

**THE MIRROR OF
SCRIPTURE
The Old Testament Is About
You**

Archbishop Lazar Puhalo

SAINT MACRINA PRESS

THE MIRROR OF SCRIPTURE:

The Old Testament Is About You

by Archbishop Lazar Puhalo

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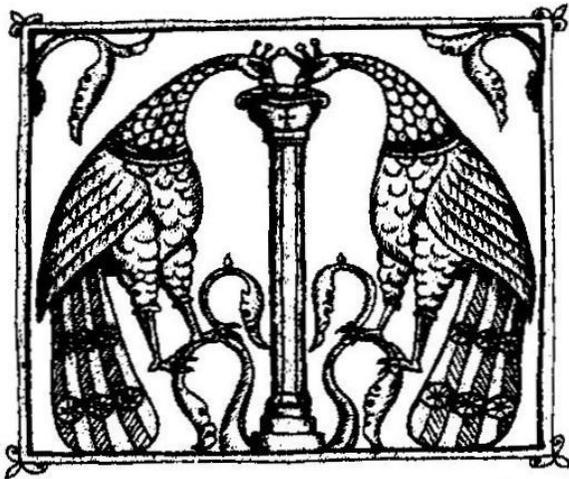
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PREFACE

There are many facets to the Hebrew Scripture or, as we call it, the "Old Testament." Perhaps one of the more important, though neglected, aspects is the personal one, the aspect that speaks to each one of us as an individual.

It is important to see the Hebrew Scripture as more than a history of the short-lived Kingdom of Israel and the remnant of Judea. The Old Testament is a chronicle of humanity, but it is also the story of each one of us, of our own spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical struggles. As we navigate the narratives of this great book, if we pay attention, we constantly find ourselves in familiar surroundings; the depths of love and hate, the corrosive effects of egoism, bitterness, malice, envy and self-focus, but also the heroic struggle of mankind, the presence of hope and joy. There, we find the same constant tensions between constraint, self-discipline and self-control, and the chaos and destructive energy of unconstrained desires and passions. All these are present in the daily lives of each one of us, and in the society and culture around us. Join me in examining the ways in which the Hebrew Scripture tells the story of each one of us, of our parishes, our families and

our communities, as it unfolds the history of Israel.

There is a notable detail in the creation narrative. Light exists before those heavenly bodies that we usually associate with the source of light. This is something that has to be the case, whether one is speaking in strict scientific terms or in spiritual understandings. The energy of creation, formless, void and in chaos, gradually formed into the stars, including our sun, as form and order began to permeate the universe.

The separation of light from darkness is the result of the rotation of the earth on its axis,¹ but there is spiritual revelation here. We are told that God-the-Word separated the light from the darkness. Let us begin then, with God, our Lord Jesus Christ, separating light from darkness in the universe. This should be the most profound image that we carry with us, for on the Cross, God-the-Word once more separated light from darkness in the hearts of mankind.

1. The fact that there was light before the advent of the stars (including our sun) is true. Even taking into account the posit of a “dark epoch” following the initial light generated by the birth of the universe.

1

IN THE BEGINNING

In the Symbol of Faith when we confess, "And without Whom nothing was made that has been made," we are talking about Jesus Christ, we are talking about God the Word as the One Who made all things.

In the creation narrative, when we talk about the separation of light from darkness, this has a profound meaning that will echo down throughout the whole period of human existence, up until the end of human history. Christ Jesus separates light from darkness. The light is necessary for life, and the darkness is also present in life. Our Lord Jesus Christ is always striving to separate the light from the darkness within mankind.

While both light and darkness have their proper place in our lives, they are also used symbolically. In the light, we can see clearly, while in the darkness we can only grope our way along, we cannot see the realities of life, and there is always a certain danger in the darkness.

Within each one of us our hearts have to be recreated by the presence of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Our Lord stands without, desiring to enter into our hearts to separate light from

darkness within each one of us. We must see both the light and the darkness so that we can make a clear choice. Much later we will hear that men desired darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil, but that the light was in the world and the world could neither comprehend nor overpower it. That light was present, calling upon everyone to let it shine in their hearts, to separate the light from the darkness within them and having separated it, to make it clear what is darkness and what is light. The more filled with the Divine Light that our heart becomes, the more it becomes the Kingdom of God (Paradise) within us, as Christ promised.

When Our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, two thieves were on crosses together with Him. The two trees in the Garden of Eden are in fact a prophecy and type about the Cross, because one thief looked upon Christ on the Cross and saw in Him "the good" and then recognized for the first time his own wickedness. So the Cross of Jesus Christ became, at that moment, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil for this brigand. When the man said, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom," the Cross of Jesus Christ became the Tree of Life for him, because Jesus Christ is the fruit of the Tree of Life, the One

Who can bestow upon us everlasting life.

On the other side of Christ's Cross was a man of equal guilt as the first thief; but he does not repent, in fact he reviles Christ. In this we see that the Cross of Jesus Christ becomes a dividing line between light and darkness, between the heart that has become illumined through repentance and the heart that remains in darkness because it will not repent and open itself to the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Here on the Cross, Christ separates light and darkness visibly before us, and the two thieves are a type of the light and the darkness that constitutes the inner struggle of everyone.

We see this struggle flowing throughout human history and throughout our own personal history, because the Cross of Christ still stands within and before each one of us as the dividing line between light and darkness. This dividing line was present when Christ created the earth and made it habitable. The grace of the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters bringing forth life, and there the light of God's grace shone in the Garden of Eden. St John Damascene tells us that the Garden was Paradise because it was filled with

light, the Uncreated Light of God's Glory.² Unfortunately, mankind chose darkness rather than that light and departed into the outer darkness, away from the light of God's love and glory.

Jesus Christ will use that formula sometimes in His parables, "Cast them forth into the outer darkness, where there be wailing and gnashing of teeth." We see this in the prophecies, we see this reflected in the New Testament, and we see above all that there stands before each of us the choice between light and darkness, life and spiritual death. We see the Ark as a dividing line also, between those who laughed at Noah and those who were on board the ark with him.

We are all called upon daily to open ourselves to the light and try to root out the darkness that is within us. Our Lord Jesus Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit are there to help us, because the light of Christ's love and glory shines into the heart that opens itself toward Him and the Grace

2. Paradise is wherever God abides, wherever the light of God's glory shines. Paradise does not refer to a carnal or material walled garden. Carnal, material descriptions of Paradise should never be taken seriously. One can experience paradise in one's own heart if Christ is truly present there as He promised. He and the Father will abide in us and the Holy Spirit will indwell in us through faith and the struggle to acquire the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

of the Holy Spirit fills the heart with the illumination of that glory the more we struggle to acquire the Grace of the Holy Spirit and to unite ourselves with Jesus Christ and to live a life in Christ.

A person can be very religious and still be filled with darkness, because being religious does not necessarily mean that you have faith. We can be religious to such a degree that we become cruel, destructive, full of hatred for others, full of malice and convinced that we are absolutely right and the rest of the world is absolutely wrong. Yet it is never us that are right; it is the Church that is right, not us. We have to choose even within the life of the Church our position –whether in light or in darkness, whether to be simply religious or whether to have a living and vital faith and struggle for a life in Jesus Christ. The light and the darkness both stand together until the end. This is the Mystery of Paradise in the end, that the light fills everything, all in all. That it illumines and gives life to the faithful and to those who rejected Christ and those who are brutal toward their fellow human beings or are indifferent toward their fellow human beings, that light of Christ's love and glory will burn them like an everlasting fire.

Therefore, let us, as we proceed through the

Old Testament, consider its meaning and consider the meaning of the separation of light from darkness, and of the meaning of the knowledge of good and evil. Let our lives be consecrated to the struggle to acquire light and cast out the darkness from our own hearts and our own minds. This means not only our egoism and self-centredness but those things that are created because of them: all of our prejudices, our ill will, our evil feelings toward others and all of those things that constitute this spiritual darkness.

This is what the creation narrative begins with: the separation of light from darkness and the begetting of life, and this is how our lives have also to begin anew in order to become authentic lives; the separation of light from darkness within us, the choosing of light, the struggle to drive out the darkness by increasing the light of the grace of the Holy Spirit and Christ's Presence within us. We cannot do this just through religion; we can do it through a living and vital faith in Our Lord God and Saviour Christ.

2

THE "GARDEN OF EDEN" NARRATIVE

**The ego as the root of evil;
Fall into an unauthentic life**

As we understand the creation narrative, God created humanity from perfect love. This means that He also created us with freedom. Love demanded without freedom is a psychosis, it is not love. Love given without freedom is an obsession, it is not love.

With authentic love, there is also trust. God demonstrated His authentic love, with its freedom of will and trust, by placing before mankind a choice. Why? Because without choice, there is no freedom. Even in marriage and friendships, love unfeigned requires freedom and trust, as any successful marriage demonstrates.

The "two trees" in the garden are certainly a metaphor and prophecy, not something to be taken literally, as if one could eat an apple and suddenly know the mysteries of good and evil, or

a pomegranate and live forever. Are the trees not rather a fore-image of the Cross, upon which God-the-Word would once more separate light from darkness? Had not God already planned for our redemption even before we fell?

In Eden, humans lived in an atmosphere of unselfish love. God had created them in His own likeness and image, so they had freedom of will, unselfish love and virtue, and humility.

The "tree" that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from is a metaphor, a symbol, and also a prophecy about the Cross of Christ, so we will not discuss it here. The important thing is what the temptation was about and what its results are.

Satan tempted the humans by offering them a counterfeit of something that they already had. "Don't trust God, He's just being selfish and does not want you to have knowledge. If you have this knowledge you will be like God."

The humans forgot that they were already "in the image and likeness" of God. Satan painted a false image of God as being vain and egoistic so he created a counterfeit; a false image of God and of what it meant to be "like God."

Satan had set the fire of egoism, self-love and self-centredness in the heart of mankind. Once Adam and Eve had accepted this temptation, they fell into this egoism and self focus -- they accepted the counterfeit instead of the Grace which God had given them.

This is the root and base of all human tragedies, murders, robberies and deception. It does not matter whether you take the entire "Eden narrative" literally, as allegory or as a mixture of both. The story is about each one of us both as individuals and collectively.

The temptations we fall to are almost always counterfeits for what is real, and we yield to them because of our own ego and self focus. This is the greatest spiritual struggle for each one of us, and this is the ultimate meaning of the story. As with Adam and Eve, so often what we accept is a counterfeit of something that God has already given us. We choose the counterfeit and lose the gift of Grace. The "Garden of Eden" narrative is about you.

3

CAIN AND ABEL

The story of Cain and Abel amplifies what we are taught about the fall of mankind, and our own condition. Egoism and self-focus are at the root of the violence in our world. Every war, every murder, every act of violence begins in the heart of man. Those who lead in creating such violence and wars, pogroms, attempts to destroy those who are "not like us" are people without empathy, people who cannot or will not identify with the sufferings and struggle of others. Murders arise from greed, from envy and pride, from lusts of every kind and jealousy: all aspects of egoism.

This narrative portrays the first such crime amongst humans, and a crime made worse because it was the murder of one's own family member.

We are told that the two brothers brought their thanksgiving offerings in due season, to offer to God. Abel, who offered from the heart, with sincere thanksgiving to God, had his offering accepted. Cain's offering was not accepted because

it was not offered from the heart, from love, but rather he offered it because of a law, a rule, a regulation, and he offered it, not in heartfelt thanksgiving, but from obligation. The difference in the "first fruits" being offered was not the issue. God tells Cain, "If you had rightly offered, your sacrifice would have been acceptable." He did not say "If you had offered the right thing..."

Cain lost nothing from the fact that his offering was not accepted this time. He could have striven to correct himself and his relationship with his Creator. God will later remind him that he, as the firstborn, was the leader and head of the tribe, that because of this he had dominion over his brother. This was not enough. Cain's ego and pride were offended. Moreover, the righteousness of Abel was a censure to his conscience.

