

DEFECTION OR PERSEVERANCE

THE EXAMPLE OF THE PROPHETS

By WALTER A. VOGELS

IN RECENT YEARS, we have become accustomed to frequent headlines in the national and international press about priests leaving the ministry and men and women abandoning religious life.¹ The increasing number of defections has occasioned much statistical research and prognosis about the future: all of which is for many a cause of deep discouragement. Those who are left feel that they are in the midst of violent tempest, if not actually sinking. Like the first apostles, we may think that the Lord is sleeping: 'Master, don't you care? We are going down!'²

We know that here our faith is in question – faith in the future of the Church, of the priesthood and the celibate life, of religious life in general and in particular. Every priest and religious is involved in this crisis. Perhaps we have questioned ourselves, not only at the general level of the Church but at our own life's level. When we see our friends leaving, people whom we have admired, we find ourselves in the position of the apostles after the discourse on the bread of life: 'after this, many of his disciples left him and stopped going with him'.³ We may have felt within us a taste, so to speak, a hidden desire, a voice speaking to us as did the Lord to the twelve: 'What about you? Do you want to go away too?' We know Peter's answer: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life'.⁴ Such must be the attitude of one who has accepted the Lord's choice of him, not in any triumphalistic spirit nor with any feelings of pride, thinking himself better than others: but rather with the sentiments that must have been Peter's after his fall.

The words of eternal life are the Lord's; he alone is the Word and Wisdom. All the human wisdom in our inquiries and statistics

¹ An outstanding but by no means isolated example is the article in the February 23, 1970 issue of *Time Magazine*, 'The Catholic Exodus: Why priests and nuns are quitting' pp 63–69.

² Mk 4, 39.

³ Jn 6, 66.

⁴ Jn 6, 67–68.

fade into insignificance before this eternal Word of God. We might see, then, in this inspired word, examples of people committed to the Lord's service; people who, like us, have heard his call, have known moments of personal difficulty, moments of temptation to abandon everything, moments of discouragement, moments of deep loneliness, when all seemed to be lost. What reaction has been theirs: defection or fidelity?

*The example of Moses under pressure of criticism*⁵

The scriptures have left us many details regarding this central figure of the Old Testament. He must have been like so many men who have left their mark on history. From the purely physical aspect he was attractive – 'he was a fine child'.⁶ This is characteristic of other chiefs of the people, Saul, for example,⁷ and the great king David⁸ or Absalom.⁹ Moses also had the personality of a true leader; he was a balanced man of action;¹⁰ through his culture and education at the royal court¹¹ he was superior to the others and even acknowledged as an authority: 'Moses himself was a man of great importance in the land of Egypt, and of high prestige with Pharaoh's courtiers and with the people'.¹² Humanly speaking, therefore, he was destined for an important career. Vistas of success opened wide before him.

Then it was that God intervened and entrusted him with a mission.¹³ It is as he listens to God speaking that this truly extraordinary man begins to realize his limitations. Over and again, the biblical narratives reveal a strong hesitancy and reluctance:¹⁴ who dare claim that he is worthy of the divine call? Moses, too, has misgivings about this decisive step: 'Who am I?'¹⁵ And his response is full of 'ifs' and 'buts'.¹⁶ This reluctance, though, is accompanied by a marked assurance, a conviction that he can count on the One who calls and sends: 'I am the God of your father';¹⁷ I shall be with you;¹⁸ 'I am who am';¹⁹ 'Is it not I, Yahweh?'²⁰ 'I will help

⁵ Amongst the numerous studies of Moses, cf Buber, M.: *Moses* (New York, 1958); Neher, H.: *Moses and the vocation of the Jewish people* (London, 1959); Cazelles, H.: *Moïse, l'homme de l'Alliance* (Paris, 1954).

⁶ Exod 2, 2.

⁷ I Sam 9, 2.

⁸ I Sam 16, 12.

⁹ 2 Sam 14, 25.

¹⁰ Exod 2, 12.

¹¹ Exod 2, 10.

¹² Exod 11, 2.

¹³ Exod 3, 1 ff.

¹⁴ Cf Habel, N.: 'The Form and significance of the call narratives', in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 77 (1965), pp 297–323.

¹⁵ Exod 3, 11.

¹⁶ Exod 3, 13; 4, 1; 4, 10; 4, 13.

¹⁷ Exod 3, 6.

¹⁸ Exod 3, 12.

¹⁹ Exod 3, 14.

²⁰ Exod 4, 11.

you'.²¹ One of his hesitancies will assume a particular importance and will mark a crucial point in Moses' life: 'What if they will not believe me or listen to my words and say, Yahweh has not appeared to you?'²² An apostle can overcome fear, become eloquent; but mere human efforts cannot bring him acceptance or rejection. This very acceptance or rejection may bring him joy or suffering. Yahweh chooses him for a ministry that will benefit his chosen people. Will the people accept or reject him?

