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## Old Testament Problems

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place in industrial development, but individuals, groups of them, pooling their talents and capital, have an even more legitimate role in economic expansion. Projects of magnitude have been promoted by private enterprise. It must be done, it can be done—and we can do it.

SIXTO K. ROXAS

## Old Testament Problems

To know the answer or to know where to find it, is the whole secret of knowledge.—*Dr. Johnson*

The early chapters of the Book of Genesis continue to provide puzzling problems for even the professionally trained reader. Not long ago a busy parish priest passed on to the local seminary for solution a question proposed to him by one of his parishioners. Does the Old Testament, the inquirer wished to know, reckon years in the same way as we do? The bible tells us that Mathusale lived 969 *years*. Newspapers report that Magsaysay was 49 *years* old when he died. Does the word *years* have the same meaning in both statements? If so, how are we to explain the extraordinary length of Mathusale's life?

Similar problems, derived from the same biblical source, are discussed even in the halls of the national legislature. Between senate sessions one senator recently asked another: How is an intelligent Catholic supposed to interpret the account of Noe's ark? Did the ark include among its passengers animals indigenous to the Philippines? How were they ever captured, cared for, fed? How could an ark have been built big enough to carry two of every known species of animal?

The year for Mathusale was neither notably longer nor shorter than it was for Magsaysay. The Hebrew year contained 12 lunar months, totalling 364 days, 8 hours, 48 minutes, 34 seconds. The problem of the first questioner lies not in the meaning of the word *years*, but in the meaning of the number. Hebrews more often than not used numbers as symbols rather than as exact mathematical quantities. Nothing in Catholic teaching requires us to believe that Mathusale lived precisely 969 years. Nor is it necessary for a Catholic even though he be a senator to maintain that carabaos held a prideful place on the passenger list for the maiden voyage of Noe's ark.

That does not mean that the bible has erred. Catholic *are* obliged to believe in the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures. But it does mean that before we charge the bible with error or absurdity we must make sure we are interpreting it correctly. And that is not always easy. The bible itself warns us of that. "In his (Saint Paul's) letters, there are some passages hard to understand. The unlearned and the unsteady twist the meaning of these to their

own destruction, as they do also the other Scriptures" (II Peter 3/15). Preparation and guidance are necessary for reliably fruitful reading of the bible. Nor are the oldest books always the safest guides. Amazing advances have been made in practically all branches of biblical study during the past thirty years. A Catholic who wishes to read his bible intelligently therefore should be acquainted with some of the more recent publications of Catholic scriptural scholars.

A few that may be recommended are: Dom Celestin Charlier, *The Christian Approach to the Bible* (translated by H. J. Richards and B. Peters), Westminster, Md., Newman, 1958, 298 pp., \$4.00; John L. McKenzie, *The Two-Edged Sword, An Interpretation of the Old Testament*, Milwaukee, Bruce, second printing, 1957, 317 pp., \$4.50. The views expressed in both these books are so progressive that they not infrequently arouse a reaction of shocked surprise in readers familiar only with the older and more conservative Catholic viewpoints. Yet the second has been hailed by Catholic reviewers as "the best study of the Old Testament that exists" for the general reader. And of the first, Monsignor Barton, British consultor of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, writes: "As one who is frequently asked to name a volume that will assist all earnest readers of the Bible, I have constantly recommended . . . Dom Charlier's book."

More pertinent to the problems proposed at the beginning of these notes are three works concerned with the interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. Bruce Vawter, C.M., *A Path through Genesis*, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1956, 308 pp., \$4.00, provides a fairly full and up-to-date commentary on the entire Book of Genesis, while the same author's 48-page pamphlet, *Does Science Prove the Bible Wrong?*, Religious Information Bureau, 4422 Lindell Blvd., St. Louis, 8, Missouri, presents in popular style, supported by competent scholarly research, acceptable Catholic interpretations of such biblical accounts as that of the creation, the fall of man, the longevity of the patriarchs, and the flood. The third book is the work of a French priest-professor: Charles Hauret, *Beginnings: Genesis and Modern Science* (translated and adapted from the fourth French edition by E.P. Emmans, O.P.), Dubuque, The Priory Press, 1955, 304 pp.

Hauret's book should have special interest for teachers of catechism and religion classes. Problems of biblical interpretation beset the catechist (or should) from the moment he begins to tell the story of creation to his wholly unsophisticated audience. How can the biblical stories of the creation and the fall of man be presented to undiscriminating youngsters in such a way as not to confuse the essential teaching of the bible with the literary vehicle by which that teaching is conveyed? "It is imprudent in the extreme to propose as historical reality certain symbols that are but the envelope of religious truth, for example, the creation of woman from the man's rib, or the eating

of the forbidden fruit." Hauret warns: ". . . some aspects of our catechetical teaching should be corrected. We simply must not allow our children to think that man was created by God '4000 years ago', or that according to the bible the world was made in 'six' periods, no more, no less. It is dangerous to declare without any reservations that the Creator molded a human statue out of clay; our listeners will think of vacationers sculpting sand figures on the beach . . . What then is to be done?"

In the final chapter of his book, Hauret makes practical suggestions and gives concrete examples of how the teaching contained in the first chapters of Genesis might be proposed to a grammar-school class, a discussion group, and an ordinary church congregation.

J. J. KAVANAGH, S.J.

### *Democracy at the Grass Roots*

Still unnoticed perhaps by many of the reading public are two significant pieces of legislation which were passed by Congress without the stormy debates characteristic of the last regular and special sessions. They are the Local Autonomy Act (R.A. 2264) and the Barrio Charter (R.A. 2370). Both of them are designed to bring democracy within the reach of the common man.

Centralization of authority in the national government, which some consider a necessary consequence of a unitary form of government, has long been the object of serious criticism and, as early as 1947, attempts were made to formulate a local autonomy bill. The strongest expression of the desire of local leaders for greater freedom was perhaps Sergio Osmeña Jr.'s paraphrase of Quezon to the effect that local leaders would prefer "a government run like hell by local officials to a government run like heaven by national officials." Osmeña, then City Mayor of Cebu and Chairman of the League of Provincial Governors and City Mayors, was at the head of the movement working for the introduction into Congress of a local autonomy bill. The movement had the support of President Magsaysay who in his 1957 State-of-the-Nation Message to Congress expressed his desire to give greater stress to local autonomy. The same sentiment was reiterated by President García in his 1959 State-of-the-Nation Message.

The Local Autonomy Act is evidently the result of compromise. Local officials would certainly want to have greater freedom than that granted by the Act, but there is always the question of how much freedom Congress would be willing to grant. The Act, for instance, does not contain the powers of appointment given to local officials in the 1957 draft which local leaders already tried to pare down to a