The solution to the situation should have been repentance and a striving to correct himself. Instead, his pride and ego overcome him and he does the unthinkable: he murders his brother. Remember that the Ten Commandments begins with a reference to murder and ends with forbidding us to be envious. Envy is born of ego

and self-focus, and it unleashes great fires and great tragedies. We are all subject to this deception, and none of us should think that we are immune to its excesses. This story is about us; about us as individuals and as societies, and perhaps this is why we are told that Cain built the first society, the first village (hardly a city by today's standards, but a complex human society).

This is also a story of God's mercy and forgiveness. Notice that after murder has been committed, God does not come down in a fury of vengeance and outrage. Rather, He comes to Cain with love and attempts to lead him to repentance. In the Garden, although God certainly knows where Adam and Eve are, He nevertheless calls to them to come into the open and repent. Now, He asks Cain, "Where is your brother...." Did God not know all that has taken place? Certainly He does, but He calls upon Cain to confess his horrible deed and repent. Indeed, following the narrative, one can almost hear God speaking with tears of sorrow and compassion as He makes every effort to lead Cain to "turn from his sinfulness and live." God even goes so far as to prevent Cain from being

killed by others, because so long as he is alive, he can repent and return to God.

Cain, the story tells us, went yet farther away from God, just as we ourselves do when we do not repent of our sins and falls. The story is about us, and it is also about God's infinite love and mercy.

4

COMMENTARY ON CAIN AND ABEL

We should not think that anyone of us are completely exempt from such a possibility. We are all human beings, we are all capable of great wickedness; and we are all capable, with God's grace and our struggle, to also become people of genuine holiness and sanctity.

Think about how this applies to you in your daily life and even in the practice of religion. Remember that religion is not what the Orthodox faith is about, it is about a living faith in God, not a "system." Faith does not consist in coming into accord with a system of facts; faith is an orientation of the soul toward the will of God.

This is how the second story of Cain and Abel plays out in our own personal lives. God's heart is always open to us, as it was to Cain. Note that God's heart was open to him even if he did not repent, but this is not going to do Cain any good, because he himself will not return to God's heart.

In fact he departs further from God. The designation "the land of Nod" evidently comes from a Chaldean word that signifies "to wander." So he wanders farther away from God, and now he has added to the alienation begun by his parents: greater separation, and this alienation is going to be the great story of the Hebrew Scripture, our "Old Testament."

Alienation and the endless struggle against idolatry and above all, the idolatry of "self" and the idolatry of "religion." Remember that the beginning of Cain's fall was offering his sacrifice because of religious law rather from the love contained in true faith and worship. Such a religion can become a very destructive idolatry. One can be intensely religious and worship his religion more than he worships his Creator. One can become intensely religious without ever having genuine faith and without ever having a real relationship with our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ, with the community of the faithful. This is one of our great tragedies. It comes about from that venom of Eden, the fall into egotism, self-centredness and self-love. The real result of the fall then, and what

we call sin, is an inclination and proclivity to habitually misuse our energies, a proclivity for creating our own alienation; alienation from God, alienation from humanity and alienation from our own self. Religion without a living, transforming faith, is a form of idolatry. This misuse of our energies is what sin really consists of.

My teacher, Father John Romanides, once said that "religion is a neurobiological illness," he said that "Orthodoxy is its cure" (I did hear him say once that "faith is its cure"). This is a very telling statement, because here we have two brothers who were obviously religious. They offered the thanksgiving sacrifices that, according to the rules of religion, they were supposed to offer. That was the religious thing to do, a religious act. One of them, however, had love and faith and the other one did not. They both believed of course, but belief is not the same as having faith. Faith in God means to have love and trust in God, to desire a relationship of love with Him, to express that love in ways that we, in our weakness, are unable to; knowing that despite the insignificance of the offerings that we make, God

receives them lovingly when we offer them from the heart in love.

Here we have then this problem of religion without faith, and we will see it again in Christ's parable about the publican and the Pharisee, and the one about the prodigal son, when we see that it is the "righteous" son who remains in the outer darkness, while the sinful but repentant son rejoices in his father's house.

Let us pause now and look at ourselves. How often are we fulfilling things externally because we are "supposed to," because it is expected, because it is the Law? Even in our religious life, we can be observant of rules and codes, but still not have faith. We can be quite diligent in the external practice of our religion, and never have a relationship with God. This is a great tragedy for us, and this is what the story of Cain and Abel is telling us first of all. Do you see what your ego can bring you to? Your ego and self-love can so corrupt you that you can murder your brother, and then try to hide from it and cover it up. You may not actually murder your brother in the strict sense, but you may try to destroy him with gossip and

slander, or in some other way, but all the same, you are guilty. Ah, foul envy, foul jealousy, and all are a product of our ego and our self-focus, which is sometimes self-love and sometimes self-hatred.

5

FROM CAIN TO LAMECH

Cain has introduced murder into the life of mankind. That is what egotism, self-centredness and self-love can lead us to. When we add self-righteousness, which is a form of narcissism, it is even worse.

Do not think that anyone of us is completely exempt from the possibility of committing such a crime. We sometimes do it in our minds, even if we do not do it literally. We are all human beings, we are all capable of great wickedness; and we are all also capable, with God's grace and our struggle, to also become people of genuine holiness and sanctity. People tend to think that one becomes "holy" by means of externally correct behaviour, some even realise that there must be some sort of inner change also. However, the greater part of becoming sanctified is to rid ourselves of our self-delusions about ourselves.

Think about how this applies to each one of us in our daily lives and even in the practice of

religion. Remember that religion is not what the Orthodox faith is about; it is about a living faith in our living Lord Christ Jesus and His Gospel, and a striving to live life according to His teachings, transforming our inner person into the image of His life example and teachings. It is not a system of law or a moral code. Faith does not consist in coming into accord with a system of facts or doctrines; faith is an orientation of the soul toward the will of God revealed in Christ Jesus. Think about how the story of Cain and Abel plays out in our own personal lives. We may not commit actual murder, but the egoism, envy, self-justification that we saw already with Adam and Eve, frequently recurs in our own lives. Moreover, in our idolatry of self, we see God as a harsh, brutal dictator who, in order to get revenge on those who displease Him, creates earthquakes, tornadoes, floods and other disasters which destroy the faithful and the good together with the unbeliever and the evil.

Satan is the father of egoism and self-worship. He has led us to such understandings of God in order to replace the image of God with his own image. Yet, we seldom notice that after Cain killed

Abel, the amazing thing is that we do not see God come thundering down for vengeance or to mete out juridical justice. "I am going to punish Cain, I am going to make him pay! I am going to give him a death penalty, I am going to kill him with anger and wrath!" No! God comes down with great gentleness. "Cain, where is your brother?" "Ah! I should know? I mean, am I my brother's keeper?" And then you can almost see the tears in the eyes of God: "Oh Cain, what is it that you have done? You were the eldest, the inheritance was yours. Why have you done such a thing?" In all of this, God is seeking to open Cain's heart, hoping that Cain will repent and turn to Him. God's heart is wholly open to him should he repent. God's heart is open to him even if he does not repent, but it is not going to do Cain any good, because he will not return to God's heart. And in fact he does not; he goes away further from God. It is said that Cain went away to the land of Nod. "Nod" is derived from a Chaldean word indicating "to wander." Cain alienated himself ever further from the God Who sought to reconcile and save him.

Perhaps this does not even mean that Cain

went away to a different geographical location, but only that he alienated himself further from God. In any case, he wanders away from God, and now he has added to the alienation, greater separation, and this alienation is going to be the great story of the Old Testament. Alienation and the great struggle against idolatry and above all, the idolatry of ourselves and the idolatry of religion; because believe me, religion can become a very destructive idolatry. One can be intensely religious and worship his religion without ever having genuine faith and without ever having a real relationship with our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ, with the community of the faithful. This is one of our great tragedies. But it comes about from that venom of Eden, the fall into egotism, self-centredness and self-love. The real result of the fall then, and what we call sin is an inclination to habitually misuse our energies, a proclivity for the misuse of our energies in a manner that alienates us from God. This is what sin really consists of.

We can reflect on the great Canon of St Andrew of Crete; he does not go into a great deal of detail, but he certainly calls upon us to liken

ourselves to the sinners and the disobedient and unbelieving people of the Old Testament. So that having examined ourselves, it gives us an opportunity to cleanse the idolatry out of our hearts and to follow God in truth and in spirit, knowing that we can only know God through Jesus Christ; because in the Old Testament we often see God through the lens of the passions of a humanity which, in its idolatry, so often transfers its own passions onto God, because Satan is tempting them to recreate God in their own image, or at least to recreate their concept of God. However, what Satan is really striving for is to replace the image of God in us with his own image. This idolatry is also part of the great story in the "Old Testament," this is part of the great struggle.

Now we talked about Cain and Abel and we saw that Cain had become the first murderer and that this murderer rose from his own ego. The next such crime we will see is not explained to us: Lamech, who was the seventh after Adam, had killed a man — both a man and a youth. In the Hebrew Scripture it tells us that he beat the young man to death and that he just killed the other man.

So he has committed these two murders, and he is evidently lamenting that he had done it. We are not sure if he repented, but he is lamenting to his two wives, both of whom appear to have been barren in the beginning. Now we come to this rather confusing part of the Scripture, which we are not going to be discussing at this point, but we are told that mankind has somehow become more and more wicked. This is not surprising, because mankind's history starts with falling into ego, then with murder, then with the murder of two people and then with whatever kind of wickedness they had fallen into which was so destructive. History informs us of the cruelty and savage massacres of this ancient era, and little is left to the imagination when we read of it in secular history.

6

LAMECH

(Gn.4:23-24)

Lamech said to his wives Ada and Zila, "Listen to me, O wives of Lamech, and pay attention to my words. I have killed a man, wounding myself, and a youth, harming myself. If Cain was to suffer sevenfold then I, Lamech, seventy and sevenfold."

One evil piles upon another, and we become imitators of the sins and crimes of our fathers. Cain has initiated mankind into murder, and as seeds sown in a field produce an increase, so the seeds of murder begin to bring forth their crops.

After the Flood, God warns the children of Noah, "Whoever sheds a man's blood will have his own blood shed by man: For [I have] made man in the image of God." (9:6) And again, in the incarnation, He says, "whoever lives by the sword will die by the sword."

It is the image of God in man that Satan hates; and it is because of this image that he incites us to commit murder. His target is really the image and

likeness of God that is within us—a murder of God by proxy. It is for this reason, also, that Satan strives to corrupt mankind. Because he is the father of egoism and self-centredness, he desires to replace the image of God within us with his own image, to re-make man in the image of the Evil-One.

PREFACE TO THE STORY OF NOAH AND THE ARK

There are many aspects to the stories in the Hebrew Scripture, the "Old Testament." For the sake of our discussions here, there are two things that the Old Testament continuously reminds us of and these are things about ourselves. One of them is why we human beings have an inner conflict between good, bad, holiness and wickedness; why we so often fall and the source of our inner contradictions that torment us so often. The other is the tendency of humankind toward an idolatry. These facts have much to say about corruption in our societies and the strife and bloodshed in our world.

Reading about these things will reveal to us why our Lord Jesus Christ instructed us to pray, "...and deliver us from the evil-one" rather than "deliver us from evil." God has created mankind in His own "likeness and image," that is, with freedom, intellect and a will toward virtue. Satan,

trying to become more glorious than God, fell and came into an enmity toward God. Now he lures mankind into the idolatry of trying to recreate God after his own image.

One aspect of the Old Testament is that it tells us about how mankind transfers his own passions, his own cruelties and his own aggressiveness onto his understanding of God. This idea flows throughout the Old Testament. Gnostic teachers such as Marcion and Mani carried this so far that they actually thought there were two Gods: an evil one in the Old Testament and a good one in the New Testament. What is really happening here is that Satan is trying to distort the understanding of God. Satan promised mankind that he could become like God, but instead, lead man to think that God is like man. Mankind's concept of God becomes an idolatry, a kind of self-worship, because he thinks of God as being just a "giant human" or a projection of fallen humanity. If people are cruel and murderous, then they re-image God as being cruel and murderous; if mankind is aggressive and vulgar then they recreate (in their own minds) God as being aggressive and vulgar. So

what Satan has done now is to trick people or lead them into a counterfeit of God Himself. God has revealed Himself as being perfect, unselfish love, and being trusting of mankind, so Satan wants to offer a counterfeit. And that counterfeit is a god who is mentally created by man, in man's own image and likeness, with man's own passions.