Moses must now take the risk required of every apostle. 'Yahweh said . . . Go, return to Egypt'.²³ He has one only guarantee, but it is enough – the staff which is the strength of God.²⁴ We know that we are in the presence of a man who no longer knows what it is to waver, a man whose apostolic success is now assured because the people now manifest their acceptance of him: 'The people are convinced and they rejoice that Yahweh has visited the sons of Israel'.²⁵

He may now begin his ministry of liberating his people. Pharaoh resists, however, and the people's forced labour increases. The acceptance Moses' people had formerly shown now turns to rejection and even to accusations against the apostle. There are criticisms and recriminations:²⁶ 'may Yahweh see your work and punish you as you deserve';²⁷ 'the children of Israel would no longer listen to him, so crushed were their spirits'.²⁸ The apostle, the man of God, sent to them but rejected by them, becomes discouraged. He asks himself, 'Lord, why . . . ? Why did you send me here?'²⁹ In the face of rejection, failure, apparent lack of fulfilment, the choice is to give up or to turn once more to the Lord in the conviction that he alone remains true. So vocation is renewed, the apostle is confirmed in his mission.³⁰ There is nothing partial or temporary either about the call or the commitment. God does not change Moses' mission, nor does he lessen its exigencies; but he does reaffirm his fidelity more profoundly: 'I am Yahweh'.³¹ 'I made a covenant'.³² 'I am Yahweh';³³ 'I shall make you as a god'.³⁴ Moses knows perfectly

²¹ Exod 4, 15.

²² Exod 4, 1.

²³ Exod 4, 19.

²⁴ Exod 4, 20.

²⁵ Exod 4, 31.

²⁶ Exod 5, 19 ff.

²⁷ Exod 5, 20.

²⁸ Exod 6, 9.

²⁹ Exod 5, 22.

³⁰ The vocation narrative of Exod 6 belongs to the priestly tradition (P), parallel to that of the Yahwist-clohist tradition (J.E.) in chs. 3 and 4. The final editor retains the two narratives and gives P's story of the vocation its present place – after the account of Moses' difficulties, so that he gives it a fresh perspective.

³¹ Exod 6, 2.

³² Exod 6, 4.

³³ Exod 6, 6.

³⁴ Exod 7, 1.

well that the difficulties will not end here either; so he hesitates: 'I am slow of speech'.³⁵ Nevertheless, what ultimately counts in the life of the envoy is the fact that God has chosen him as instrument: 'You yourself must tell them all that I command you'.³⁶ Moses will not speak in his own name, he will not impose his own ideas; he is an envoy.

At the end of this phase in Moses' life, during which he has acquired an awareness of his vocation and of its exigencies, we already sense what his apostolic life will be: acceptance or rejection on the part of those to whom he is sent.

Moses now begins his first apostolic task, the struggle to free his people from the land of Egypt. It is a period of enthusiasm, because it entails struggle. If there are no immediate results, at least there is no discouragement, no criticism; the people side with Moses. We are always strong and united in a struggle against a common enemy.

In the writings of this period a refrain appears: 'the sons of Israel . . . obeyed'. 'They carried out the orders Yahweh had given to Moses and Aaron';³⁷ 'The sons of Israel did as Moses had told them';³⁸ 'all the sons of Israel obeyed: they carried out the orders Yahweh had given to Moses and Aaron';³⁹ 'and the israelites did this'.⁴⁰ The title 'sons' does not simply signify the unity of the people with their leader. Through their leader and their obedience towards him, Israel is faithful to Yahweh, because the apostle is God's envoy.⁴¹

However, as soon as danger reappears and the Egyptians pursue the people of Israel, the latter's confidence in God fails: 'The sons of Israel were terrified and cried out to Yahweh'.⁴² They reject the apostle and begin to murmur: 'To Moses they said, Were there no graves in Egypt . . . ? What good have you done us . . . ? We spoke of this in Egypt, did we not? Leave us alone'.⁴³

Once the danger is over and they have been freed, the people of Israel regain confidence in their leader. When the sacred author wishes to summarize and conclude this period of struggle for freedom, he does it in a single verse, the last of this section: 'the people venerated Yahweh; they put their faith in Yahweh and in Moses,

³⁵ Exod 6, 30.

³⁶ Exod 7, 2.

³⁷ Exod 12, 20.

³⁸ Exod 12, 35.

³⁹ Exod 12, 50.

⁴⁰ Exod 14, 4.

⁴¹ The words and concepts stressing fidelity recur in the long account of the Sinai-covenant, where all Israel's laws are grouped together. Fidelity to Moses includes fidelity to God and vice-versa. Cf Exod 19, 18; 24, 3; Lev 8, 36; 10, 11; 16, 34; 24, 23; 26, 46; Num 5, 4; 9, 5.

⁴² Exod 14, 10.

⁴³ Exod 14, 11-12.

his servant'.⁴⁴ Apparently successful, his mission accomplished, the apostle is accepted by his own people: they have struggled together against Egypt.

The mission's second period begins. They have not been liberated in order to remain in the desert; it is now a question of moving towards the promised land. It will be a period of suffering for Moses; he will be the object of criticism on the part of the people. Once the common enemy has been vanquished, the people will rise up against Moses. The theme of murmuring dominates the long sojourn in the desert.⁴⁵

Throughout, it is easy to sense the pressure exacted by the constant hostility, the suffering which the grumbling of the people involves for Moses: he has been sent to them, he has brought them out of Egypt, he is responsible for them before God.

Israel accuses Moses after the manner of a lawsuit: 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt?'⁴⁶ The very reason for his mission is brought into question. The sons of Israel upbraid Moses for having brought them freedom and salvation. In other words, they reject their election because of material difficulties: thirst – 'What are we to drink?';⁴⁷ and hunger – 'Why did we not die at Yahweh's hand in the land of Egypt, when we were able to sit down to pans of meat and could eat bread to our heart's content!'⁴⁸ Then Yahweh, at Moses' intercession, provides them with manna: 'That is, the bread Yahweh gives you to eat'.⁴⁹ After a certain length of time this manna

⁴⁴ Exod 14, 31; cf 4, 13.

