacred history might have for my roles in religious education and pastoral ministry.

This study has allowed me to consider an integral part of the Jewish and, as an outgrowth of our parent religion, Christian approach called sacred history. I have culled from this reflection an improved appreciation for the ancient roots of my own Roman Catholic faith and a vastly improved understanding of how to read and study Sacred



Scripture. As a direct result of this reflection, I am better equipped to improve my own knowledge and assist those who might request my assistance, formally and informally.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I do not mean those using an ahistorical approach would be unaware that these events occurred in history. They would not be looking for meaning by exploring areas that sacred history looks to as its staple.

<sup>2</sup> Claims have been made for individual infallibility quoting Jn 16:13a, "When he comes, however, being the Spirit of truth, he will guide you into all truth." I have found this in my experiences with those who use the fundamentalist approach. All scripture references are from the New American Bible.

<sup>3</sup> Sola Scriptura is Latin for Scripture Alone. It means that scripture alone is the basis for faith, exclusive of any other source (as the basis of faith) and allows for no interpretive authority. The scriptures are clear that it is the Church, not the Bible, which is the 'pillar and bulwark of truth' (I Tim 3:15).

<sup>4</sup> I don't mean to say that fundamentalists do not refer to these sources, only that they do not hold them authoritative. In my experience, they only hold authoritatively what they think, regardless from where the thought comes.

<sup>5</sup> A name change indicates a change in a person's mission. To illustrate in three examples, Abram renamed Abraham, Jacob became Israel, Simon Bar-jona to Peter.

<sup>6</sup> Even if it is true that the redactors of the story read back into history that the people were Israelites when they actually were not, that it is mentioned shows that they were distinctly different from the Egyptians.

<sup>7</sup> In Anderson, he discusses the possibility that there was more than one departure from Egypt, one from the South through Ezion-geber and one along the Mediterranean through the land of Goshen

<sup>8</sup> The Egyptians apparently were not Pastoralists.

<sup>9</sup> From Anderson 278, "Hesed is loyalty manifested by a stronger party toward someone who is in a weaker position."

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