

The Place of the Old Testament in the Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church reads the Old Testament (OT) with both faith in Jesus Christ and a desire to understand the Bible with which He and His apostles grew up and from which they prayed and learned and preached. It is helpful for us to seek answers to five questions:

- (1) How did Jesus Christ and His first-century followers see the OT?
- (2) How did the Church Fathers view the OT?
- (3) How do contemporary Orthodox theologians approach the OT?
- (4) How is the OT used in the liturgical services of the Orthodox Church today?
and
- (5) What can we learn today from reading and praying with the OT?

Answering these questions helps us to grow as persons and as Orthodox Christians, as we seek to draw closer to Christ and His Church.

(1) How did Jesus Christ and His first-century followers see the OT?

The first statement that Jesus made about the law of the Jewish people in first-century Palestine was quite clear: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Mt 5.17).¹ Christ set out the two key commandments of the Law:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and will all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets (Mt 22.37-40).

Not only did Jesus Christ Himself recognise that the OT—the only scripture known in first-century Palestine—“must be fulfilled in Me,” but He communicated this understanding to His disciples before the crucifixion (Lk 22.37) and later on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24.13-35). However, as John the Evangelist reflected: “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1.17).

As John D. Franke has written in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament, Vol IV*:

The most influential version of the OT was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint (LXX)... The early Christian church inherited

¹ Biblical quotations are generally drawn from the Revised Standard Version as published by Bible Society.

the LXX from the Jewish tradition as its own Bible. The writers of the NT commonly quoted the OT from it, and the early Christian fathers generally regarded the LXX as the normative form of the OT and rarely consulted the Hebrew text, believing the LXX was inspired by God... (p. xxx).²

The worship of Christ and respect for the OT united the apostles and the early Church.

Earlier, throughout the first six books of the OT six leaders—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (later known as Israel), and then Joseph, Moses and Joshua—gathered and guided their followers to learn that God is One—not many as the Egyptians, Babylonians, Romans, Greeks and many other civilizations falsely believed. Today we retain this faith that God is One; and we have learned in the NT and from the Ecumenical Councils that God is three—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

(2) How did the Church Fathers view the OT?

The Church Fathers saw the OT and the NT as a unity. For example, St Augustine wrote of Psalm 73:

If we distinguish between the two Testaments, Old and New, there are not the same sacraments, nor the same promises; nevertheless, ... when examined, they are either all found to be the same, or there are hardly any in the Gospel which have not been spoken by the Prophets... Grace was enjoined [that is, given] because there is fulfilled through love that which by the letter was being [commanded]: Truth, because there is being rendered [that is, given] that which was promised.³

² Franke continues: “The Christian adoption of the LXX, along with concerns that it was too free in its rendering of the Hebrew, led Jewish scholars to produce several other Greek translations that they regarded as more consonant with the Hebrew Bible. Thus, while the LXX was generally accepted as the standard form of the OT, the Fathers were aware of these other versions and sometimes referred to them”

³ Quotations from the Church Fathers have been drawn from *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, published by InterVarsity Press, with the General Editor, Thomas C. Oden, as well as from *Grace for Grace: The Psalter and the Holy Fathers*, published by Monastery Books, compiled and edited by Johanna Manley. Also of interest is Johanna Manley’s *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox*.

At the same time, there was a deep awareness among the Church Fathers that the OT empowered them through prayer and study to understand the NT. For example, St Augustine wrote of Psalm 77 (78) that Christ:

is himself the bread of heaven that came down from heaven.... This bread was also signified by manna of which it was said, 'He gave them the bread of heaven; people ate the bread of angels' (vv. 24-25). Who can the bread of heaven be, but Christ? But for people to eat the bread of angels, the Lord of angels became a human being. Because if he had not become this, we would not have his flesh; if we did not have his flesh, we would not eat the bread of the altar [that is, the Eucharist].... This is where you are going.... You come through Christ to Christ. How through Christ to Christ? Through Christ the man to Christ the God, through the Word made flesh to the word which in the beginning was God with God (Jn 1.1, 1.14).

That is a powerful insight, true for the apostles, for many Church Fathers and for many of us today: we can reach out "through Christ the man to Christ the God."

This awareness of Jesus Christ as both human and divine led Cassiodorus, founder of a 5th century monastery that preserved many of the texts we read today, to reflect of Psalm 68 (69):

Watchful reader you will find that ... this psalm accords with the Lord's passion.... [The title of this psalm is]: 'For Them that shall be Changed.' This change ... points to the Christian people who have abandoned the wickedness of the old man, and have been changed by the gift of a new birth... We have listened to a psalm ... in which it is clear that the power of His divinity is matched by the humility in His humanity.

That is a balanced Scriptural understanding of Christ who lives throughout the ages in which "the power of His divinity is matched by the humility in His humanity."

(3) How do contemporary Orthodox theologians approach the OT?