We should keep this in mind as we continue to look at the way each one of us finds himself in the Old Testament, and we find a picture of mankind itself in the stories we read.

8

THE STORY OF NOAH

Betrayal and Loyalty

We could refer to Noah as an "apostle." He preached the truth of God and salvation by obeying God even though people thought that he was foolish for doing so.

We are told in the story of Noah that the path of egoism and self-worship which began with Cain's murder of Abel, followed by Lamech's murder of two men, continued to expand. This is the next narrative that we will look at in order to try to find ourselves within it and to try to discover within our own hearts whether we would have been on board that ark or not. There was choice to be made then, just as there is a daily choice for us in our relationship with God and our neighbour.

From the beginning of the creation, we see that God is constantly blessing all of His creation. When mankind began to defile the earth and rob the earth of its blessing, disregarding both God and

fellow humans as well all living things and the world around them, we are told the story of Noah's ark.

In the story, Noah is told to build a large ship called an "ark" and to bring on board representatives of every known species of animal, along with several plants. Noah was told that a great flood would occur that would destroy mankind, except for those who were repentant and became faithful to God. The building of the ark took a very long time, and Noah used the process as a way of warning people and calling them to repentance. Orthodox Christians understand that the Ark is a type of the Church. The holy apostles called people into the Church, and away from the sinful and destructive attitudes of the world around them. This is just what Noah was doing in his own time. The flood took place just as Noah had warned, and the earth was cleansed.

Noah really becomes an apostle of the Living God because he is preaching to these people as he builds the ark. Hearing Noah's words and seeing his actions, the people had to make a free choice. The choice is between God and the corruption of

the world, between life and death. Noah is calling them to something else also. He is calling them to struggle for self-control and self-discipline in order to lead decent lives.

In the same way, we are called upon to make such choices. We do not need forty days and forty nights of rain in order to sweep us away. We can be swept away from an authentic life and from a life of contentment and a life of inner joy by the passions and corruption of the world around us. We can, on the other hand, pay attention to the actual meaning of the story of Noah and choose the kind of struggle that Noah calls us to, and have an authentic life, a life filled with meaning, hope and love.

COMMENTARY
The Story of Ham,
And Our Role in Creation

God has bound man together with the created universe; man was intended to be a point of unity for all creation. Mankind is material, intellectual, spiritual, made up of everything that the universe is made up of, a combination of all the things that occur within creation. By accepting the counterfeits of Satan we began to be more a point of disunity, and all of these wounds and divisions that occur in our human nature developed amongst us.

We must often make a choice between spiritual life and spiritual death. Let us look at the story of Noah's ark from this point of view, because the ark is a type of the Church, and true spiritual life is to be found within the Church because it is there that the Tree of Life still grows. The altar of the Church is a type of Paradise, where we receive

from the chalice the fruit of the Tree of Life, which is Jesus Christ Himself. In the description of the building of the Ark, and the command about what to bring into the ark, we see that all of creation was symbolically represented and encompassed in the ark. A type of everything that exists was there, for God did not just command various clean animals, but clean and unclean animals alike, and plants, particularly those that could be used for food, and birds and creeping things, all of creation was encompassed in the ark and they were all redeemed together with mankind, represented by Noah and his family.

This is similar to what Apostle Paul says: "All creation is being redeemed together with mankind, because all creation will be set free into the glorious freedom of God's children" (Rm.8) There is a very close bond between us and the created universe and the ecosystem in which we live. We suggest that this story tells us that we are encompassed together with the rest of creation. We have a role to play as the centre of unity in creation and we have a responsibility to the ecosystem in which we live; a responsibility to humanity and to all life

on earth, to preserve our biosphere.

Egoism: the Son Betrays the Father

When the ark landed, we find a rather disturbing story of a son's betrayal of his father. One of Noah's sons, Ham, found his father passed out drunk and naked. He humiliated and degraded his father. When he mockingly told his brothers about their father's condition, the other sons of Noah showed their love and respect for their father by entering the room holding a blanket. They entered backward, with their faces away from their father, and covered him with the blanket in order not to shame him.

No matter what family we have, when we begin to raise children, not all of them really follow our teachings and follow our path. Some are led into disrespect, and not just disrespect, but even into a kind of revilement of everything that their parents have stood for. Sometimes a child is right not to accept everything that the parents teach, because they come to realize that some of these

teachings are just prejudices or they come to realize that some of us are just too Pharisaical or too full of judgment or condemnation, lacking in compassion and love. But there is this rejection of the whole concept, the whole idea, the whole system of values that the previous generation had, the complete disrespect for the parent, and therefore the disrespect for the values and the things that were passed on to the children. This always leads to some kind of sorrow and grief, because we do not realize that thousands of years of human experience has formed many of these basic values. Sometimes when a child comes to this point of being completely rebellious against the parents and against what they have taught and passed on, they are not just rejecting what the parents have taught them, but rejecting also thousands of years of human experience which has taught us that certain things are necessary for survival, for the survival of societies, for the survival of communities, for the survival of civilisation.

How does this story apply to us? We also have to make choices. Each one of us has to make a choice about how to deal with the values, teach-

ings, and the instruction that have been given to us by our parents and our grandparents. To totally reject everything and all the standards that have been taught by the parents leads to a degeneracy in society. From the beginning of the story of Noah's ark we see the majority of the people rejecting the revelation and the proper relationship with God and neighbours. It was not just the flood that caused them to be swept away, rather they allowed themselves to be swept away and spiritually drowned by their own passions. Meanwhile, those who were listening and heeding their conscience, the voice of God, were lifted up in the ark which is a type of the Church carried above this flood. They had the self-control and self-discipline necessary in order to reject what was wrong and struggle for what is good.

When we read in this story about Ham's betrayal of his father Noah, and the great respect and reverence with which the other brothers approached their father, we also see something about self-control and self-discipline. The other brothers might have been tempted to look upon their father's nakedness just out of curiosity, but

they did not because they had self-control and self-discipline as well as reverence for their father. This is the problem with Ham; he had no self-discipline, no self-control and therefore no respect and no reverence. Because without self-control and self-discipline, we also cannot have self-respect or respect for others.

There is something yet more pointed about this story, however, and that is our relationship with our neighbours, with other people in our own lives. Rather than expose our brother's or sister's sins, we ought rather to cover them. We are here to help lift each other up, not to push others down; to help our brother heal, not to cut his wounds deeper. We, as followers of Christ, must learn to respect our neighbours, our brothers and sisters in the faith and others in the same way that the righteous sons of Noah loved him and covered his nakedness. Too often we behave like the unrighteous Ham and mock and revile our neighbours for their weaknesses and failings rather than entering backward to cover the sins of others. Even when our own weaknesses, failings and sins stand glaring before us, we find opportunity to uncover

our brother's or sister's sins, mocking them and trying to put them to shame, as if we ourselves were sinless and perfect. Such actions separate us from God, from the love of Christ and from the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is, perhaps, the central lesson for us in the story of Noah, this is where we find ourselves in the story and the point at which the story becomes about us, each one of us personally.

COMMENTARY ON NOAH AND THE ARK

This is the story of Ham and his brothers and the choices made by them, and it is a story about each one of us and the choices we make. The ones who had self-discipline and self-control also had some reverence and respect. We respect things that we do not necessarily agree with. We should respect elders because they have survived so long, and experienced so much. Moreover, as a whole, they did desire to leave the world a better place for the next generation. Within the pool of older citizens, while not everyone is wise, there is a collective wisdom, knowledge and experience among them.

What happens to Ham when he has to face the reality of what he has done? He becomes an outcast. He has fallen into alienation from God and even his own family. He demonstrates that ego and self centredness will continue to be the primary stumbling block for humanity. Egoism and

self centredness are the primary attributes of Satan. Coupled with a lack of empathy, this is the soul of evil. Ham has gone a step beyond Adam and Eve in this replay of the fall. They fell into egoism, but we did not see evidence that they also fell into a lack of empathy.

We said earlier that Satan desires to obliterate the image and likeness of God in man and replace it with his own image. Sincere repentance is the ladder by which we can ascend out of such a fall.

But why is it that Ham is now to serve his brethren? What kind of bondage or slavery does he fall into? Does God make him the slave to his brethren as punishment? Or is there rather something else being said to us? People without self-discipline and without self-control inevitably fall into bondage. Indeed, they fall into many different kinds of bondage and slavery. We are not supposed to have a weak will, we are supposed to have a strong will, but a will directed toward the will of God and submissive to the will of God. We need enough self-discipline and self-control to resist peer pressure, to resist the desire to find an artificial way to have some kind of temporary happiness, which

could include drugs or alcohol, or to fall evil because of our egotism and self love. It generally takes self-discipline and a strong will keep from falling into ego and self focus. Without self discipline and self control, we must be controlled by others. Self discipline and self control are elements of true freedom.

The Church has given us the path and the means toward proper and effective self-discipline and self-control. We need to have a certain amount of proper self-esteem also, and this self-esteem comes primarily from the knowledge that Christ loved us enough to die for each one of us and to rise again for the sake of our salvation. He took our sins and burdens upon himself and carried them to the Cross for each one of us, and this is a source of proper self-esteem. This means that we have self-respect which is manifested in respect for others, even those with whom we do not agree.

ON THE TOWER OF BAB'EL³

Let us reflect on the main point in the story of the Great Flood. We know that the story is not literally true, and we know where the almost universal flood stories, with many variations actually arose from.⁴ However, everything in Scripture is a revelation about mankind, his rela-

3. Why is it called "the tower of Babble?" The Hebrews made a wordplay on the name of the tower. In Hebrew, Vavel is to babble or be confused. However, the tower was actually bab'el, "gate of God." Our English word "babble" is derived from the Hebrew wordplay.

4. There were two particular enormous floods in this region about 8000 years B.C. One took place in the rich, fertile basin that is now the Black Sea, the other was in the valley that is now the Persian Gulf. These were once rich, fertile valleys, but when the last Ice Age ended and sea levels rose, the Atlantic Ocean poured into the Mediterranean Sea, and this broke a narrow land barrier so that the Mediterranean poured into the valley to create the Black Sea, destroying a whole ancient civilisation. Something similar happened when the Indian Ocean broke through an isthmus that is now the Straits of Hormuz and pushed up into the Tigris-Euphrates delta. These floods were caused by the end of the last Ice Age, and sea levels rose rapidly around the world, generating numerous flood myths.

tionship with God and alienation from God, and his relationship with fellow human beings.

In the story, the flood at the time of Noah was generated by the flood of human passions, all based in ego and self-focus. As we understand humanity was drowning spiritually and his life was being crushed, robbing humanity of an authentic life. There were few left who chose to orient their will toward God and toward God's will.

Following the flood, and after Ham's betrayal of his father (again an episode in egoism and self-centredness), we read that the descendants of Noah went into the plain of Shinar and there they decided to build another city. In this city they are going to begin to exalt themselves, to fall for Satan's original temptation: deceiving man into thinking that he could become equal with God.

Let us pause for a moment to look at the matter of the skills and talents that had developed, allowing man to build a city of the type described. It does matter how we use the skills, abilities and talents we have. It is not appropriate for Orthodox Christians to use them for self-aggrandizement, simply to give oneself or one's community a name.

The gifts and skills that have been given to us are to be used for positive reason that will affect all mankind in a positive manner and make the lives of those around us easier and better. In the Noah story, however, his descendants begin to build a tower in their new city, that they believe will take them to the very throne of God and make them His equal.

The story of the building of the city possibly refers to ancient Uruk (Arak) in Mesopotamia. The ruins of this city have been uncovered, together with a ritual tower called a ziggurat. It is important to understand that the theme of this story is a conflict between ego and virtue. This is a conflict that takes place within our own hearts when we follow our own passions and self-centred desires.

Let us discuss what the word virtue actually means and see how it is pitted against ego, then we will see how this story about the building of the city and the tower of Bab'el is about us. Bab'el means "Gate of God." The tower was going to be built right up to the Gate of God, right up to the heavens, an assault on Heaven itself as it were.