⁴⁵ There is a whole series of verbs expressing the opposition of the people to Moses: 'The people spoke against God and Moses' – Num 21, 5, 7; cf Ps 78, 19; 'They grumbled against Moses' – Exod 17, 2, where the verb *rtb* perhaps means 'to prosecute'; 'The people took up a lament offensive to Yahweh's ears' – Num 11, 1; 'They began to wail again' – Num 11, 4, 10; 14, 1; 'The people lost patience' – Num 21, 4. But the verb which dominates the narrative is *lān*, 'to murmur' with the preposition 'against' (*'al*). It characterizes the hostile attitude of the people towards their leader: cf Exod 15, 24; 16, 2, 7, 8; Num 14, 2, 27, 29, 36; 16, 11; 17, 6, 20. From the same root we have the noun 'murmuring'; Cf Exod 16, 7, 8, 9, 12; Num 14, 27; 17, 20, 25.

Further, the verb 'gather together' (*ya'ad*) with the use of the preposition 'against', gives another dimension of this hostile attitude – Num 14, 35; 16, 11; 27, 3; as does the similar verb *gahal*, 'group together' – Exod 32, 1; Num 16, 3, 19; 17, 17; 20, 2. Cf Coats, G. W.: *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The murmuring motif in the Wilderness traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville, 1968).

⁴⁶ Exod 17, 6. Coats has shown that the literary form of these questions is the language of the courtroom: *op. cit.*, pp 29–43.

⁴⁷ Exod 15, 24; 17, 1 ff; Num 20, 2 ff.

⁴⁸ Exod 16, 3.

⁴⁹ Exod 16, 15. It is significant that John takes up the same theme of murmuring in the discourse on the bread of life – 'Stop complaining to each other', Jn 6, 43, 51. Defections follow the criticisms – 6, 66.

is no longer sufficient for them: the sons of Israel demand meat. 'Who will give us meat to eat?'⁵⁰ Later on, the hardships endured in the effort to reach the Promised Land will give rise to renewed grumblings, as though he who had liberated them was unable to bring his work of salvation to completion.⁵¹ Truly 'these people are headstrong'.⁵²

In reflecting on these passages, we have some understanding of the prophet's state of mind. Although he is criticized by men, he remains convinced that he belongs to God who will never fail him. That is what the texts stress time after time: he who murmurs against Moses, murmurs against Yahweh, just as he who obeys the one sent, obeys also the One who sent him: '... for Yahweh has heard your complaints against him – for what are we? ... your complaining is not against us ... for what are we? ... but against Yahweh'.⁵³ Poor solace indeed from a human point of view, for the one who submits to such opposition. And also a grave responsibility to be carried by the people of God who, by their criticism, are the cause of so much suffering.⁵⁴

Opposition of this sort is oppressively discouraging. Every man feels the need of human understanding, collaboration, respect for the work accomplished. 'Moses worried a great deal over this',⁵⁵ much more than he had earlier in life.⁵⁶ He feels himself forsaken even by God. The same 'why' comes to him: 'Why do you treat your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour with you so that you load on me the weight of all this nation?'⁵⁷ He can endure the loneliness of the apostle no longer: 'I am not able to carry this nation by myself alone: the weight is too much for me'.⁵⁸ Does life still make sense? Is it even worth living? 'I would rather you killed me'.⁵⁹

⁵⁰ Num 11, 4–5. ⁵¹ Num 13, 14. ⁵² Exod 32, 9; 33, 3, 5; 34, 9; Deut 9, 6, 13.

⁵³ Exod 16, 7–8; cf Num 16, 11; 21, 5. These texts, especially Exod 16, 7, 8 and Num 16, 11, suggest that the office of leadership represented by Moses and Aaron is endowed with authority by Yahweh. Out of deference to that authority, the leaders suggest that the action taken by the people is against the office and the authority that stands behind the office rather than the person in the office. This is explicitly stated in Exod 16, 8: 'Your murmurings are not against us but against Yahweh'. Coats *op. cit.*, p 27. He adds in note 15: 'cf also those texts which simply shift an original designation of the object of the murmuring from the human leadership to Yahweh, Num 14, 29, 35; 27, 3'.

⁵⁴ The relationship between God and the apostle is equally emphasized in other texts – and its implicit repudiation by those to whom the apostle is sent: cf e.g. Exod 32, 7, 11, 23, where the opposition to Moses is called apostasy, where Moses attributes the liberation from Egypt to Yahweh, and where the people refuse to acknowledge the relationship.

⁵⁵ Exod 11, 10.

⁵⁶ Exod 5, 22.

⁵⁷ Num 11, 11.

⁵⁸ Num 11, 14.

⁵⁹ Num 11, 15–16; Exod 18, 18; Deut 1, 9, 12.

The criticisms which affect him most come from those who should be his closest collaborators: 'Miriam and Aaron too spoke against Moses . . .'.⁶⁰ They attack not only his actions but also his person: 'Has Yahweh spoken to Moses only? Has he not spoken to us also?'⁶¹ Again he is hurt when some of his collaborators establish themselves in authority, and seek division: 'These joined forces against Moses and Aaron, saying to them: you take too much upon yourselves! The whole community and all its members are consecrated and Yahweh lives among them'.⁶²

Does not the covenant mean that 'Israel was a kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation?'⁶³ Then come the words, 'Why set yourselves higher than the community of Yahweh?'⁶⁴ The fact that the covenant was made through an intermediary is forgotten. It is not a question of the apostle being superior, but rather that he has a mission to fulfil towards them. 'By this you will know that Yahweh himself has sent me to perform all these tasks and that this is not my doing'.⁶⁵

In spite of these pressures, Moses holds on. But a moment comes when he can no longer bear the burden of these bitter criticisms. Faced with the prospect of having to capture the land of Canaan, the people take fright, and complaints against Moses reach their highest peak. His mission is in danger of destruction: 'Should we not rather go back to Egypt? . . . Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt'.⁶⁶ In the face of such opposition, Moses consents to abandon the campaign against Canaan, yielding to the recriminations of Israel. And we know of God's terrible chastisement: like the people, Moses shall not enter the promised land.⁶⁷ No privilege, no exception is accorded to him: he will share the fate of the people.⁶⁸

These texts give us an idea of the sufferings of Moses, the constant

⁶⁰ Num 12, 1.