In *The Face of Christ in the OT*, the lay Orthodox theologian, Georges A. Barrois, points out that St John Chrysostom urged both men and women of his time to read both the OT and the NT at home. If they complained they were too busy, St John would reply: "

Do not give me any of that shabby nonsense [that] ... to read the Scriptures is not for me, but for those who have renounced the world.... Tossed as we are

on the high seas, pressed by ten thousand hazards, we need... the comfort of the Scriptures.⁴

Citing how Jesus Christ would have read the words of the prophet Isaiah (61.1-2; Lk 4.16-21), Barrois notes that: “We may reasonably assume that the inspired words of the prophets formed the very program of Christ’s preaching in the synagogues of Galilee during the years of his public life....” As Barrois has written in *Jesus Christ and the Temple*, “the religion of the patriarchs is, in essence, genuine monotheism, not an ideology.”⁵

A comprehensive study of the place of the OT in the Orthodox Church has been written by Father Eugen J. Pentiuc (Professor Emeritus of the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology) in *The OT in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*.⁶ Father Eugen begins his study by citing an early Church Father:

If the faithful are keeping vigil in the church, David is first, middle, and last. If at dawn anyone wishes to sing hymns, David is first, middle, and last. In the holy monasteries, among the ranks of the holy warriors, David is first, middle, and last. In the convents of the virgins, who are imitators of Mary, David is first, middle, and last. In the deserts, where men [and women] hold converse with God, David is first, middle, and last.⁷

This perspective of prayer with the Psalms is also strongly affirmed by Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra in *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, when he writes of Psalm 83 (84), verse 3b (“My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God”):

Between the mind and the heart, between reasons and emotions, there is no separation, no distance, for the psalmist is turned wholly to God. Thus the past tense of the verb ‘rejoice’ conveys the sense of a lived experience which is full and complete.”⁸

So, Father Eugen and Elder Aimilianos are setting out a model for the place of the OT, especially the Psalms, in the Orthodox Church today.

This model has not always been observed within the Orthodox Church in large part because of “ubiquitous and long-lasting Christian supersessionism,” that is, the approach to the Bible in which the NT replaces and supersedes the OT, turning the

⁴ St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974, p. 15.

⁵ St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980, p. 25.

⁶ Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁷ Pseudo-Chrysostom, *De poenitentia*.

⁸ Indiktos Publishing, p. 173; available from St Sebastian Press: www.sebastianpress.org

OT “into a lifeless, dusty, and mostly useless archive.”⁹ This misleading interpretation of Scripture fails to appreciate the relationship of Tradition to Scripture. As Father Eugen explains:

Tradition cannot add anything essential to Scripture. What the Tradition can do is provide the lens for reading Scripture in its canonical intentionality. Tradition represents the Church’s unfolding life under the guidance of the [Holy] Spirit. And the Church is the first stage of God’s ongoing self-disclosure to humanity. There is a natural interrelation between Scripture, Church, and Tradition. That is why, as [Georges] Florovsky [1893-1979] rightly states, ‘Real interpretation of Scripture is Church preaching, is tradition.’¹⁰

Furthermore, as Elder Aimilianos insightfully notes, many people today ignore faith, scripture and tradition because their “strange gods” or “new gods” (Ps 80/81, v. 9/10) are “idols fashioned by man. They are, in fact, projections of man himself, who has put himself in the place of God. Man’s gods and idols are his thoughts; his self-will is the god he worships, for he is a slave to his desires.”¹¹ Happily, this is certainly not a characteristic of the contemporary Orthodox approach to the OT.¹²

(4) How is the OT used in the liturgical services of the Church?

Father Eugen Pentiuch points out that one of the most important ways in which the Orthodox Church has “interpreted the Bible [is] by integrating it into her liturgical life.”¹³ This is true, both for the Psalms for Vespers with Psalms 102 (103), 103 (104), 129 (130), 140 (141), 141 (142), as well as for Matins with Psalms 3, 37 (38), 62 (63), 87 (88), 102 (103) and 142 (143).¹⁴ However, as Father Eugen summarises the present position:

⁹ Pentiuc, pp. 41, 335 note 85, 39-44, 49-52.

¹⁰ Pentiuc, p. 162, with the citation of Florovsky’s seminal *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View, Volume 1 in the Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*. Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972), p.80. Pentiuc notes that: “During the seventeenth century, Protestant theology absolutized the Scripture as the unique and supreme arbiter of truth [with *sola scriptura*, “only Scripture”]. In response, the Roman Catholic Church and to a certain degree also Eastern Orthodox theologians reacted by overemphasizing church tradition as the preeminent criterion of truth” p. 162.

¹¹ *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, pp. 126-127.

¹² See also Father Eugen Pentiuc’s *Jesus the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible* (Paulist Press, 2006) and Father John Breck’s *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

¹³ Pentiuc, *The OT in Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, p. 200. See also Georges A. Barrois, *Scriptural Readings in Orthodox Worship* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977).

¹⁴ See Pentiuc, pp. 213-221 for further details.