The word virtue (Gk. "*arete*") actually means

to use our skills and abilities to create something beautiful and useful. When a sculptor takes a piece of stone and sculpts a beautiful statue from it because he wants to create beauty, it is a virtue. He has used his skill to the best of his ability, to create something of quality, something of beauty. If, however, he creates the statue only for the sake of the money he will get for it, this is just business, not virtue. The tower of Bab'el was built for egoistic purposes, not for any purpose that could be called a virtue. This happens with people who have a lust for power and who desire, not a peaceful and harmonious life, but who desire to rise up above others and to dominate them or to get ahead at all costs. We see this in the society around us, and can be tempted to follow such a path. We must, however, discover another path. In the building of the city and the tower, we see that skills and abilities were used for the sake of ego, self-centredness and self-love, whereas the skills could have been used to build a home or a shelter, or something of elegance and beauty for the sake of beauty and usefulness. We will not speculate on alternate interpretations of the motives of the

builders because this is a story with a moral to it, and the moral point is made by the way the story is told in the Scripture. We must take the story as we have received it in order to understand its meaning. This story is an analysis of passions of pride and ego and a lack of humility. These are things that can drive a community apart and create deep divisions and enmities.

Let us continue discussing virtue and the concept of virtue and ego. We are all given some kind of ability and skill, even if that ability is something that does not fit into the marketplace well. Love, for example, the ability to have an open heart toward people and to be loving and kind and gentle can be manifested in many ways. Those people who go out of their way to be kind to street people, to give comfort and consolation to somebody in sorrow, to visit someone in a nursing home, all these things are acts of virtue because we are using the skill or ability that we have within us for something positive, something useful, something good, and not something that focuses on our own ego, lust for money or self-centredness.

Every one of us has to face the challenge of

whether or not we will examine ourselves and try to see what kind of skills and abilities or talents that we have. Our calling is to do this not in terms of being competitive in the world, and not in terms of seeking a proper job position, or seeking what kind of an education we will get so that we will have marketable and commercial skills of some kind. Those things must be done by everyone in our society, but that is not a path to virtue or to an expression of our Orthodox Christian faith. In this context, we should see what skills and abilities we have which can be put to a good creative and positive use.

If a person is very skilled at fishing, then find someone who is lonely, who has no one and would love to have companionship and company and take them fishing with you, share that moment with them. We can use any of our skills and abilities in a virtuous way. Virtue and a virtuous way does not mean being ultra-moral, praying and being in Church regularly. It also is manifested in the use of our energies in a manner which is compassionate, caring and creative, and which reflects the idea that we understand that our energies are a gift from

God to be used for the good of others. It may be easier for us to use the same abilities and gifts solely for self-serving reasons and ego.

It is understood that we have to take care to prepare ourselves for the future, choosing how we will educate ourselves so that we earn our own living and support our families, but we can also plan how to use these skills only for selfish goals. This is the struggle that faced the people who came out of the ark, multiplied and came into the land of Shinar. They were presented with an opportunity for a new beginning; the possibility of faithfulness and virtue was set before them. The story of the tower of Bab'el is reflected so often in man's repeated failure to follow through on such opportunities. It is the story of our own personal failures also, for the story is about each one of us.

This is the point we wanted to make in this discussion of the Tower of Bab'el and the building of the first city after the settling of the ark. A new society is formed, but formed on the same basis on which Cain built his city, a drive toward egotism and self-centredness. We should not assert that everybody who was there, and taking part in the

building up of culture, society and civilization in that area of Sumeria⁵ (Babylon) was disposed to that kind of negative manner. The story is presented to emphasize our own struggle, the struggle of humanity in general. War, murder and all manner of wickedness flow from ego and self-love, and this is the great story, the great warning to us from all these narratives in the Scripture. This is the struggle we must all undertake in choosing the path of our own lives.

This story is about you, it is about us, it is about us as individuals and us as societies. To use our skills and abilities in a virtuous manner, to create something beautiful, creative, useful to mankind, whether it is in a great or small way, it is nevertheless a virtue which helps us in the struggle for our salvation and draws us closer to God, Who created the universe in beauty and made a fit place for man to live creating something that was shared by all humanity and all living things.

Hopefully when we read or hear the story of

5. Sumer or Sumeria. Chaldea did not exist at the time, and would not for several centuries. The Chaldeans retold the ancient Sumerian flood myths in details similar to the original.

the Tower of Bab'el, the story of Sumeria (Babylon), we will remember that the story is about universal meaning, about our choices between virtue and ego, unselfish love and self-centredness. Hopefully, we will come to understand that our great struggle to return to Paradise is the struggle to return to unselfish love, and in that unselfish love, to use all of the gifts that we have in a virtuous manner; that is, to create beauty, harmony, peace, love, something that will make mankind a little better and the life of the world a little more peaceful. This is what the story is really all about and what it is actually trying to reveal to us, so that we will know that this very struggle is taking place within each one of us, in our hearts every day of our lives.

COMMENTARY

WHY "BABBLE"

Why "The Tower of Babel?"

(The Origin of Our English Word "Babble.")

The Hebrews refer to the Tower of Bab'el as "Babel." This is a Hebrew play on words. The Hebrew word "vavel" means confusion, chaotic or babbling, and they made a word play on Bab'el. What actually transpired at the tower is something we can never know. It is certain that the various languages, races, and nations did not originate with the collapse of the society that built the tower. If we follow biblical chronology, there were already tribes in the Americas before the tower was built (indeed, before the flood took place). However, some sort of chaos and sever rupture in the society around the area of the tower certainly took place early in that civilisation's history.

While it is speculative to assign a given moment to the development of the story of the confusion of languages, there are a few events which

might have spurred this. With the fall of the old Sumerian kingdom, the cuneiform tablets of the era were no longer “readable” to the new rulers. In a destructive war, ziggurats, such as the “tower of bab’el” would have been destroyed, the tablets could no longer be read by the conquerors, and the myth of the destruction of the tower and the chaos of the languages could have been born from something as direct as that, particularly when the conquerors could not speak or understand the language of the conquered. Doubtless, the myth had some roots, and the mythos itself carries a useful moral message.

THE CYCLE OF THE PATRIARCHS

13

ABRAHAM, SARAH AND THE PROMISE

(Gn. Chapter 12-23. Aprox. 1850 BC)

While the story of Abraham and Sarah brings us into the truly historical era, it was recorded from oral tradition. The story is set in the era of written history. Inscriptions that appeared in every area of the great fertile crescent and the Nile Valley record major events, and cuneiform tablets record more daily and personal aspects of life. However, this story was not written down before around 550 BC. We know this from the text itself.⁶

Why would God call him out of that land and take him to another one, if He wanted him to be a witness to Him, to the Truth, the Living One, an

6. The story records that Abraham (Abram) was called out of “Ur of the Chaldees,” but the Chaldeans did not exist as an organized tribe in the epoch of Noah, and they did not enter the lower Tigris-Euphrates region until around 900 A.D. It was not until about 600 A.D. that the Chaldeans formed a dynasty and government in the region of Babylon and Ur.

apostle as it were, and to give to him and Sarah both this promise? Maybe we could speculate that Sumeria was given over so deeply to a kind of idolatry and the rising of the monarch as a divine person so God placed Abraham and Sarah elsewhere.

Perhaps, however, there is another reason: because Canaan was in the centre of the world of the "fertile crescent" in which the most ancient known civilisations developed.⁷ Here, the great empires of the world met and so much of the trade and travel passed through. The Egyptian, Babylonian and later Chaldean, Assyrian, Hittite and other empires, finally the Greek Empire of Alexander of Macedon, all of these came together, encountering each other around the area of Canaan. This means much of the information and influence exchanged between the civilisations passed through

7. We are aware that there are more ancient civilisations than those in the Fertile Crescent. Some of them vanished when the sea levels rose following the end of the last ice age between 12,000 and 10,000 years BC. Others, such as those in India vanished because of local climatic catastrophes. Tamil is the oldest continuously spoken language on earth, for example. Their early cities are under the sea in the straits between India and Sri Lanka, and date back to about 8000 years BC.

that area. As a result, God is calling His apostles Sarah and Abraham to that place, where witness can be given to all of the activity that goes through this area. In a way this is the proper centre for the dissemination of the true faith in God. Abraham heeds God's will and he is called to this great challenge, "Come out of your father's house, out of this land of your ancestors and I will lead you through a great wilderness and a desert, on a great, long, arduous journey to a land you have never seen, know nothing about and where you have not so much as a place to put your foot that you can call your own, and there I will make you the father of many nations."⁸

Abraham believed, and he followed God and went to that place to which he was called.

Not all of us are called to such an extreme exercise of faith, but we are called and we have to make a choice. Sometimes the choice is to leave a place where we are being spiritually destroyed, even though we have roots, a home, family and people there. Yet we realize that spiritually it is a

8. His father Terah went with Abraham, and they went up and lived in the town of Haran in the region of Padan Aram.

place that is not satisfactory for our salvation and we need to go someplace else, because our salvation is far more important than all these other considerations.

We need to trust God to lead us to the place where we should be. Abraham could have said "Look, I do not have anything there, no land, no relatives, no people, if I move down there with my flocks, sheep, my people, my tribe, those who are already there are going to resent it, they are going to be angry and may try to destroy us." He could have found all kinds of excuses, like the men in Christ's parable, "there was a certain ruler who made a wedding banquet for his son and he called for those who were invited," but they all made an excuse why they could not come.

Abraham made no excuses, he simply packed up and went. This is a choice that we, too, have to make often: between the things that are material that we might possess or have and things that are spiritual; a choice between paradise and alienation.

This story is not only about Abraham and Sara; it is also about us, about our choices and our priorities, about our relationship with God, with

Christ Jesus. We, too, have been given great promises which would come to us through Jesus Christ, “whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature...” (2 Peter 1:4), if we believe and live by faith, as it is said, “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness” (Rm.4:3).

14

ABRAHAM AND LOT

Peace triumphs over Ego

What is it about the character of Abraham that might show us why God chose him as his chief apostle in this era, and chose him to establish that centre where God would reveal the faith?

Abraham is not shown to be perfect, he lied in Egypt about Sarah, his wife, and caused a great deal of distress by saying that she was his sister and allowed Pharaoh to take her into his household because she was a beautiful woman.⁹ This caused a great deal of distress with the result that he was more or less thrown out of the land of Egypt instead of being put to death. God preserved Abraham and Sarah, for he had given a promise to Abraham that could be fulfilled only

9. Although the story is dubious since Sarah would have been at minimum 65 years old at the time. We are told at Gn.12:4 that Abraham was 75 years old when he left Haran for Canaan. At Gn17:17, we find that Sarah is 10 years younger than Abraham. She was 65 when they departed from Haran. The same incident is said to have happened another time at Gerar (Gn.20:2) but the same story is related of Isaac and Rebekah, in the same setting and under the same circumstances at Gerar (Gn.26:6-7).

through Sarah.

Nevertheless, we will find Abraham to be both generous and ethical in his overall behaviour.

Abraham brought his nephew Lot into Canaan with him. One of the things we notice is that Abraham is not full of ego and self-centredness. He is interested in peace; he does not want strife between himself and his brother's son. This concern for peace brings him to suggest that he and Lot take their flocks and their people and part company so that there will be no conflict between them. He does this in a very unselfish manner. Abraham suggests that Lot can choose which direction he will go. "If you choose to go to the left, I will go the right. If you choose to go to the right, I will go to the left."

He gives Lot the choice instead of insisting on the choice himself, choosing the best land for his own use. In a reversal of Cain's action, although he is the older and the one with authority and power, he yields to the younger man, the one who is under his authority. He gives Lot the first choice. Lot looks down on the green valley of the river Jordan and chooses this waterway, as far down as the southern shore of the Dead Sea, in which he will graze his flocks.

We see that Abraham is conscious of the possibility of strife and resolved it in favour of peace and he was unselfish and allowed Lot to choose the better land and the better area for himself. Abraham deals in every way honestly and fairly with the people with whom he is intermingled now in Canaan. He does not take things that belong to someone else, and there is a negotiation, a price, a purchase, an alliance for everything and every bit of land that he needs.