⁶¹ Num 12, 2.

⁶² Num 16, 3.

⁶³ Exod 19, 6.

⁶⁴ Num 16, 3.

⁶⁵ Num 16, 28.

⁶⁶ Num 14, 3.

⁶⁷ Num 14, 22 ff; 20, 12.

⁶⁸ We know that the bible is very clear concerning the punishment meted out to Moses, but very vague as to his sin. H. Cazelles offers the following comment on Num 20, 12: 'This fault of Moses and Aaron is very mysterious. Through respect for these national glories, the writer seems to have wanted to tone down an inglorious episode. Psalm 106, 33 speaks of Moses' ill-considered words on that occasion; but this can have no connection with v. 10. As Deut 1, 37 (cf 3, 26; 32, 51; 33, 8) ascribes the punishment to the abandonment of the campaign against Canaan, an abandonment that Moses consented to, it is probable that our v. 12 is the sequence not of the miracle of the waters of Meriba but of chapter 14'. *Nombres* (Paris, 1958), pp 97-98, note c. Cf also Cazelles, H.: *Moïse, l'homme de l'alliance* (Tournai, 1955), pp 24-26; and Buis, P.-Leclercq, J.: *Le Deutéronome* (Paris, 1963), pp 40-41.

object of criticism and recrimination. One day, tired of rowing against the tide, he gives in. Yet he repents and, accepting his own weakness and the chastisement, he faces again the sufferings which inevitably accompany his apostolate. He continues to march forward towards the promised land, even though he will not be able to enter it. He remains faithful to his mission, he does not give in.

Tradition makes clear what was demanded of him in order to be able to endure these sufferings. 'Moses was the most humble of men, the humblest man on earth'.⁶⁹ To be a leader, a guide to the people of God demands an especial forgetfulness of self and humility.

*Elijah's disappointment at failure*⁷⁰

The texts that speak of Elijah are less fully developed than the narratives dedicated to Moses, but they suffice to present to us another central figure of the bible.⁷¹

We have no account of a vocation properly so-called. Elijah appears for the first time in an unexpected manner.⁷² On the other hand, one might say that his life is a series of calls from God and of answers from the prophet; he can never be 'settled'; his life is a continual parting: 'go away from here, go eastwards . . .'.⁷³ 'He did as Yahweh had said and went . . .'.⁷⁴ 'Up and go . . .'.⁷⁵ 'So he went . . .'.⁷⁶ 'Go, present yourself . . .'.⁷⁷ 'So Elijah set off'.⁷⁸ In contrast with other accounts of vocation or of mission, there is no sign of hesitance in his various answers, even though the missions entrusted to Elijah are not without danger. Here emerges the prophet's depth of character; he is a man who refused to compromise; for him it is a matter of 'all or nothing'. Severe and exacting on himself, he strives for the absolute. Besides, as he himself will admit, he is Yahweh's servant. 'As Yahweh lives, the God of Israel whom I serve'.⁷⁹ Yahweh, for whom he is ready to risk all things

⁶⁹ Num 12, 3; cf Deut 34, 10-12.

⁷⁰ Among the studies on the Elijah cycle, cf Bronner, L.: *The stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics against Baal worship* (Leiden, 1968); Michaux, W.: 'Les cycles d'Elie et d'Elisée', in *Bible et Vie Chrétienne*, 2 (1935), pp 76-99; Rowley, H. H.: 'Elijah on Mount Carmel', in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 43 (1960-61), pp 190-219; Von Rad, G.: *Old Testament Theology* (New York, 1962), Vol I; Steinmann, J.: *Le prophétisme biblique des origines à Osée* (Paris, 1959).

⁷¹ Elijah is present with Moses on the Mount of the Transfiguration - Lk 9, 28-36. 'Without Moses, the religion of Yahwism as it figured in the Old Testament would never have been born. Without Elijah, it would have died'. H. N. Rowley, *op. cit.*, p 16.

⁷² 1 Kg 17, 1.

⁷³ 1 Kg 17, 3.

⁷⁴ 1 Kg 17, 5.

⁷⁵ 1 Kg 17, 9.

⁷⁶ 1 Kg 17, 10.

⁷⁷ 1 Kg 18, 1.

⁷⁸ 1 Kg 18, 2.

⁷⁹ 1 Kg 17, 1; 18, 15.

without counting the cost, in order to remain faithful to the meaning of the name he bears: Eli-Yahu, that is, 'Yahweh is my God'.