The OT readings are now restricted to a number of liturgical days and periods. For instance, OT lessons are found in vesperal liturgies [as noted above]... Other OT lessons can be found in the services of Holy Week, in the Vespers of great feasts throughout the year, and the services of Royal Hours on ... Christmas, Theophany [and] Holy Friday. However, apart from the use of certain fixed psalms, there are at present no Orthodox readings in the Byzantine Orthodox Eucharistic service.¹⁵

As Demetrios J. Constantelos has suggested: “The loss of OT readings in the Byzantine liturgy is a tragic event [and] it is our responsibility as Church (people of God, hierarchy, and theologians) to [seek the reintroduction of] OT readings in the Sunday Liturgy ... through a Pan-Orthodox Council....”¹⁶

This dearth of OT readings in the Divine Liturgy is not a small matter. As Father Eugen concludes after writing more than 60 pages about the uses of Scripture in the Orthodox liturgy:

Liturgy creates an arch over time linking past events, that is, the history of salvation in its many and varied moments, with a perpetual present time experienced by worshipers in a personalized way within and outside church’s confines. Listening to the ‘liturgized’ Scripture, worshippers become gradually part of the history of salvation with all its valleys and peaks. In their struggles and trials, Scripture provides them not only with radiant models to follow but also converging points of human frailty. Paradoxically these examples of weakness, confusion, and apparent defeat may contribute to the strengthening of their own spiritual warfare. Wrapped in hymns of high poetry, the unreachable scriptural models become reachable and the scandalizing negative examples are turned pastorally with steady effort into a springboard for renewal.¹⁷

Such deep personal renewal in the midst of a praying community is a worthy goal.

¹⁵ Pentiuc, p. 225. For an analysis of which readings still appear in the Divine Liturgy and why, see pp. 226-262.

¹⁶ “The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: An Orthodox View.” In John R. Kohlenberger III (ed.), *The Parallel Apocrypha*, xxvii-xxx (Oxford University Press, 1997). Cited by Pentiuc, p.361, note 56.

¹⁷ Pentiuc, p. 262.

(5) What can we learn today from reading and praying with the OT?

In urging in Psalm 68 (69), v. 32/33 that “you who seek God, let your hearts revive,” St Augustine has set out for us a dynamic Orthodox understanding of Scripture in which the Lord guides us into His purposes. St Augustine writes:

Let us direct the mind’s gaze and, with the Lord’s help, let us search out God.... Let us seek him who is to be found, let us seek him who has been found. He has been hidden so that he may be sought for and found; he is immeasurable so that, even though he has been found, he may be sought for. For this reason it is said elsewhere, ‘Seek his presence continually’ (Ps 104/105.4). For he fills the seeker as far as [they] have capacity. And he [encourages] the finder ... [to] seek again to be filled when [they] have begun to increase [their] capacity.”

So, our reading and prayer with Scripture is an ongoing experience in which, as we grow as persons and as Orthodox Christians, continuing to seek the Lord, He gives us more and more of His presence in our lives.

Of Psalm 69 (70) v. 1 (“O LORD, make haste to help me”) the fourth-century compiler of many books on Orthodox monasticism, John Cassian writes:

This verse ... is necessary and useful for each one of us in whatever condition we may live. For whoever desires to be helped always and in all things shows that [they] need God as a helper not only in hard and sad affairs but also and equally as much in favorable and joyful ones, so that just as [they] may be snatched from the former [they] may abide in the latter [and] know that in neither instance can human frailty endure without his assistance.

Regular reading and praying with the whole of the Bible does indeed help us to face the challenges of life. His advice applies to men and women, boys and girls. In the fourth century, the Biblical scholar and theologian, St Jerome set out a programme of Biblical study for a girl of seven years old, encouraging her to learn the entire 150 psalms by heart and to “make the Books of Solomon, the Gospels and the Prophets the treasure of her heart.”¹⁸ That would certainly exceed expectations today! However, Father Andrew Louth notes that throughout the OT, in translations from the Greek and Latin “the noun that the Fathers “translated ‘man’ (in Greek *anthrōpos*, in Latin *homo*) embraces both male and female.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Cited by Barrois, *The Face of Christ in the OT*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Louth, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT, Vol I*, p. lii.

This review of the place of the OT in the Orthodox Church will hopefully encourage each of us to spend more time reading and praying the whole of the Bible. In Psalm 67 (68), v. 1, (“Let God arise”), St Augustine offers us a four-step path to draw closer to the Lord. He writes:

[1] First, we had to be persuaded how much God loved us, in case ... we lacked the courage to reach up to him. Also, [2] we had to be shown what sort of people we are that he loves, in case we should take pride in our own worth ... and sink ever more under our own strength. So, [3] he dealt with us in such a way that we could progress rather in his strength; [and 4] he arranged it so that the power of love should be brought to perfection in the weakness of humility... As he said to Paul, ‘My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor 12.9) [concluded St Augustine].

That is helpful advice for the whole of our lives.

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