

CARMELITE ORIGINS: PART I

A STARTING POINT

We begin our investigation into Carmelite origins by citing two texts of undeniable authenticity and of more or less definite date.

The first is taken from the Carmelite Rule, written by St. Albert of Jerusalem for a group of hermits living on Mount Carmel. Its date was some time between 1206 and 1214, possibly 1209. In the prologue we read: 'Albert, called by God's favour to be Patriarch of the Church of Jerusalem, bids health in the Lord and the blessing of the Holy Spirit to his beloved sons in Jesus Christ, Brocard and the other hermit-brothers under obedience to him, who live near the spring of Elijah, on Mount Carmel'.(The *Rule of St. Albert*, p.79 ed. Fr. Bede Edwards O.D.C.)

The second text is from a historical narrative compiled by Jacques de Vitry, Bishop of Acre, about 1216. He is speaking in somewhat rhetorical language of the new flowering of religious life which took place in the Holy Land in the early 13th century, making special mention of the eremitical life which had grown up there. He speaks of one group living in the desert where Our Lord had fasted. He adds: 'Others, in imitation of the holy anchorite, the prophet Elijah, led solitary lives on Mount Carmel, especially on that part of it that overlooks the city of Porphyria, now called Haifa. They lived near the fountain called Elijah's Well, not far from the Convent of St. Margaret the Virgin, where in little comb-like cells, those bees of the Lord laid up sweet spiritual honey'.

(*History of Jerusalem*, quoted in *MHC*)

From these two texts, it is obvious that a community of hermits were settled on Mount Carmel, near the fountain of Elijah, some time before the year 1216.

Who were these hermit-brothers?

How did they come to live together on Mount Carmel?

When did they first come there to live?

These are among the crucial questions that confront the student of Carmelite history and a great deal has been written both in olden times and more recently about this phase of the Order's history.

Let us begin with an outline of the answers that were given in the past and were accepted as official statements up to very recent times.

THE TRADITIONAL ACCOUNT AFFIRMED

The constitutions of 1281 are the oldest set preserved. Here is a paragraph from their Prologue (Santi del Carmelo p.25).

'To give a reply to those who ask how our Order began and why we are called Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, this is what you must say: We declare, bearing witness to the truth, that from the time when the Prophets Elijah and Elisha dwelt devoutly on Mount Carmel; the Holy Fathers both of the Old and New Testament, whom the contemplation of divine things drew to the solitude of the same mountain, have without any doubt led praiseworthy lives there, by the fountain of Elijah, in holy penitence, which they maintained faithfully and successfully.

Their successors after the Incarnation of Christ built an oratory there in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary and took her for their patron. Later on, by privilege of the Holy See, they called themselves Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel'. (*MHC*, p.20: also, *Anal. OC XV*, p.208)

Another text is from a sermon preached in the Carmelite Church at Avignon by 'Armachanus', Le.Richard FitzRalph, Archbishop of Armagh. The date is December 8th, 1342. The sermon itself is on the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady but it contains the following interesting paragraph: 'You are wondering why I refer to the Carmelites as the special and ancient Order of our Lady but if you were to know the reasons, you would wonder no more. Trustworthy histories of Elijah and Elisha tell us how they often dwelt

on Mount Carmel, three leagues distant from Nazareth, the city of Our Lady. And saintly men continued to live there in solitude, until the time of Our Saviour. At that time, the hermits were converted by the preaching of the Apostles. On one side of the mountain, they built a Church or oratory in honour of the Holy Virgin, in a spot which, they had been told, she often frequented in her life, with her maiden~ companions. For this reason, they were the

first among all religious Orders to be Galled Children of the Blessed Mary of Mount Carmel. From the early days of the Church, they worked with alacrity to preach the Gospel and in later times they were given a rule of life by John, Patriarch of Jerusalem, based on that of St. Paulinus and St. Basil. Thus, quite justly, this Order enjoys the honour of being the oldest of them all.' (see *Anal. OCD* 1932: III, p. 166).