The very presence of such a man is itself a sign of contradiction. The presence may disturb. He will either be accepted or rejected. When problems or difficulties arise, Israel will withdraw from him: 'What quarrel have you with me, man of God? Have you come here to bring my sins home to me, and to kill my son?'⁸⁰ On the other hand, when all goes well, he is accepted and acknowledged: 'Now I know that you are a man of God and the word of Yahweh in your mouth is truth itself'.⁸¹

The uncompromising nature of his character makes itself felt in his apostolate. He is inclined to make categorical statements: 'there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except at my order'.⁸² He is also enamoured of impressive and marvellous enterprises:⁸³ the miracle of the meal and the oil,⁸⁴ and the raising of the widow's son.⁸⁵ But most especially, the great achievement of the sacrifice of Mount Carmel: a dangerous enterprise, a public commitment.⁸⁶ Here again it is 'all or nothing'. Is that not indicative of temerity, of provocation, a little too much audacity, over-confidence? 'Now give orders for all Israel . . . and also the four hundred prophets of Baal'. It is the great confrontation: 'I, I alone, am left', and on the other hand, the four hundred and fifty prophets, in the presence of all the people.⁸⁷ The entire narration emphasizes this spectacular aspect; Elijah even 'mocked them'. This character, hard on himself but strong in the service of Yahweh, will demand this same unlimited service, this total choice, from God's people: 'How long do you mean to hobble first on one leg then on the other? If Yahweh is God, follow him, if Baal, follow him'.⁸⁸ The fact that one cannot serve two masters, however, seems less clear to the sons of Israel: 'But the people never said a word'. Is this people ready to choose Yahweh and the apostle whom he has sent?⁸⁹ Here again we find this link between Yahweh and his envoy: to accept or to refuse the envoy is to accept or refuse him who has sent the envoy.

This confrontation with the prophets of Baal is, humanly speaking,

⁸⁰ 1 Kg 17, 18; cf 18, 17.

⁸¹ 1 Kg 17, 24. 'Elijah is unapproachable, unpredictable, feared, and even hated, but always someone to be reckoned with'. Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p 14.

⁸² 1 Kg 17, 1.

⁸³ 'Elijah knew how to manage the crowds, how to fill them with enthusiasm. He had a genius for grandiose settings'. Steinmann, *op. cit.*, p 116.

⁸⁴ 1 Kg 17, 7 ff.

⁸⁵ 1 Kg 17, 17 ff.

⁸⁶ 1 Kg 18, 20 ff.

⁸⁷ 1 Kg 18, 19-21, 24, 30.

⁸⁸ 1 Kg 18, 21.

⁸⁹ 1 Kg 18, 36-7.

the crowning point of Elijah's apostolic career. Success seems assured: 'When all the people saw this they fell on their faces. Yahweh is God, they cried, Yahweh is God', reiterating the meaning of the prophet's own name.⁹⁰ The question is whether Elijah realizes that this conversion of the people, apparently as complete as it is sudden, cannot have authentic roots. For a character like Elijah the danger of idealism is a very real one. The fact is that people are not converted once and for all by the spectacular. When they are as easily influenced as this, it is highly probable that they will change again. And so it happens. The prophet once again becomes unacceptable to them; they will do away with him.⁹¹ It is then that Elijah experiences the discouragement of his life. Eventually he finds himself alone: 'I am the only one left and they want to kill me'.⁹² And from the 'all', the entire people of the preceding chapter, Elijah is now left with 'nothing'. The prophet, who has never known compromise in his own life, falls from the height to the depths. He who was the servant of Yahweh⁹³ now withdraws: he was afraid and fled for his life.⁹⁴ Whereas at the outset of his mission all was directed by Yahweh, Elijah now acts on his own initiative. Full of fear, he is no longer the servant of Yahweh: 'Yahweh, I have had enough. Take my life'; and we are given the profound reason: 'I am no better than my ancestors'.⁹⁵ Like other prophets before him, he too had dreamed of bringing back Israel to Yahweh. Elijah, active and dynamic yet impulsive and headstrong, finally realizes that man remains powerless, that he is no better than his predecessors, that apostolic work can result in failure. After experiencing great successes, it now seems to him that he has missed the direction of his life and that there is nothing left for him. He is physically and morally done for.⁹⁶

The man may give up and resign his charge; but he is pursued by the One who chooses him as an apostle and to whom he has pledged himself: 'Get up and eat'. The Lord once again assumes the guidance of his life, but his response remains imperfect: 'He eats and drinks and then lies down again'; he wants quiet and yields to the temptation to settle down. God calls again; 'Get up and eat or

⁹⁰ 1 Kg 18, 39. 'But saints do not triumph so easily or so violently. There was something impure about this ecstasy and this massacre. The prophet risked relying on his power as a hero'. Steinmann *op. cit.*, p 103.

⁹¹ 1 Kg 19, 2.

⁹² 1 Kg 19, 10, 14.

⁹³ 1 Kg 17, 1; 18, 15.

⁹⁴ 1 Kg 19, 3.

⁹⁵ 1 Kg 19, 4.

⁹⁶ Cf de Vaux, R.: 'Le cycle d'Elie dans les livres des Rois', in *Elie le Prophète* (Bruges, 1956), tom 1, p 66, note c.

the journey will be too long for you'.⁹⁷ One failure does not end a mission; the journey must continue. The apostolate demands continuous progress; there can be no balking in the life of one who has here no lasting city. The Lord demands perseverance and fidelity, not surrender. So the prophet's response is the same: 'he gets up and eats . . . he walks', he again becomes the wanderer. He presents himself before God in this same attitude of total donation. His flight into the desert, where he has sought refuge and oblivion, now becomes a pilgrimage, a new conversion; 'he walks for forty days and forty nights until he reaches Horeb, the mountain of God'. He resorts to the very place where the covenant was made; he relives the history of his people but in an inverse order;⁹⁸ he will plunge once again into the very heart of the alliance.