Such choices confront us regularly in our daily lives. It is difficult to choose peace over getting our own way or yielding to someone else even when we are wrong. It is, however, blessed and righteous to yield to others for the sake of peace even when we are right. How much strife and heartache could be avoided if, in parish meetings or parish council meetings, people were always ready to yield to the choices of others for the sake of peace when doing so would cause no harm.

Moreover, do we in all cases and every time deal fairly and justly with all people? In all these matters, Abraham is an example for us to follow.

THE RESCUE OF THE CAPTIVES

Abraham's Lack of Greed; Appearance of Melkhisedek

The “Great Rift” is a significant geological feature. It stretches from the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon down into the region of the African Great Lake in Mozambique and Kenya. It includes the valley of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, the Gulf of Aquaba and the Red Sea rift region. This rift has developed over millions of years as the two tectonic plates in the region continue to separate. Eventually, the rift will open wide, turning the east side of it into an island with a salt water strait between it and the mainland of Africa. The Gulf of Aqaba will then extend up at least to the dead sea.

This area is highly seismically active. Although the northern portion from the Gulf to the source of the Jordan has become dormant, the lakes and rivers of fire that characterise the area are still quite active in the

African portion, with surface volcanic activity.

In the time Abraham, the south end of the Dead Sea was a valuable source of salt and bitumen, and this is why some towns were located in that area. Trade in salt and bitumen,¹⁰ made these small cities quite wealthy. It was not a particularly hospitable region; eruptions and their attendant earthquakes were a constant threat, but the economic value of the area certainly raised the envy and greed of neighbouring warlord “kings.”

Sometime in the 1700s BC,¹¹ a consortium of warlords, led by Kedorlaomer (Gn.14) moved toward the allied cities on the plain south of the Dead Sea. These included Sedom (Sodom), Gommorah, Zoar and others. These towns were subjected as “vassal states” to the consortium for several years. The allies finally decided to engage this consortium in a pre-emptive

10. Bitumen is a form of tar. Also referred to as “asphaltum,” it has been a major trade item since at least 40,000 B.C. Used to waterproof reed boats and the roofs of reed houses, it was also used in ancient construction.

11. Some sources place Abraham early in the 1800s B.C., however this is not realistic. Jewish scholars place his birth at about 1800 B.C., which, in their reckoning, is 1948 years after the creation of the earth. The events of Abraham’s life take place in the 1700s B.C.

battle and get free of them. The battle took place in the Plain of Siddim which was filled with pits of bitumen, and was won by the consortium, while the allied warlord “kings” fled. The consortium carried off many captives to be sold as slaves, and a great amount of military equipment and treasure. Among the captives were Lot and his family and retainers.

When Abraham learned of this disaster, and the capture of his nephew Lot, he pulled together those of his own men who were trained, and some from tribes allied with him and pursued the army of the consortium. Abraham defeated this enemy and freed their captives, recovering the treasures that had been taken. The grateful warlords of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the other cities told Abraham that he could keep the treasures for himself, but only release the captives to return home.

Here we see the principle that we seek in this story. Abraham did not go to war to obtain anything other than the freedom of his kinsmen. He refuses to take so much as a thread or sandal strap for himself. He has no avarice or greed for anything. He has fought only for the freedom of the captives. He does nothing more make a tithe (10%) of the goods to the High

Priest Melkhi-tzedek, the King of Shalom.¹² Abraham neither desired nor accepted anything for himself.

This is the second time we have observed the lack of overriding egoism in Abraham. He gave his nephew Lot his choice of the grazing land, desiring peace above his own rights, and now we see that he is free of avarice and greed. He has refused a considerable treasure, demonstrating his own righteousness along with his courage and care for others. Is this not why, in the wisdom of God, this man was chosen to receive the Promise, and become a prophet of God and forerunner of our Saviour, Jesus Christ?

12. We understand this Melkhi-tzedek to be a fore-image of Christ. His name means “righteous king” or “king of righteousness,” and he is referred to as the “King of Shalom” (Shalem), which indicates “king of peace,” but refers to Jerusalem.

16

ABRAHAM'S INTERCESSION

A Revelation of Compassion

(Genesis Chapter 18)

There are many peculiar aspects to this story, but these are not the object of our examination. We are interested in the moral lesson that is here for us, and that speaks to each of us and our own lives and conduct.

We must note that the visitation of God-the-Word and the two angels to Sarah and Abraham is a profound revelation in itself. Not only is God reaffirming His promise to them, but we understand the appearance of God-the-Word with the two angels as a “type” of the Trinity (not the Holy Trinity itself, of course).

You will recall that the Lord came to Abraham at Mamre, accompanied by two angels. Not only does God repeat His promise to the prophetic couple, but He announces His intention to destroy the cities of the plain (including Sodom and Gomorrah) because of their wickedness.

There are two aspects of this narrative that concern us here. The first is a comparison of the spontaneous and heartfelt hospitality of Abraham compared with the brutish lack of hospitality and the evil intent of the men of Sodom. The second aspect is the compassion of Abraham. When God mentions that He intends to destroy the cities of the plain because of their wickedness, Abraham intercedes. He is prepared to see the guilty go unpunished for the sake of even a few innocent people. God is agreeable in this intercession, but it seems that, aside from Lot's immediate family, there is no one in the twin cities who is righteous or redeemable. As we shall see, God had already determined to save the righteous Lot and his family.

Abraham, despite his flaws, is among the greatest persons in Scripture. At times, he is overcome by fear and acts in ways that shame him, but in an unselfish gesture, for the sake of peace, he allows his nephew Lot to choose the better grazing ground for his flock. When he has rescued Lot and the citizens of the plain from the five warlords ("kings") he refuses to partake of the spoils because his actions were motivated by the highest intentions. He demonstrated a compassion and lack of prejudice that is singularly admirable and in the end he

demonstrates a total unwavering faith in God, as the Apostle says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Rm.4:3; Ga1.3:6).

Abraham has demonstrated to us the reasons why God had called and chosen him. A man who could curb egoism and power for the sake of peace, and give great benefit to another rather than choosing it for himself, is also a man without greed, who risks even his life to save others. Moreover, he is moved by a deep spirit of compassion and true justice. These are qualities that we, as followers of Christ, should strive to accomplish in our own lives. These are the great moral lessons that the holy prophet and patriarch Abraham offers to us.

COMMENTARY

On the Graphic Rejection of Human Sacrifice

We are not discussing the “sacrifice of Isaak” in detail in this text. There are complex theological aspects that do not fit into the context of this work. However, let us say only two things about the "sacrifice of Isaac."

First, it appears that the main feature of this incident was a graphic rejection of human sacrifice, a revelation that, no matter what the neighbours of Abraham might have thought, God did not accept a human sacrifice.

The second is that, since the people of that epoch were inclined toward sacrifice and sacrificial rituals, God provided some other form of sacrifice for His people until they should mature and progress beyond all such considerations. Having their own sacrificial rituals helped keep the Hebrews from falling into the pagan religions around them.

Many of the holy fathers understand the sacrifice of Isaac as a fore-image of Christ, but one must also see

in Abraham's unquestioning acquiescence a sign of extreme faith. God had promised that Isaak would carry Abraham and Sara's seed forth into a populous nation, and he had total faith that, no matter what, God would fulfil that promise as the Apostle remarks: "Accepting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure" (Hb.11:19).

LOT IN SODOM

The Dangers of Assimilation

As we read the details of the story of Lot and his family, it becomes clear that Lot is assimilating into the community in the city of Sodom. We see no more mention of his flocks or his tribal people, and his family is married into the inhabitants of the city. We are not told what Lot's occupation is at this point, only that he has preserved the faith revealed to Abraham, and that he has maintained the spirit of hospitality and openness to strangers that his uncle Abraham had demonstrated, so far, that is. How far his family's assimilation might have gone is something we cannot know.

Since Lot has maintained the faith and an appropriate disposition, God has sent two angels to him to warn him to flee from the city before it is destroyed.

We should pause on this portion of the story to reflect on the ease with which one can assimilate into a culture or community which is inimical to the faith and to a moral life. This can happen easily enough

when a person begins to rise in a corporate or other business setting. It certainly happens often enough as one moves up in politics. The corporate world is far from any moral or virtue matrices. Assimilation into a system which can be spiritually and morally deadening is easy enough. It can consist in something as ordinary as a peer group in school. As Orthodox Christians, we might do well to think carefully through our decisions concerning careers, educations, even neighbourhoods we consider living in if we wish to have a stable and Christian family life. We have no idea how often Orthodox people do give consideration to these factors, although we trust that many do.

With these thoughts in mind, and the ease with which one can negatively assimilate, let us say once more that the Old Testament is about “you.” It is about each one of us and our spiritual struggle in life.

COMMENTARY

About the Dead Sea Settlements

Between 50,000 BC and 10,000 BC, Lake Lisan occupied the area stretching from the Sea of Galilee to some 60 km south of the present shoreline of the Dead Sea. This indicates that the land was much more well-watered and fertile in the distant past. Although much of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture, were written around 550 BC from oral tradition, the idea of Palestine as a productive land “of milk and honey” may be borne out by the extent of this fresh water lake.

Sometime around 12,000 years ago, Lake Lisan began to dwindle. There may have been a number of climatic reasons, however, the eruption of the Jabal al Druz volcano just east of the Sea of Galilee was a major cause. The eruption dislocated much of the drainage that had carried water into Lake Lisan. Other seismic, volcanic and tectonic plate activity also interrupted the outflow of the lake as well as changing the courses of some of the streams that fed into it. In the epoch of the

Genesis and Exodus stories, there may have been a remnant of Lake Lisan along the Jordan Valley, in the form of a wider stream and a more well-watered area.

What remained of Lake Lisan itself by the time of Lot's presence there was the Dead Sea. The south shore of the sea was already covered by salt flats and pitch (asphaltum) pits, particularly in the Siddim flats. There have been "pitch volcanos" in the area and even underwater, for centuries. Salt and pitch were valuable commodities in the ancient world. Pitch was used to waterproof ships and boats as well as the roofs of reed houses. Salt is a necessity of life. This explains the presence of the large town or "cities" in that rather desolate region. Great wealth came from the control of these commodities. There must have been considerable warfare as neighbouring warlords sought to appropriate the sources of the commodities from the towns that occupied the area.

The ruins of cities presumed to be Sodom and Gomorrah have been uncovered, and there is considerable certainty about the identity of Zoar, the ruins of which have also been explored by archaeologists.

Both the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea continue to shrink, largely due to human activity.

THE STORY OF LOT

Fleeing to Zoar

(Genesis Ch.19)

Following the thought of my theological hero, Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky, we will ask, "What moral value does this story have?"

The question is more significant since there are elements of the story that raise important questions about its accuracy.

A fundamentalist would perhaps reduce this matter to a question of law or perhaps just blind obedience. In that case, we would have to assert that there was no essential moral meaning at all nor a moral choice, but only a legal connotation and an act of self-preservation. Here, we are faced with a conflicting concept of what morality consists in. The crux of this is the detail about Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt as punishment for her having disobeyed God's command not to look back once they had fled from the city. A literal understanding of this narrative would make God appear incredibly petty and vindictive. In

many Greek myths some deity turns someone into a stone, a star, or by some other magical act turns them into an animal or other inanimate object.

Here, however, we are speaking of man's interaction with the living God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. There must be a significant moral point in such an unlikely story.

We had already mentioned the problem of the gradual assimilation of Lot, his family and kinsmen, into the culture and society of Sodom and Gomorrah. When Lot is warned by the angels to flee from Sodom, he appears reticent at first. At least one of his daughters has married into the culture, and all have become citizens of the city-state. Indeed when the angels lead Lot and his family out of the city, one of his daughters and his son-in-law chose to remain behind.

The family has been warned not to look back at the burning cities of the plain, but to set their faces toward Zoar. But, alas, Lot's wife looks back and perishes.