There is little doubt that both St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross accepted unquestioningly this 'official' version. (For St. Teresa, see Peers II, p.306, 348: III, 145, 156, 289. For St. John of the Cross *Asc.* 11,8,4; 20,2; 24,3; *Asc.* III 42,5: *S.C.* 14,14).

The former Constitutions of our Order (revised in 1940 and drawn up once again in revised form in 1976) speak as follows in the Prologue: 'The Prophets Elijah and Elisha instituted the Carmelite way of life not by what they put into writing but by their manner of living; they handed it on to their successors to be observed faithfully. With the coming of the light of tire Gospel, the descendants of these great Fathers of ours followed in their footsteps, both in the East and in the West.'

OFFICIAL VERSION OF HOW OUR ORDER ORIGINATED

The Carmelite Order derives its origin ultimately from the 'Sons of the Prophets', a kind of religious community which originated with Samuel but was particularly associated with Elijah and Elisha.

At some period of their lives, both Elijah and Elisha lived

on Mount Carmel and the institute which they founded or organized was a kind of Old Testament contemplative Order, whose principal role it was to worship the one true God and to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

In later days, some of the 'minor prophets' like Jonah, Obediah and Micah were members of this institute.

Possibly the Rechabites too, by reason of their ascetical ways of life, were associated with it.

The wife of Elijah founded a similar institute for women.

The 'Order' continued to exist on Mount Carmel in uninterrupted succession, down to the time of St. John the Baptist who was himself a member of it and who came 'in the spirit and power of Elijah'.

The 'Sons of the Prophets' had some devotees even among the Greeks. On the authority of Jamblichus (c. 300 B.C.), we are told that the philosopher Pythagoras retired to Mount Carmel, 'the most sacred mountain of all, and inaccessible to common folk' (*Les Plus Vieux Textes*, p.253).

At the time of Christ, the 'Sons of the Prophets' were known to the Jews as Therapeats or Essenes (monks of Qumran). Their way of life is described by Philo, Josephus and the Roman writer Pliny.

This phase of the Carmelite Order was known as its 'prophetic era'.

Some or all of the monks on Mount Carmel were converted by the preaching of St. Peter at the first Pentecost. From that time or soon afterwards, the 'Greek era' begins. The Carmelites were now Christian monks with a special devotion to Our Lady.

About the year 400 A.D., the Carmelites were given a rule of life by John, 44th Patriarch of Jerusalem. It took the form of a long mystical interpretation of the life of Elias the Prophet. Since by this time they were Greek-speaking, this 'rule' was written in Greek.

Many ancient hermits and saints were Carmelites. The list includes St. Basil and St. Patrick's predecessor on the Irish mission, Palladius.

With the arrival of the Crusaders and medieval pilgrims in the Holy Land, the community on Mount Carmel was gradually Latinised. To meet their needs, Aymeric de Malafayde, Patriarch of Antioch, had the 'rule' of the Patriarch John translated into Latin, some time before 1187 when he died. This marks the beginning of the 'Latin era'.

A pilgrim monk from Patmos, Phocas by name, wrote of a white-haired Calabrian monk who, inspired by the example of Elijah, had gathered about him a small community and was living with them on the site of an old monastery which he had partially restored. The date of this entry is given as A.D. 1185 (see *Les Plus Vieux Textes* p.58-59).

Some time during the first decade of the 13th century, the leader of the monks on Mount Carmel requested Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, to give them a rule of life according to their manner of living. To this request, Albert acceded.

The Carmelites, though now entirely Latinised, continued to venerate the Prophets Elijah and Our Lady. A small document known as the last Testament of St. Brocard, reads: 'Know, my brothers, that God has called us to be one of the orders of hermits By His grace. too we are known as Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Take good care, when I am gone, not to lay false claims to that title. Stand firm in what is good; reject riches; shun the world; model your lives on the example of Mary and Elijah.' The date assigned to this (spurious) document was 1220 (see old Breviary for feast of St. Brocard).

