

Rediscovering Old Testament Christianity

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As the third Christian millennium dawns, the Church of Christ has entered into an age of reflection and reminiscence. The religion that began on quiet desert sands with the words of a sacrificial God and spread like wildfire to every corner of a rapidly growing world has entered a time of historical reflection and antiquarian curiosity. Christianity, divided among thousands of varieties that call themselves by the same name yet preach radically different doctrines, has come to long for the purity of an earlier age, in which the divisive voices of a fallen humanity had not begun to tear themselves away from the pure and undefiled garment of Christ.

This is not the first such "reminiscent phase" in the maturation process of the people of Christ. In the early fourth century, when the holy Emperor and Equal-to-the-Apostles, Constantine the Great, permitted the open practice of Christianity in the Roman Empire and the Church of the Persecution began to surface as the Church of the State, pious believers feared the dilution of Orthodox praxis and self-sacrifice that arose in the free Church, hearkening to earlier days as examples of the true Way.

Today, two full millennia later, similar sentiments abound. The human story since those early days has been full of advances and growth, but has also seen the saddening effects of abundant sin. Now, as the One Church of Christ sits in the midst of a fragmented Christian world, pious souls once again yearn for that early time when Christ's footprints were still fresh upon the soil and the Church lived as He had founded it.

Such a quest to recapture the spirit and devotion of the early Church can be beneficial to the modern world, so long as it does not overly idealize the past or fail to appreciate the ongoing, promise of Christ's presence in the Church and His assurance of her continued spiritual growth. Yet there are dangers that must be avoided in such reflections.

Perhaps the most poignant of these, and unfortunately the least avoided by many Christian groups, is the desire to recapture the faith of

the earliest Christians by creating a Church "based on the New Testament." This aim, as noble as the intentions behind it may be, fails to appreciate the fact that the earliest Christians—those held up as pillars of Orthodoxy and great saints to be emulated by all—understood themselves entirely differently. Far from being a Church "of the New Testament" (which in any case did not exist as such during the first centuries of the Church), the early Christians understood themselves to be the people of the Covenant, of the ancestral and eternal promises of God—of what the world now terms the *Old* Testament.

The Church of the Old Testament

Here was the Scripture of the early Church, the Scripture read by the Incarnate Lord, the Scripture quoted by the Holy Apostles and their successors. Here was the source of models and examples for the Church of Jesus Christ, such that St. Clement of Rome could write in the late first century, "Let us turn to every age that has passed, and learn that, from generation to generation, the Lord has granted a place of repentance to all such as would be converted unto Him" (First Epistle of St. Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, 7).

In the writings of this great and inspired bishop, as well as in the writings of all the early Fathers and Mothers of the Church, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ was the next, great and miraculous step in the sanctification and redemption of humankind—a sanctification begun millennia before in the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Moses; in the holy covenant of God with His chosen people. It was in the context of this history that the early Christians lived, and within its midst that they understood Christ as living, acting, and redeeming. St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in the late second century, exemplifies this understanding when he says of the Apostles that "they exhorted [the people] *out of the prophets*, that the Christ whom God promised to send, He sent in Jesus, whom they crucified and God raised up" (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, iii.12.2).

"Out of the Prophets"—out of the sacred Scriptures known now as "old"—together with the histories, genealogies, legends, revelations, and promises that comprise the holy texts of the first Covenant, the early Church drew its own traditions, understandings,

methods of prayer, liturgical practices, and hopes for the future life. Out of these texts it drew images of Christ, for through the grace of the Holy Spirit it understood the whole Old Testament as the very foundation of genuine Christianity—a Trinitarian work guiding the faithful to a right understanding of their Trinitarian God. The Old Testament was from the first seen as the great contextual source from which God's continued leadership of His Church would be drawn, and in which it would be rooted.

If this, then, was the great textual source for that laudable era in Christian history, then it must also be the source of context and focus for a contemporary Church desirous of a return to the richness of that very era. The holy texts of the New Testament, the lives and writings of God's great saints, the conciliar teachings of the holy Church and the counsel of her bishops must not be seen as a *replacement* for the Scripture called "old," but as its extension and fulfillment. These newer elements of Christian Tradition are truths that cannot be understood without a deep, inner and faithful understanding of and love for the Scripture from which they all have flowed: the Old Testament of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

St. Ignatius expressed this divine reality in the late first or early second century:

If any one preaches the one God of the law and the prophets, but denies Christ to be the Son of God, he is a liar, even as also is his father the devil, and is a Jew falsely so-called [...] If any one confesses Christ Jesus the Lord, but denies the God of the Law and of the Prophets, saying that the Father of Christ is not the Maker of heaven and earth, he has not continued in the truth any more than his father the devil, and is a disciple of [the heretics], not of the Holy Spirit (Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians, 6 [longer version]).

It is the belief of St. Ignatius, of all the Fathers, and of the whole Church that Christianity is none other than the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, borne to new heights through the renewal to life of God's Incarnate Son.