In this incident, we have a second important spiritual lesson. When we are struggling to come out of bondage to passions, we are often tempted to look back at them with regret and a sense of loss. If we allow this

temptation to take hold, then we can suffer a great setback. A person who has taken the moral decision to stop watching internet pornography, for example, might decide to keep a note of his passwords in his desk drawer. This means that he is thinking, “just in case.” An alcoholic or narcotic addicted person, once they have taken the decision to become liberated from that bondage, cannot risk “looking back,” but must rather keep their eyes, the eyes of their mind and soul, fixed on their goal – fixed, as it were, on Zoar.¹³ Any looking back can destroy the entire struggle. One must always remember that one is never “cured” of the disease of alcoholism or narcotic addiction, one is always only in remission. Looking back at the place of their bondage can be fatal to their struggle.

This detail of the story really is about us. It is easy for us to assimilate into the negative aspects of the era in which we live; an era of gambling, alcohol and drug addiction, of addiction to internet pornography, etc. In an epoch of greed, self-centredness and shallowness, we can drift into the same condition. We can also be lured into a spirit of destructive religious fanaticism and

13. Saint Andrew of Crete makes this point in his Great Canon.

religious addictions.

As we struggle to free ourselves from such spiritual illnesses and from our addictive passions, we can find ourselves turning around and looking back with longing at the very things we are fleeing from. Perhaps this is best summarized by our Saviour, "When an unclean spirit goes out of one, it wanders in dry places, seeking rest... Then it says, 'I will return to the abode that I came from, and when he has come to it, he finds it swept and decorated. Then it takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and the last condition of the person is worse than the first.'" (Mt.12:43-45).

We cannot hold something back in reserve. We cannot say, "I'll just save one cigarette, just in case. I'll save one pornographic picture, just in case. I'll just put the password to the porno site under my desk blotter. Oh, I won't use it, but I won't throw it away. I will keep my needle even though I am giving up heroin; I'll just keep it here in the drawer for a souvenir." What we are really doing is preparing ourselves to fall back into the passion.

LOOKING BACK AND FALLING DOWN

We end up in a much worse way than we were in the first place. Our resolve will have been undermined, our struggle would have been for nothing and our fall will be much deeper. That is what we are being told in this part of the story, what we are being warned about. Just as our Saviour told us about the house that was swept and garnered for the demon, so he brings back seven more wicked than himself. I believe this story about Lot and his wife and fleeing to Zoar is really telling us the same thing. There is a time when you have to cut yourself off completely, absolutely from whatever is dragging you down spiritually, and often physically as well. Very seldom does something affect you spiritually that does not affect you also physically as well. So cut it off, turn your back on it, go away and do not look back and do not save any little remnant of it that might lead you to fall back into the same trap, to the same passions, to the same addictions all over again. Otherwise, spiritually you can turn into a pillar of salt. Spiritually, you know if you fill a field with salt nothing is going to grow there. There will be no spiritual growth, once you have allowed yourself to turn into a

pillar of salt by falling back into a passion that you knew was wrong, know is wrong, knew it was destroying you and knew it was destroying those around you. And suddenly you are walking back into the city and being destroyed all over again. Only this time, the passion is much deeper, much more powerful, and the struggle is infinitely more difficult.

COMMENTARY

About Patriarch Isaak

We noted earlier that, when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaak, it is easy to reach an erroneous conclusion about the matter. Isaak was the promised and long awaited son of Sarah and Abraham. He was the one who was to carry on the generations of his parents and establish the Holy Nation, the nation of the covenant. Shockingly, God commanded Abraham to take his son to Mount Moraiah and offer him as a burnt sacrifice. (Gn. Ch. 22) As we know from the story, God does not permit Abraham to carry out this human sacrifice, but rather replaces Isaak with a ram, and the ram is offered up as a sacrifice instead of the son.

It may be easy to simply dismiss the story as a test of Abraham's faith and his obedience to God. There has to be some actual revelation taking place here, however. To begin with, the tribes round about Abraham offered human sacrifices, often their own children, to Baal and Molech, the idols of the Canaan-

ites and Philistines, and other tribes. By ordering such a sacrifice and then refusing it, God is making it clear that He does not condone and does not wish human sacrifices. By providing a ram for the sacrifice in place of Isaak, God provides a ritual for the Hebrews so that they will not be attracted by the rituals of the idolaters. They will have their own sacrificial rituals, with particular meanings in connection with their relationship with the Living God.

The offering of the only begotten son of Sarah and Abraham is also seen as a fore-image or prophecy about God giving His only begotten Son because of His co-suffering love for mankind.

While there is a cycle of stories about Abraham, and another about Jacob, there is, surprisingly, not an actual cycle of stories about Isaak. One thing that is particularly notable, however, and we must mention it, after Abraham departed this life, we are told that “Isaak went up and settled by the ‘well-spring of the Living-One Who sees me’.” (Gn.25:11 Hb.). It will be by this name, the Living-One that Moses will encounter God on Sinai, and the God of Abraham will be revealed to him. Note that Moses will also introduce to Israel a sacrificial system, with special meanings to each ritual,

that will help keep the Hebrews from being seduced into the sacrifices of the idolaters around them when they return to Palestine. Moreover, it will be in the land of Midiyan, one of the sons of Abraham by his second wife Ketura, that Moses will encounter “The Living-One,” the “One Who Lives” (I Am).

22

JACOB

The Deceiver Pays the Price

(Genesis Chapters 25-30)

[Preface: We read, in some versions of Scripture, “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” This appears very harsh and unjust. Some colleagues of mine who are Jewish, and Hebrew Scholars tell me that this is a misunderstanding. They say that the actual reading should be “Jacob have I loved; I have loved Esau less.” It seems reasonable that Jacob was chosen to receive Isaac’s mantle because he was the more sober, conscious of duties and responsibilities, and thus able to lead the Hebrews more conscientiously and wisely than was Esau. The expression about loving one more than the other is a chronicler’s expression, and not God’s own words, since God loves everyone equally. It is unfortunate that some have doctrinalised this expression to support the heresy of predesti-

nation.]

Misdeeds often find their way home. That was certainly the case with Jacob.

We remember how Jacob took advantage of his older brother Esau when the latter was desperate. Jacob acquired his brother's birthright by treachery and deceit (Genesis Ch.27).

It is true that Esau was wild and careless. It is also evident that Jacob will lead the Hebrews better than would Esau. Nevertheless Jacob was guilty. Having induced Esau to relinquish his birthright as the eldest son of Isaak, Jacob next conspires with his mother to deceive his blind father. He disguises himself as Esau and obtains his father's blessing as his heir. This was all done by disguise and deceit. But Jacob will discover that "what goes around, comes around."

Jacob receives God's promise at Beth-El (Genesis 28: 12-19) so clearly it was God's will that the more sober and faithful Jacob should inherit Isaak's mantle.

When it came time for Jacob to take a wife, he is sent north to his uncle Laban in Padan Aram, who has two daughters. When Jacob meets his cousin Rachel it is love at first sight. Jacob negotiates a marriage agree-

ment with uncle Laban. The price for his daughter is seven years of labour with Laban's flocks and herds.

Jacob worked for Uncle Laban the full seven years, and then requested that Rachel be given to him as his wages. And here, the deceitful Jacob is in turn deceived. Laban, after a feast no doubt with much wine, disguises his eldest daughter Leah and takes her to Jacob's dwelling. Unknowingly, Jacob consummates a relationship with her, and she is now his wife. And "in the morning, Jacob saw that it was Leah [and not Rachel]; and he said to Laban, 'What have you done to me?' Did I not serve you [for seven years] for Rachel? Why have you deceived me." (Genesis 29:25).

Having thus disposed of his older, less attractive daughter, Laban loosed his second punch. He will still sell Rachel to Jacob, but it will cost him another seven years of servitude. Jacob is so deeply in love with Rachel that he accepts, and a week later consummates a marriage with Rachel.

Jacob's deceptiveness is not over yet, but he has paid with fourteen years of servitude for having deceived his father. It is surely not an accident that, as he took unjust advantage of his older brother, he is now deceived and taken advantage of through the older

daughter.

We humans are often inclined to use some form of deception to get what we desire, but we should bear in mind that there is always a price to pay for it. But Jacob's sorrow is far from over. He will eventually experience his greatest grief in the disappearance of his favourite son Joseph.

THE VIRTUE OF ESAU

Forgiveness is the wellspring that quenches
the fire of hell in our hearts

If we write off Esau as being “a loser” or simply immoral, we do both him and ourselves a great disservice. We have much to learn from the “Red Son.”

As is so often the case, we are led by our own emotional chaos to judge too quickly, too harshly and too unwisely. Let us see the great and deeply moving lesson that we must learn from the one who appears to be “the loser.”

You will recall all that has been done. Jacob deceived his brother, robbed him of his birthright by trickery, and now returns to his father’s land with his family, retainers and flocks. Jacob is tormented by anxiety and fear (and one might hope with pangs of conscience) because he fears that his brother might seek to take a terrible revenge on him for what he had done. As he approaches Canaan, Jacob sends agents and gifts to his brother, hoping to assuage any thought of vengeance on Esau’s part. Esau’s response is a great

lesson to all of us, and we see the greatness of the man's heart:

Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau was coming toward them with four hundred men. So Jacob divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two handmaids. Then he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children behind, and Rachel and Joseph the farthest back.

Then Jacob went on ahead of them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, as he approached his brother. And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, placing his head on his shoulder and kissed him, and they wept.

Then Esau lifted up his eyes, and saw the women and the children, and said, Who are those with thee? And Jacob replied The children which God hath graciously given thy servant. Then the handmaidens came near, they and their children, and they bowed themselves. And Leah also with her children came near, and bowed themselves,

and afterward, Joseph and Rachel drew near and they bowed themselves.

And Esau said, What is the meaning of the flock I met? [*Jacob had sent it as a gift to appease his brother in case he was angry*] Jacob replied, These are to find grace in the sight of my lord. Esau said, I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself. And Jacob said, I beseech thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my gift from my hand, for I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou hast been pleased with me. (Gn. 33:1-10)

May God grant that we all be given the gift of being able to not only forgive from the heart, but show love and brotherhood to those who have offended us. The offence that Esau might justly have felt against his brother is far greater than the offences that we might feel have been done against us. Let us rise to the virtue of Esau “the loser” and sincerely, from the heart, forgive all offences against us.

JOSEPH IN EGYPT

Suffering and Sorrow in Order to Serve (Genesis Ch.41)

Joseph was obviously called by God for some particular service to Israel, to the continuation of that apostleship of the nation in its particular place.

Nevertheless he had revelations of his brothers bowing down to him and he was bit of a conceited young man because he went around boasting about it and of course his brothers were irritated and upset with him and became more and more angry. They already envied him because he was the father's favourite. But he provoked even more envy; he was seventeen years old and immature and he was not going to be able to fulfill his service to God before he also had gone through sufferings and hardships and been purified. Having learned some meekness and humility he would be able to carry out God's will and fulfill the plan that God had for him in the unfolding of the story of man's fall and movement toward the redemption which was to come through the promise of God in the fullness of

time.

Joseph's brothers, moved by envy to be sure, but also irritated by their boastful brother's irritating manner, seized him and cast him into a pit. At first, they wanted to kill him but his brother Ruben intervened, suggesting that the brothers just throw him into a pit and abandon him. In fact, Ruben intended to rescue him later. God had other plans. He intended for Joseph to be the forerunner of the Hebrew sojourn into Egypt. There first Joseph and then Israel, would be tried in the fire and prepared through humbling and suffering to continue the apostleship of Abraham and Sarah in the promised land. While the brothers were having their lunch, a caravan going into Egypt to trade passed by that way. The brothers decided to sell Joseph into bondage so that he would be carried away into Egypt.

Now this is certainly all worked out in the order of God's plan. God was preparing Joseph to become the salvation of his brothers and his father when the great famine would strike that land and they would have to go someplace in order to survive. Egypt was the only option, and in Egypt, so long as they were under the protection of the outcast brother, they would

thrive, but later, they would learn the humiliation of slavery. In their bondage and servitude, they would long for the land promised to them by their Creator and be prepared to, in meekness, to place all their hope in God.