Will his life now be a retreat into the desert, consecrated solely to the Lord? There on Mount Sinai he meets God much more intimately than on the occasion of his spectacular exploits at Carmel. 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' Is this really the prophet's place? Is the place of an apostle in a cave, in a desert? Discouragement has brought him there. 'I was filled with jealous zeal',⁹⁹ 'I am the only one left'. The absolute donation of self, the complete refusal to compromise, the zeal that animates him, all have now left him. He has known the unbearable weight of absolute loneliness. What will Yahweh answer? He withdraws nothing from his first call and its exigencies, but, surprisingly enough, he demands conversion and calls for fidelity: 'Go back by the same way'.¹⁰⁰ Now his vocation is renewed. The prophet's place is among the men to whom he was sent. Elijah is once again faced with the choice of 'all or nothing'; he chooses 'all'. This uncompromising character, prone to extremes, does not know that he was not alone in the moment of his discouragement. After all, there are always, among any people, some who are good and others less so. There are still some just men: 'seven thousand in Israel: all the knees that have not bent before Baal and all the lips that have not kissed him'.¹⁰¹

But it is good for the apostle to have collaborators who will share

⁹⁷ 1 Kg 19, 5-7.

⁹⁸ Elijah's forty days and nights in the desert, nourished by Yahweh and menaced by Jezebel, resumes the history of the people's forty years in the desert, nourished by Yahweh and menaced by Egypt.

⁹⁹ Or 'I have been a very fanatic for Yahweh': so Gray, J.: *I and II Kings* (London, 1964).

¹⁰⁰ 1 Kg 19, 15. The verb *shûb* is a play on the literal meaning of 'going back' and the technical 'conversion'.

¹⁰¹ 1 Kg 19, 18.

and assure the continuity of his work, to know that what has been begun will be continued. Yahweh will give him Elisha; 'Elisha then rose, and followed Elijah and became his servant'.¹⁰²

The prophet's life continues as it had begun, under the Lord's guidance, with the summons to continual departures: 'Up, go down...'¹⁰³ 'Up! go... And Elijah set out';¹⁰⁴ and this, even though the missions are fraught with dangers: 'Go down with him. Do not be afraid of him... He rises and accompanies him to the king'.¹⁰⁵ Thus he remains a sign of contradiction; the one whom people accept or reject: 'Ahab said to Elijah, So you have found me out, my enemy!'¹⁰⁶

The mission of the prophet Elijah, Yahweh's servant, burning with jealous zeal for his God, is under the sign of all or nothing, both in his own life and in the demands he makes upon others. Such a character is more vulnerable at the moment of failure. Elijah was profoundly disappointed; he even became discouraged and knew the weakness of flight. But this discouragement and this flight did not lead to defection. Thanks to a new conversion, a deeper understanding of the sense of God, he has the courage to pull himself together, and so to remain *faithful* to his mission and to his vocation.

Jeremiah's endurance of frustration

The character of Jeremiah is well known to us, and much study has been devoted to his psychological development.¹⁰⁷ It will suffice for us to point out a few aspects of his life, which show that he too had experience of the most profound discouragement through a series of frustrations.

Already in the account of his vocation we note the prophet's sensitive character.¹⁰⁸ Like Moses, he hesitates to accept his vocation; 'Ah, Lord Yahweh, look, I do not know how to address the people'.¹⁰⁹ The reason he gives for his reluctance to accept the prophetic mission is not so much felt unworthiness as diffidence. 'I am a child (*na'ar*)', he says – meaning a young man in his

¹⁰² 1 Kg 19, 21.

¹⁰³ 1 Kg 21, 18.

¹⁰⁴ 2 Kg 1, 3-4.

¹⁰⁵ 2 Kg 1, 15.

¹⁰⁶ 1 Kg 21, 20.

¹⁰⁷ Cf Skinner, J.: *Prophecy and Religion: Studies in the Life of Jeremiah* (Cambridge, 1963); Vawter, B.: *The Conscience of Israel* (New York, 1961), pp 237-77; Von Rad, G.: *Old Testament Theology*, Vol II (New York, 1965); Gelin, A.: 'Jérémie', in *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément*, IV 1948), cols 858-89.

¹⁰⁸ Jer 1, 4-10.

¹⁰⁹ Jer 1, 6.

early twenties. I am still too young. I have not sufficient experience, my word will have no weight. Again, we see throughout the text that human qualities are not of paramount importance; God can choose the instrument he wishes. God will be with the prophet because he has chosen him from the beginning: 'I knew you . . . I consecrated you . . . I have appointed you . . . I am with you 'I am putting my words into your mouth'. And so, 'go now'.¹¹⁰

Jeremiah accepts and begins his ministry with the enthusiasm of every young apostle.¹¹¹ Later, he will recall this joy. 'When your words came, I devoured them; your word was my delight and the joy of my heart'.¹¹² But with the years, difficulties pile up. When he is about forty years of age, he passes through a dark period of his life, a period that may well be called his 'Gethsemane'. In his 'confessions',¹¹³ he reveals to us the innermost thoughts of his heart during this time. The question recurs as a refrain, 'Why?'¹¹⁴ He no longer understands, he who has spent all his life in the service of the Lord: 'Truthfully, Yahweh, have I not done my best to serve you? Why now these difficulties? Why is my suffering continual?'¹¹⁵

The first difficulty which causes him suffering is why the prophetic mission so often consists in preaching 'against'. 'Every time I speak the word, I have to howl and proclaim: Violence and ruin!'¹¹⁶ Why does the preaching of prophets and envoys of God so often consist in denouncing sin, in announcing chastisement and judgment and in pleading for conversion? Why must they so often go against the current? It is not that they feel superior to others, adopting a haughty attitude toward the people of God, for the very awareness of sin is already a cause of suffering to them: 'My heart is broken within me. I tremble in all my bones. I am like a drunken man, a man overcome with wine'.¹¹⁷ When the prophet sees his

¹¹⁰ Jer 1, 3, 9, 7.