The Christian Old Testament

The Old Testament known to the first centuries of the Church — that of the Septuagint text — was in many ways quite different from that known today by the majority of English-speaking Christians. (See Daniel Lieuwen's article, "Who Decides?" on page 8 of this issue.) The Orthodox Church, however, has always maintained that the older Septuagint text is *the* Christian Old Testament. It is here alone that the full message of the first Scriptures concerning the Trinity, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and salvation can be found.

St. Irenaeus, already mentioned, wrote that "the Apostles [. . .] agree with this aforesaid translation, and the translation harmonizes with the tradition of the Apostles" (St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, iii.21.3), and Justin Martyr would write that "not to [the Jews] but to us [Christians] does the doctrine of the [Septuagint] refer" (Justin Martyr, *Address to the Greeks*, 13).

Sadly, however, discovery of these doctrines has long been limited to those capable of reading either classical Greek, or archaic and largely inaccurate English versions. But in the present day, with multiple projects underway to render the Septuagint Old Testament into accurate contemporary English (including one project being realized within the Orthodox Church itself - see the report by Fr. Jack Sparks on page 11 of this issue), Christians of the English tongue are soon to be presented with a new and certainly God-given opportunity to rediscover their own Old Testament - and find therein the "books relating to our [the Christian] religion" (Justin Martyr, op. cit).

The Christianity of the Old Testament

What shall this rediscovery present to the contemporary Christian who, perhaps for the first time, sets eyes on the oldest version of the Old Testament in his or her own language? For Orthodox

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readers, a new clarity comes to much of Church doctrine when one is at last able to study and absorb the Scriptures from which it was formulated. This will also be the case for Roman Catholics, as the Old Testament canon of this body bears much similarity to that of the Orthodox Septuagint. For Protestant readers, the Septuagint will pose a unique challenge: how to read and understand an Old Testament containing multiple passages—and a collection of entire books—which have never been included in the Protestant canon, but which for two thousand years have been the official Old Testament Scriptures of Orthodox Christianity.

Renewed discussion on foundational Christian ideas cannot help but be a side effect of burgeoning interest in the Septuagint, as this ancient version addresses with some clarity issues that are often obscure (and thus, sadly, historically considered open for interpretation among various Christian bodies) in the Hebrew versions. It is on these very issues that many of the doctrinal discussions of modern Christianity have been based.

Prayer for the Dead

While space and the nature of this article prevent any full examination of the theological issues the Septuagint elucidates, mention of a few such issues will demonstrate the point at hand. First among these is prayer, concerning which there is much witness borne in the Hebrew Old Testament (1 Kings 8:22-53; Psalm 17; Daniel 9; etc.), as well as the New (Matthew 6:114; Philippians 1:3-11; James 5:13-20; etc.).

Yet when questions began to arise, early in the Church's life, concerning prayer for and with those who have fallen asleep in Christ, the issue seemed to become more complicated. This remains so for many of the non-Orthodox churches, especially those subscribing to the notion of *sola scriptura* and finding in Scripture an absence of clear support for this practice. Yet for the Orthodox, there is substantial support of prayer for the dead not only among the extrascriptural writings of the Fathers and the various Councils, but also in the

Scripture of the Old Testament itself.

The book of 2 Maccabees, included in the Septuagint canon of Scripture from the earliest days of the Church, speaks explicitly of this idea on a number of occasions. Perhaps most notable is the reference to Judas Maccabeus and his men praying for their fallen comrades after a sorrowful defeat in battle:

For if [Judas] were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin (2 Maccabees 12:44, 45).

One witnesses in these verses not only a defense of the acceptability of prayer for the dead, but also a powerful confession of faith in the resurrection, even before the days of Christ. It is on account of this pending resurrection, and in the hope that his beloved companions will attain to the Kingdom in its time, that Judas prays for his fallen soldiers. To this day, the Orthodox Church continues in the same tradition, praying on behalf of those who have fallen asleep that sins may be forgiven, and "that the Lord will establish their souls where they just repose . . . where there is neither sickness, nor sorrow, nor sighing, but life everlasting" (from the Orthodox burial service; cf. Isaiah 35).

The Church's ancient tradition of prayer for, with and to the departed — which in the Hebrew versions of the Old Testament finds only vague and somewhat tenuous support — discovers firm and solid grounding in the Septuagint version; and let us not forget that this version is the eldest, and that which was the original Old Testament of Christianity. It is little wonder, then, that contemporary churches based on a different edition of the Scriptures are challenged to find support for this older view in their own texts, and thus have formulated doctrines that differ quite markedly from it. Renewed interest in and accessibility to the Septuagint provides clarity to this traditional practice.

Faith and Works

Another issue upon which substantial light is shed by the textual tradition of the Septuagint version is that of the relationship between works and faith. Dispute over this issue has been formative in the whole history of Christianity in the West since the days of the Protestant Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century; yet in the whole course of Orthodox history it has never played such a major—much less a divisive—part. Even the distinction between faith and works is a false distinction in Orthodox thought, for they are understood as two aspects of a dynamic whole that is the virtuous and holy life.