It is not difficult to see how this applies to us as well because very often we, as Orthodox Christians, can fall into a kind of conceit and arrogance, a delusion of self assurance that can work against our spiritual struggle and rob us of a life in Christ. This could happen to anyone of us, thus sometimes we need to be humbled and reminded that our assurance is in Jesus Christ, not in ourselves. That humbling can come through any number of ways. It can come through our own mistakes and errors, it can come about as the response of other people to our own conceit and it can come about because God allows that we should be sometimes attacked, sometimes slandered, sometimes maligned, sometimes even physically attacked, but all such events occur because God cares for us and, as a loving Parent, does not want to allow us to destroy ourselves. In the midst of every trial and tribulation, if we accept them with patience, we can be purified by them, remembering that " we know that all things

work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rm.8:28). We sometimes react or over react to them, but when we learn not to over react, when we learn to accept this kind of humbling that comes to us, then we can experience a growth and development, and we can more completely fulfil God's will and God's plan for us. In so many aspects of life we often need to pass through some kind of failures or some kind of humbling experiences in order to make us better people and to make us true followers of Jesus Christ. These things can come upon us as much of a blessing as something negative.

Joseph will be completely forgiving to his brothers in the fulness of time, to receive them, to make it possible for them to survive, but at the same time prepare to the way for Israel to become humbled and to become purified through suffering to become the kind of servants of God that they should be. And this of course as you remember, will take a very long time and the amazing thing is that in the suffering and the exile that is to come upon Israel they do remember the Living One who sees them, the true and living God.

EPILOGUE TO GENESIS

In closing our journey through Genesis, there is one point we should pause and think seriously about. Our narrative begins with man in full communion with God, in a relationship of unselfish love between the man and the woman, together with God. It descends into ego, self-love and alienation, Passing through murder, degradation, betrayal. God recalls mankind from alienation through Noah, and brings him from corruption into a new land through Abraham and Sarah and bestows promises to all mankind through them. We journey on through human weaknesses and failing, through treachery and again, betrayal. We pass into exile in Egypt and God's providence in the midst of our arrogance, envy and yet more betrayal, and we shortly pass with the Hebrews into the crucible of suffering and apparent hopelessness. It is our own story, the story of each of us in our weaknesses and falling, and the vale we must often pass through before we can lift up our eyes and see the light and experience our exodus from darkness. Our narrative of mankind begins in paradise and ends "in a coffin

in Egypt.”

THE EXODUS CYCLE

26

COMMENTARY ON EXODUS

The Revelation of the Cross as Symbol of Liberation from Bondage

An interesting aspect of Genesis is the focus on internal family conflicts. The Book of Exodus will take us into much deeper and more profound conflicts.

The Book of Exodus is difficult to approach. How do our lives, struggle and experiences find a shadow in this epic story? Great revelations unfold in the desolate and forbidding landscape of the Sinai desert, but so do shocking and deeply disturbing events. Most of those events will not pertain to the purposes of our discussion and we will pass over them in silence, with perhaps only a few footnotes. However, it is not useful to ignore them altogether, as most Sunday School teachers and pastors do. There is something inherently dishonest about doing so. They are not only a part of this story, but of the story of mankind — the darker side of the story which should always be attended to with the

hope that humanity will strive to rise above it.

The most significant lessons from the Book of Exodus concern Christ. The representations of victory through the sign of the cross permeate the Exodus. Let us examine the types and symbols and see how great a revelation they present.

Moses himself is a type of Christ. Moses is born in simplicity at a time when Pharaoh has reduced Israel to bondage. The ruler has ordered the extermination of all newly born male children among the Hebrews for fear that they will grow into warriors capable of staging a rebellion. Herod will do something similar when he hears that Christ has been born.

We hear nothing about the youth and coming to full maturity of Moses. We will encounter details of his life only after the incident that begins his preparation for his great calling and ministry. Moses will flee away into obscurity among a tribe in Sinai that is descended from Abraham and his second wife Ketura – the Midians. Here, he will learn more fully of the God of Abraham, the God of Israel, of Isaak and of Jacob – "The Living One Who sees me."

You will all be familiar with the story of how Moses is called by God through the burning bush and

journey back to Egypt to liberate the Hebrews and restore them to the land of Abraham. We will not retell the story here; most of you are familiar with the negotiations between Moses and the Pharaoh. You will recall the plagues sent against Egypt in order to convince the Pharaoh to set the Hebrews free.

The pivotal incident, and the first one that concerns us here is the last plague, the death of the first born children of the Egyptians. Through Moses, God has sent several plagues upon Egypt in order to convince Pharaoh to release the Hebrews and allow them to return to the land of Canaan. Pharaoh continually refuses so God unleashes the last plague. The "Angel of death" will sweep over Egypt and bring death to the firstborn children.

Moses commands the Hebrews to kill a lamb and making a cross shaped sign on their doorposts with the blood of the lamb. The "angel of death" will "pass over" those houses and the children in them will not die. The power of death will be withheld by the blood of the lamb from which the sign of the cross has been traced.

This is the first "Pascha", the first "Passover". It is a type and prophecy of our redemption by Jesus Christ, and here we must pause to see what this incident teaches about our own salvation.

PASCHA (PASSOVER) AND THE REVELATION OF THE CROSS

The Orthodox Dogma of Redemption is summarised in the word Pascha (Passover). The withholding of the power of death symbolised by the blood of the lamb traced on the doorpost of each house in the form of a cross is a great revelation of the nature of mankind's ultimate redemption and salvation. This is why we do not use the word "Easter" in place of Pascha for the feast of the Resurrection of Christ.

The Orthodox Christian dogma of Redemption differs radically from the neo-Christian doctrine of Atonement through "substitutionary sacrifice." The neo-Christian notion of Atonement is based on the mediaeval law for duelling. It was developed after the year A.D. 1000, although it had roots in theology based on Roman civil law.

We must remember that the Paschal Lamb was not a sacrifice and was never an atonement offering. It

was a sign of liberation from bondage.

The Orthodox Christian dogma of Redemption is literally Pascha – the defeat of the power of death. “Through the fear of death, man was all his lifetime held in bondage” by whom? “By him who held the power of death,” that is, the Evil-One, Satan (see Hb.2:14-15). And how is the power of death defeated? By the death and resurrection of Christ. But there must be more to this story which must unfold as we proceed to look in the mirror of the Scripture and see ourselves in it. Christ is our true and perfect Pascha (Passover) because, by overcoming the power of death, He ransomed us from death and thus redeemed us from our bondage to Satan. Christ is the “Theantropos”, the God who became man because of his co-suffering love for mankind. He is perfect God and perfect human, reconciling man with God in Himself, and conquering the power of death as “one of us,” in the human flesh. The “Cur deus homo,” (reason why God became man) is simply because of His co-suffering love with man and desire to liberate man so that man could become a partaker of His Divine Nature (Pt.1:4), that is become deified and share in God’s immortality.

Christ is, thus, referred to as our Paschal Lamb,

our true and perfect Pascha (Passover), having conquered the power of death on our behalf. The Pascha (Passover) in Egypt provided us with a prototype of the Pascha that was to come through Christ, and also offers us the first clear prophecy of the Cross.

Now, let us examine the manner in which the image of the Cross is revealed to us in the Exodus.

THE CROSS AND THE PARTING OF THE SEA

We have examined the first revelation of the prophecy about the cross of Christ.¹⁴ We have examined the nature of redemption and the meaning of Pascha.

Now let us continue through the Exodus and see how the sign of the cross becomes a trophy of liberation and victory.

Pharaoh finally relents and gives the Hebrews permission to depart from Egypt. Moses, however, is likely aware that they must leave with all haste as the ruler is likely to change his mind and desire revenge.

As the Hebrews approach the Sea of Reeds,¹⁵ they see Pharaoh's army, far in the distance, pursuing them. In terror they turn to Moses, and Moses turns to God.

14. The "Protoevangelion" at the beginning of Genesis refers to the cross in a very oblique way, and does not involve an image of the cross.

15. The Sea of Reeds. In the Hebrew original of Exodus, it is the "Sea of Reeds" that Israel crosses, not the Red Sea. The Sea of Reeds is at the northwest end of the Red Sea.

On God's command, Moses lifts his staff and, bringing it down, traces a straight line over the sea. To the utter astonishment of the Hebrews, the sea splits along the axis of the line that Moses has traced. The Hebrews flee to safety along the dry pathway through the valley created between the two walls of water.

The fear is not over yet, however. Pharaoh's army races onto the same pathway in hot pursuit. Then, Moses once more lifts up his staff and traces a line across the opening in the sea, and the waters close upon the pursuing army, sweeping all away. Moses has closed the sea by completing the sign of the cross with his staff.

The Pascha (Passover) mystery has been revealed: the promise of the defeat of the power of death through the cross and the divine Paschal lamb. Now, the defeat of Pharaoh and liberation from bondage to him foretells the defeat of the "spiritual Pharaoh", Satan, and our liberation from bondage to him.

Now, the long journey through the wilderness begins. Let us see what this tortuous exile and struggle toward the promised land has to say to us, and what it reveals to us about the path of our own salvation.

WILDERNESS OF THE SOUL

Why, after being delivered from bondage in Egypt, do the Hebrews now wander through the wilderness for forty years?

This, too, is an image of our salvation. When we are baptized, we say we are "born again" through a miracle of water and the Holy Spirit. We pass through the "red sea" of baptismal waters and are delivered from bondage to the spiritual Pharaoh, Satan. We are born again as spiritual infants, given the grace of regeneration, and we begin a spiritual journey.

After several hundred years in Egypt, the Hebrews have a lot of pagan baggage and an inclination to idolatry that must be overcome. We, too, whether baptised as infants or as adults, have a lifetime of spiritual struggle to pass through. For those who have been led to believe that their journey is complete when they "accept Jesus", we can only suggest that they still have the same temptations, and still fall into as many of the same sins as before. Our will must learn to cooperate with divine grace before we can make any spiritual

advance. The struggle is set before us, and just as the Hebrews had done, there will be time when we are tempted to return to our old bondage.

When we are reborn through water and the Holy Spirit, we are expected to grow and develop into maturity. Even if we were "born in the faith" and reared in an Orthodox Christian family, we must "journey through the wilderness" of assimilating the faith into our own hearts and making a dwelling for Christ in our own hearts. Often, this includes the struggle to overcome ethnic nationalism and insure that we do not belong to the Church as part of our ethnic identity, but because we truly identify with Christ; often we must unload some of our ethnic "baggage". For those who enter the Church from other religious groups, this journey may also involve discarding a lot of theological baggage.

We have a life long struggle with the "baggage" of our fallen human nature. It will be helpful at this point to look at a brief summary of the Orthodox Christian concept of redemption.

THE NATURE OF REDEMPTION

The mystery of redemption is co-suffering love, not divine revenge in the form of a substitutionary sacrifice

The Orthodox concept of redemption may be briefly epitomized as follows. While “atonement” is not a usual Orthodox Christian term or expression, we may look at its actual meaning. "Atonement" is really "to remove (or overcome) the cause of separation." In other words, man is separated from God by sin (that is, by his constant "missing of the mark"), and so he is in bondage to death. Since man sins continually because of the power of death, sin separates man from God and death perpetuates the separation (and vice versa). By death, we fall short (again, by "missing the mark" — sin) of our original destiny, which is to live through unity with the Creator.

The following summary of the Orthodox teaching about redemption is drawn from various works by Fr John Romanides:

Christ saves men, who have fallen into the power of the devil, by breaking that power. He became Man for this purpose; He lived and died and rose again that

He might break the chains by which men were bound. It is not His death alone, but the entire Incarnation, of which His death was a necessary part, that freed men from their captivity to Satan. By becoming Man, living a sinless life, and rising from the dead (which He could not have done unless He had first died), He introduced a new power into human nature. This power is bestowed on all men who are willing to receive it, through the Holy Spirit. Those who receive it are united with Christ in His Mystical Body, the Church; the corrupted human nature (the bad habits and evil desires, which St Paul calls "the old man": Rm.6:6; Eph.4: 22; Co1.3:9) is driven out by degrees, until at last it is expelled altogether, and the redeemed person becomes entirely obedient to the will of God, as our Lord Himself was when on earth. The prisoner, is set free from the inside; his mind and body are both changed; he comes to know what freedom is, to desire it and, by the Holy Spirit working within him, to break his chains, turn the key and leave the dungeon. Thus, he is freed from the power of sin. God forgives him, as an act of pure love; but the condition of his forgiveness is that he must sin no more. "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rm.5:8-9) and we

are made capable of ceasing to be sinners by the power of Christ's Resurrection, which has given us the power to struggle against sinfulness, toward moral perfection. We must not ignore the word "struggle."