¹¹¹ 'Jeremiah is only thirty at this time; hence it is not surprising that youthful traits are noticeable in him: the overloaded character of his early preaching, the marked influence of earlier prophets, the illusions'. Cf Gelin *art. cit.*, col 876.

¹¹² Jer 15, 16.

¹¹³ These confessions comprise: 11, 18-12, 6; 15, 10-21; 17, 12-18; 18, 18-23; 20, 7-18. Cf Behler, G. M.: *Les Confessions de Jérémie* (Maredsous, 1959), and 'Vocation menacée et renouvelée: Jer 15, 10-11, 15-21', in *Verbum Salutis* 560 (1968), pp 539-67; Leclercq, J.: 'Les Confessions de Jérémie', in *Etudes sur les prophètes d'Israel* (Paris, 1954), pp 111-45.

¹¹⁴ Jer 12, 1; 15, 18.

¹¹⁵ Jer 15, 11, 18. 'As the child of his age, it was no longer possible for Jeremiah to resign himself to God's will. He had to ask questions, he had to know'. Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p 202.

¹¹⁶ Jer 20, 8.

¹¹⁷ Jer 23, 9.

people's suffering caused by the divine punishment, he suffers again: 'I am in anguish, I writhe with pain! Walls of my heart! My heart is throbbing'.¹¹⁸ 'Sorrow overtakes me, my heart fails me'.¹¹⁹ Yet the prophet must urge men on, for he knows they are weak and so easily prone to evil. 'Well you know, Yahweh, the course of man is not in his control, nor is it in man's power to guide his own steps along the way! Correct us, Yahweh!'¹²⁰ To preach 'against' is sometimes risky, as, for example, at the time of his famous discourse against the temple.¹²¹ The people are hostile to those who come to disturb certain customs and practices. The prophet is truly a sign of contradiction: 'a man of strife and of dissension'.¹²² Yet he must speak even at the risk of his life.¹²³

He has experienced another kind of suffering: while still a young prophet he had pledged himself to the reform of Deuteronomy, which aimed at centralizing worship in the temple of Jerusalem¹²⁴ and at deepening fidelity to the law.¹²⁵ But as so often happens, this reform, this *aggiornamento* enthusiastically begun, does not go right to the heart of things. Jeremiah is disappointed. Later he will preach that true renewal does not consist in such or such exterior change but rather in an interior change, a conversion of the heart.¹²⁶ Not only is it a matter of his own disappointment; there is the fact that his family is displeased. That sacerdotal family of Anothoth, living in the local sanctuary, is threatened in its very existence by the suppression of the local sanctuaries in favour of the temple at Jerusalem. It is not surprising, therefore, that they oppose Jeremiah.¹²⁷

Lastly there is his celibacy. 'You must not take a wife or have son or daughter in this place'.¹²⁸ Besides natural regrets entailed by celibacy, he thus becomes an exception, a sign of contradiction

¹¹⁸ Jer 4, 19.

¹¹⁹ Jer 8, 18.

¹²⁰ Jer 10, 23-4. 'Salvation history, the *Heilsgeschichte*, is retrospective. God's plan and its meaning in history only become clear in its fulfilment. The Old Testament gives us mostly a "history of judgment", an *Unheilsgeschichte*'. R. de Vaux, 'God's Presence and Absence in History: the Old Testament view', in *Concilium* 5 (1969), p 11.

¹²¹ Jer 7, 1 ff.

¹²² Jer 15, 10.

¹²³ Jer 26, 1 ff. On the occasion of the same discourse in the temple, and on others - e.g. 26, 9: 'the people were all crowding round Jeremiah', which recalls the sort of suffering and pressures Moses had to endure.

¹²⁴ Deut 11, 1-14.

¹²⁵ Deut 12, 2 ff.

¹²⁶ Jer 31, 31-4; 32, 37-41. For the relationship between Jeremiah and the deuteronomistic reform, Cf Robert, A.: 'Jérémie et la réforme deutéronomique d'après Jérémie, 11, 1-14', in *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 31 (1943), pp 5-16; Cazelles, H.: 'Jérémie et le Deutéronome', *ibid.* 38 (1951), pp 5-36: 'He and his friends must have lost a few of the illusions of youth'.

¹²⁷ Jer 11, 18 ff.

¹²⁸ Jer 16, 2.

for his contemporaries. Because he is unlike others, he cannot live and act like others. 'Go into no house where there is mourning . . . do not enter a house where there is feasting . . .'.¹²⁹

Because of this series of daily frustrations in his apostolate, because of the opposition of the people and of his own family and the absence of the consolations of a home, Jeremiah feels lonely. He knows too the loneliness of God's envoy: 'With your hand on me, I held myself aloof'.¹³⁰ At such times, doubts arise as to his vocation. Has he made a mistake? Or rather, has God deceived him? 'Do you mean to be for me a deceptive stream with inconstant waters?'¹³¹ Has God been faithful to his pledge to be with the prophet? He had said that he was too young, without experience, that he should have waited, for he did not really know what he was doing. Yet it seems to him that God forced him: 'You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me, you were the stronger', like the young girl seduced by fine promises that prove to be unavailing afterwards.¹³² I did not expect this. Life has changed, circumstances have changed. Is life still worth-while?¹³³