In the years that followed the giving of the Rule, the Carmelites had much to suffer at the hands of the Turks and eventually, about 1235, decided that some of their number should seek a new and safer home in Europe.

Gradually and in the face of much opposition, they secured a footing in Cyprus, Sicily, France and England. By 1247, they were sufficiently well established to call a General

Chapter at Aylesford, in England. At this Chapter, St. Simon Stock was chosen as Prior General. As a result of decisions made at Aylesford, the Order was placed among the Mendicant Orders and Pope Innocent IV sanctioned some adaptations of the Rule in 1248 (see St. Teresa's *Life* in Peers I, p.259).

But the Order's troubles were not yet at an end. In 1251, when difficulties were at their height, Our Lady appeared to St. Simon Stock in Cambridge and encouraged him to persevere, giving the Scapular as a pledge of her protection. St. Simon's secretary, Peter Swanington, wrote a first-hand account of this event. It is also recorded by John Grossi in his *Viridarium* about 1410.

On the 3rd March, 1322, Pope John XXII issued a Papal Bull, announcing the Sabbatine Privilege connected with the wearing of the Scapular. 'The one who dies wearing the Scapular worthily will be liberated from Purgatory on the Saturday following his death.'

TWO CARMELITE PROPAGANDISTS

1. The tendency to claim for the Carmelite Order saints and other persons of renown in the ancient world came to a climax in the *Paradisus Carmelitici Decoris*, written by a French Carmelite~ Alegre de Casanate in 1639 and condemned for its extravagant triumphalism by the Sorbonne in 1642. It is a totally uncritical history of the Carmelite Order. Notwithstanding its worthlessness, it was used in the older editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as a source for articles on the Carmelite Order. In the more recent editions, these articles are written by competent Catholic scholars.
2. A renaissance poet of the Order, Bl. Baptist Mantuan, wrote a number of tributes to Our Lady, in prose and verse. He mentioned the 'visits' of Mary to Carmel. It was a fairly common theme in Carmelite Marian writings of that period of history and finds an echo in the Sermon of Armachanus, quoted above, These narratives were not historical, but

simply expressions of an intense devotion to Our Lady, a naive but picturesque way of indicating that Carmelites lived in a very real sense in her presence. We should judge them as poetic or devotional writings not as serious history. (See *Anal. OCD* 1931, IV p.243: Also *Speculum Carmelit.* nn.865, 867, 1006, 1490, 1529-1533, 1550).

Mantuan accepts the traditional view of the Order's originating with Elijah. (See *Eclogues* X, line 54: also *De Vita Beata: De Patientia* ii,27 and iii, 31: Alphonsus Book V *Apologia pro Carmelitis*).

In Lezana's *Annals* the origins of the Order are assigned to 'Annus Mundi 3129, ante Christum 930'.

CONCLUSION

In the next chapter, we will attempt to make a short assessment of the 'traditional' version of the Order's history. At this point it is sufficient to say that these medieval histories need to be read both sympathetically and yet critically. On the one hand, they are not a farrago of nonsense; they do contain more than a grain of truth. Moreover, apart from Casante's ludicrous production, they are the work of earnest scholars who possessed a fine sense of loyalty to their Order and what it embodied and signified. They genuinely believed that they were doing it a service by 'proving' the authenticity of some of its age-old traditions. On the other hand, none of these writers had a critical sense of history. Neither had their contemporaries. Their pride in the Order's alleged lineage constrained them to adopt the triumphalistic interpretation of history which was common in former times. It is also well to remember that these writings are a valuable witness to the outlook and attitudes of the age *in which they were actually written*, even if they are of little help in throwing light on the particular age which they purport to describe. In that sense, they are historical documents and we must be grateful to the collectors who went to such pains to assemble and preserve them.