Though the holy James the Just states precisely this ("faith without works is dead," James 2:17), such New Testament references have been open to much dispute in modern days. Yet for Orthodox Christians, the Old Testament provides overwhelming confirmation in the Septuagint version. The story of Susannah, included as a preamble to the Book of the Prophet Daniel, describes the virtue of a holy life, which is able to overcome—through the action of the divine grace of God— even the slanders of the malicious.[1] One sees clearly the interaction of a deeply rooted belief in God (the so-called "faith" of many traditions) and the living out of life in accordance with the fervent expectation to which that belief gives rise ("works"). Neither the belief nor the action alone is the source of the rich and holy life of Susannah or Daniel, but rather the dynamic interaction of the two, woven into a single garment of personal virtue by the grace of God.

So, too, in the lives and words of the holy Prophets of the Old Testament. These great saints, whose message Christ came not to abolish but to perfect and fulfill (cf. Matthew 5:17-20), teach of belief that leads to action, and action that in turn fosters belief. Thus it is with Jonah, whose lack of devoted belief led to three days in the belly of a whale (Jonah 1:1--2:11 LXX; 1:1-2:10 in the Hebrew versions), and whose lack of servant action led to a restless night beneath the shade of a gourd (Jonah 3:1-4:11).

Thus does Micah's firm belief in the deliverance and future salvation of the Lord lead him to cry out in anticipation of that day in which His chosen people "rise up" and act in righteousness (Micah 7:8-13). Thus does Zephaniah stare upon a fallen people and long for

the return of the true character of human life, in which "all the people may call upon the name of the Lord and serve Him shoulder to shoulder" (Zephaniah 3:9).

All throughout the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and especially as they are clarified in the Septuagint version, one sees the devout life exemplified as the dynamic interaction of action and belief, of *true faith* that is in fact *both* "faith" and "works"— and transcends each of these much-abused terms. So can the holy Apostle Paul echo the words of the Prophet Habbakuk (in Greek, Avakoum) and proclaim that "the righteous shall live by faith" (Galatians 3:11; Habakkuk 2:4), not in the least contradicting James' notable "faith without works is dead" (James 2:20).

So, too, does an understanding of the holy life and the true character of relationship with God as is exemplified in the teaching of the Old Testament, help bring restored meaning to the words of the Savior Himself, whose statements akin to "your faith has saved you" (Luke 7:50) do not outweigh, but rather stand in harmony with His repeated exhortations to "go," "proclaim," "serve," "follow," "love." [2]

The witness of the Old Testament is that the dialectic between faith and works is in fact a false dialectic, a false problem, a misunderstanding of a fundamental issue. Life in the Holy Trinity—and this is ultimately what the whole of the Old Testament is about—is one of complete being, belief as well as action, centered upon the will of a loving and creative God.

Returning to the Old,

Rediscovering the New

As the living Body of Christ enters into its third millennium, it is faced with the many questions accumulated through its two thousand years of growth. It stands at the dawn of a new age, a new generation, anticipating with joy the many blessings to come, yet sorrowing at the sad divisions and dilutions already present in a world called "Christian." It glances back to its early days, now long past, and wonders with longing, "Shall we ever again be one?"

More and more, it is becoming evident that unity among a much-fractured Christian people can only be faithfully and healthfully

restored through a fresh embrace of the essential Christian truths. To this end, a renewed interest in the truly *Christian* Old Testament—the Scriptures foundational in the formation of the doctrines containing these very truths—will be an essential tool. In an era ripe for the teaching of truth, we must not forget the message of the holy Apostle Paul, that "all Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine" (2 Timothy 3:16)—nor that by "Scripture" the Apostle refers specifically to the Old Testament.

Here is the message of truth that con-tian Church. Here is the revelation of Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit and the gracious Father upon which the New Testament builds and the teachings of the Church are founded. Here is the instruction leading to righteousness and holiness, to the sanctification of humanity and the world that Christ's glorious life, death and Resurrection provide.

Here is the message of Life that makes all things new, paradoxically bound in the pages of a covenant called "Old," ready to proclaim that Life to a needy world.

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- 1 In the Septuagint canon, the story of Susannah forms the preamble or "foreword" to the Book of Daniel, immediately preceding the first chapter of that book. Pending the publication and widespread accessibility of the Septuagint in English, the story of Susannah can be found in English Bibles containing the so-called "Apocrypha," where it is known as *The Book of Susannah*, *The Story of Susannah*, or simply *Susannah*.
- 2 Cf. Luke 5:14; 9:57-62; 18:1-8, and a host of other passages in which the healing of the lame, sick and suffering by Christ is proclaimed on account of faith that has shown itself in action (e.g. the persistent widow), and is urged to promote continued virtuous action into the future (e.g. "Go, and sin no more").