In these times of discouragement, what will his decision be, defection or fidelity? Jeremiah reveals to us not only his complaints, his disappointments and discouragement, but also another facet of his soul. His vocation has affected the innermost depths of his being. Crises may arise, problems also, but his vocation has marked him for life. All in all, he has no choice, he cannot reject it: 'I used to say, I will not think about him, I will not speak in his name any more'.¹³⁴ It is the temptation of out and out defection or of a still more dangerous alienation, that of no longer preaching in Yahweh's name but in his own, of saying what will please men, as false prophets do:¹³⁵ 'Let the prophet who has had a dream tell the

¹²⁹ Jer 16, 5, 8. Jeremiah was denied this consolation (of a home). At an age when the oriental thinks of marriage, he was wedded to his profession. In his forties, his celibacy an increasingly heavy burden, found in the signs of the times a providential justification; it became a sort of symbolic state, like the marriage of Hosea. St Paul also justifies celibacy because of the 'present necessity' (I Cor 7, 5-9). If the expression is obscure, Jeremiah illustrates it most forcefully: the sweet life has no place in a collapsing world'. Gelin, *Jérémie*, pp 109-110.

¹³⁰ Jer 15, 17. 'More than others he has burnt his boats for the love of Yahweh'. Because his trust is all in him he must live in danger and loneliness.

¹³¹ Jer 15, 18.

¹³² Jer 20, 7. 'The word indicates the wheedling manoeuvres used to seduce a young girl: You took advantage of my simplicity'. Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p 204.

¹³³ Jer 15, 10; 20, 14-18.

¹³⁴ Jer 20, 9.

¹³⁵ Jer 23, 9 ff.

dream as his own! Let him who receives a word from me deliver it accurately! What have wheat and straw in common?'¹³⁶ But such defection would be useless. 'I certainly never sent them or commissioned them and they serve no good purpose for this people'.¹³⁷ Instead of defecting, Jeremiah is impelled by an irresistible inward force: 'Then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me, I could not bear it'.¹³⁸ He cannot help but speak. It is then that Jahweh reappears in his life in a new way, like a renewal of his first vocation but now addressed to a man more mature, one who understands what an apostolic life means. God does not lessen his demands. Quite the contrary. The prophet's life is not an easy life, nor will it become so; it will become even more exacting. The struggle is just beginning: 'If you find it exhausting to race against men on foot, how will you compete with horses? If you are not secure in a peaceful country, how will you manage in the thickets along the Jordan'?.¹³⁹ What God asks of his apostle is not self-pity, attributing to others the cause of his difficulties, but rather conversion and purification of the initial gift. He asks him to abandon himself totally, to place absolute confidence in him: 'If you return, I will take you back into my service and if you express noble thoughts rather than despicable ones, you shall be as my own mouth. They will come back to you and you will not be obliged to return to them'.¹⁴⁰ It is not up to the prophet to place himself on a moral level with others; they must rise to the level of the prophet of Yahweh. God's demands increase. So also do his promises: 'I will make you a bronze wall fortified against this people . . . I am with you to save you and to deliver you'.¹⁴¹

A new invitation is thus addressed to the apostle; it is not less exacting. Jeremiah's answer will be *fidelity*. He will start the last phase of his apostolic life with a mature and confident faith which expresses itself in a message of hope in this troubled period for Israel. Yet he will continue to suffer and to experience persecution.¹⁴²

¹³⁶ Jer 23, 28.

¹³⁸ Jer 20, 9; cf 23, 29.

¹⁴⁰ Jer 15, 19. 'The divine response is analogous to that given in chapter 12. It is a supreme decree, a paradoxical response. He who complained that his vocation was too heavy a cross is consoled by the promise that he will be able to take up his cross anew and keep on carrying it'. Behler, *op. cit.*, p 27.

¹⁴² Jer 37, 3 ff. 'The period of maturity culminates in formulae of hope and the victory of faith. Even as Jerusalem is falling, the transition from the fulfilled order to a superior spiritual order will begin'. Gelin, *art. cit.*, col 876.

¹³⁷ Jer 23, 32.

¹³⁹ Jer 12, 5.

¹⁴¹ Jer 15, 20.

Conclusion

The lives of these three men of God, Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah, show that the Lord's call, sometimes accepted with fear and hesitation, is followed by a period of enthusiasm in his service; but that, little by little, difficulties arise, culminating in a crisis of vocation, usually after several years. These men have experienced the noonday devil. In such a crisis they are afflicted by a loneliness which is almost unbearable: they believe themselves to be abandoned both by God and by men; and their life seems no longer to make any sense. Death, they feel, would be preferable. The difficulties facing each one may differ: criticisms may become unbearable as they were for Moses; failure and disappointments may occur, as in the case of Elijah; or the inevitable frustrations of the apostolic life, the fruitlessness of reform, the exacting demands of celibacy, may drive a man to breaking-point, as was the case with Jeremiah. So we begin to write others off like Moses, to lose faith in ourselves like Elijah, or even in God like Jeremiah. In all such situations, the ultimate question is, to give up or to remain faithful: these are the only options left to one bound by a previous irrevocable decision. The right choice is nothing other than the renewal of the first response: the choice of persevering fidelity. Such a choice demands a new conversion: to re-establish oneself in an attitude of service, a definitive return to the One who is always faithful. 'I will betroth you to myself with faithfulness'.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Hos 2, 22. The substance of this article was published in french in *Revue du Clergé Africain*, 25 (1970), pp 496-514.