The advantage of this Orthodox teaching is that it is firmly based on the New Testament. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2Cor.5:19); the act of reconciliation is effected by God in the Person of His Son, for it is man that needs to be reconciled to God, not God that needs to be reconciled to man. Throughout the New Testament we find the proclamation that Christ has broken the power of the devil, to which mankind was subject (see Lk.10: 17-18); 11:22; 1Cor.15:25; Ga1.1:4; Co1.2:15; 2Tm.1:10; Hb.2:14; Jn.10:11; 12:31; 16:11; 1Jn.3:8; and frequently in Rev.). Moreover, the Orthodox Christian teaching of the atonement requires no "legal fiction," and attributes no immoral or unrighteous action to God (as the neo-Christian Atonement doctrine does).

Man is not made suddenly good or treated as good when he is not good; he is forgiven not because he deserves to be forgiven, but because God loves him, and he is made fit for union with God by God's own power, with man's own will co-operating....He is saved

from the power of sin by the life of the risen Christ within him, and from the guilt of sin by God's forgiveness, for which his own repentance is a condition. Thus, salvation consists in the union of the faithful with the life of God in the Body of Christ (the Holy Church) where the Evil-One is being progressively and really destroyed in the life of co-suffering love. This union is effected by Baptism (the Grace of regeneration) and fulfilled in the Holy Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, and in the mutual, cooperative struggle of Orthodox Christians against the power and influence of the Evil-One. This is precisely why the last words of the "Lord's Prayer" are, "deliver us from the Evil-One," and not "deliver us from evil."

THE BITTER WATERS OF MARA

The Origin of the Blessing of Water

"By the waters of Babylon, we hung our harps upon the tree. By the waters of Mara, we hung our hope on God's grace."

The second blessing of water, and the direct antecedent to our ritual blessing of water takes place soon after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea).

Moving on into the fearsome wilderness of Sinai must have caused great anxiety for the Hebrew host. Placing their trust in Moses, and he placed his in the Living God, they pressed on none the less.

When the travellers began to run out of water, fear and anger began to ripple among them. Imagine their despair when they came at length to the waters of Mara, and found the water bitter and undrinkable.

God told Moses to take a certain tree and cast it into the water. When Moses had cast the tree into the water, it became sweet. All drank of it, and filled their

containers with it for the journey that lay ahead.

In the Orthodox Christian Church, we take this tree to be a prefiguring of the Cross of Christ, and the casting of it into the water to be a pre-image of the blessing of water with the sign of the Cross. The parting of the sea may not have been a blessing of the waters, but the hovering of the Holy Spirit over the waters at creation certainly was. It is from these actions, and others yet to come, that the Orthodox Church developed the rite for the blessing of water on Theophany. Here, we have a revelation about the power of the Cross of Jesus Christ, and a fore-image of our salvation through the tree of the Cross, which turns the bitterness of death into the sweet hope of the resurrection.

THE SAVING CROSS ON MOUNT HOREB

There could be so many episodes to pursue in the Exodus if we were preaching sermons on them. Some we might expand upon, and some we might try to explain away or cover up.

However, we are concerned here only with the revelations of the Cross and how, as prophesying about our salvation in Christ, the prefiguring of the cross saves the Hebrews from death in Egypt, leads them out of bondage, turns dead water into living water, and defeats their enemies.

We could discuss how many times Israel became beaten down with anxiety, fear, and faithlessness and longed to return into bondage. Such is the experience of many of us in our struggle and we recognise it. We could speak of golden calves and broken tables of the law, of the tabernacle with its icons and the ark of the covenant, even genocides but, for now, let us move on to Rifidim and the clear prefiguring of the cross that

saved Israel.

Then Amalek appeared at Refidim and made war with Israel. Then Moses said to Joshua, Choose strong men and go out to make war on Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in mine hand. Joshua did as Moses had commanded, and engaged in battle with Amalek. Moses, Ahron and Hur ascended to the top of the hill. It happened that when Moses stretched out his hands, Israel prevailed: but when he let [them] down, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands became heavy and they took a large stone and placed it under him, and he sat down on it. Ahron and Hur held his hands up, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side so that his hands remained steadfast until the going down of the sun. Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. (*Ex.17:8-13, from the Hebrew Scripture*).

With Aaron and Hur, one on either side of Moses, holding up his hands, outstretched in the form of the cross, Israel defeated a much stronger adversary. We can see so much prophetic foreimaging in this scene. Christ on the cross with the two brigands on either side of Him; the cross itself as a symbol of ultimate victory. It is interesting that, in Greek, the names of Aaron and his administrative assistant Hur are Aaron and Or, and with each one standing on either side, helping Moses hold up the sign of the cross, their initials are the Greek letters “alpha” and “omega.”

The Orthodox Christian Church has always seen this as another revelation of Christ and the sign of the Cross. Scripture makes a clear connection between Moses and Christ. Moses led God’s people out of bondage in Egypt, defeating Pharaoh; Christ redeems us from bondage to the spiritual pharaoh. The sign of the Cross with the blood of the lamb saves the children of Israel from death, just as Christ ransoms us from the bondage we are held in through the fear of death (Hb.2:15). As Moses leads Israel to safety through the sea and on to their journey toward the land of promise so, as Paul tells us:

“Moreover, brethren, I would not leave you

without knowing how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; all being baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.” (1Cor.10:1-4).

COMMENTARY ON THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE TABERNACLE

Tabernacle, Temple and Church

Aside from the revelations and prophecy of Pascha and the cross, we also find the foundation of Orthodox Christian liturgical iconography in Exodus.

The pattern and decoration of the tabernacle that God revealed to Moses must be given some comment. These are directly reflected in the structure and decoration of Orthodox Christian temples throughout the entire history of Christianity.

Let us look at the revelation presented by the three divisions of the tabernacle, the Temple of Solomon and the Orthodox Christian church.

We understand the divisions of the church as purification (the vestibule in which baptisms are served); illumination (the nave in which the whole

community worships together); and glorification (the altar, which is a type of paradise).

The Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and the temple were also a type of that paradise in which God had fellowshiped with humanity in a direct and personal manner. God had revealed His presence on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. However, because of man's condition of alienation, the Holy of Holies was closed off completely, and even the high priest could enter only once a year. God had demonstrated His presence and care for mankind, but also revealed that man had closed off paradise to himself through his alienation from the creator. We are purified through the grace and action of the Holy Spirit in baptism. We gain illumination, again through the action of the Holy Spirit, in our unity in worship with the congregation of the faithful. We are called to a relationship of unselfish love amongst ourselves, amongst the faithful gathered in their Father's house in the name of Christ Jesus.

In the altar – the Holy of Holies – through the prayers of the congregation led by the priest, Christ our God will also come into our midst and truly fellowship with us in Holy Communion; and, note that Holy

Communion is the antidote to alienation.

The tabernacle and the temple are prophetic preparations for the communion of Christ with God's people. On the day of Christ's crucifixion, the veil of the temple is torn in half because paradise and real fellowship with God are no longer closed off from mankind. The cross of Christ has become the key that unlocks the gates of paradise.

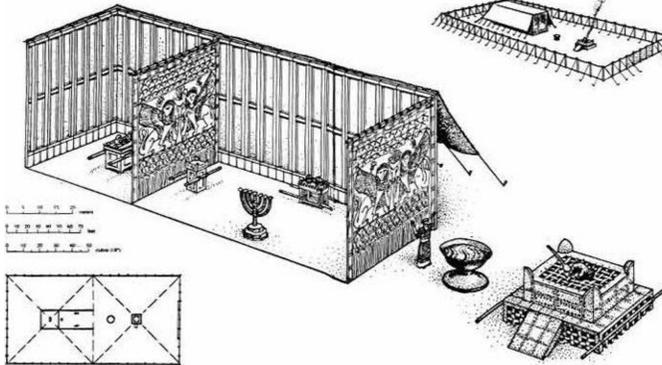
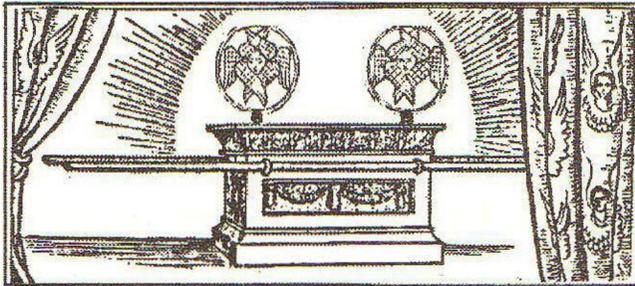
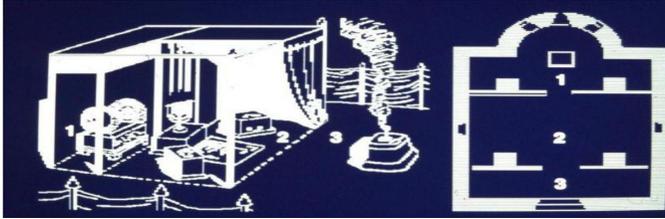
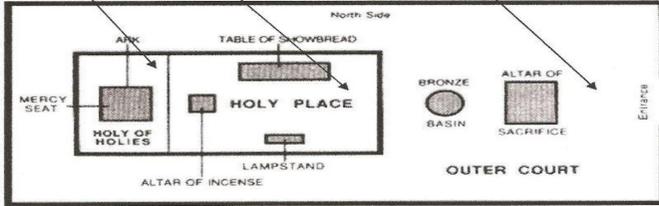
In the same manner, at the beginning of the Liturgy, the Holy Gates are opened into the altar, proclaiming that the gates of paradise are opened again to mankind and we are invited into communion with God in Jesus Christ. The Holy Gates should be left open during the entire Divine Liturgy because of the revelation.

What was the purpose of the massive iconography in the tabernacle? Indeed, how is it that God forbids graven images altogether, and yet also commands that the church in the wilderness of Sinai be filled with icons of "that which is in heaven," that is, the holy angels. Even on the Ark of the covenant there are graven icons of angels. Clearly there is a difference between the images that are forbidden and the icons that God commands us to make. We are aware of iconographic

images in Solomon's temple also, as well as in many of the earliest synagogues.

The iconography in the tabernacle, as well as in Orthodox churches, brings us visually into an awareness of the unity of heaven and earth, that we have entered into the house of the living God to worship toward His throne. In Sinai, the priests entered the tabernacle surrounded by icons of the angelic, heavenly host as a visual reminder that this is to be understood as the House of God. Since Christ brought the fulness of Grace, we add the saints to the icons of the angels, and sometimes we portray the whole life of Christ, and even the whole scripture on the walls of New Testament temples.

Such is the continuity of revelation and the unbroken communion of the faithful of all ages and generations, from the Exodus to the contemporary Orthodox Church.



COMMENTARY ON THE SACRIFICES

Saint John Chrysostom, in his "Sermon on the Genealogy" observes that the Hebrews lived under different worldly government systems: the patriarchs, judges, kings and incorporation into empires, but under no system were they the better or the worse.

With the death of the patriarch Joseph, the Hebrews found themselves in bondage in Egypt. The traditions of the patriarchs were kept alive, though perhaps weakening with each generation.

With Moses, we have passed from the era of the patriarchs and the call to a simple faith in the promise of God. We enter the era of the law and the judges of Israel and see a transition from the promise and a simple faith in that promise, to a covenant and a system of law "enforcing" that covenant. The simplicity of the era of the patriarchs has gone. The complexities of dwelling among other peoples with different concepts of gods and idolatry, and even human sacrifices and horrendous practices, required something new. It

required a covenant between God and Israel, together with a code of law opposing idolatry and the practices of those in whose midst the Hebrews will find themselves. That law goes beyond external behaviour and teaches about the proper condition of the heart, but such things are difficult to master. Nevertheless, this is the only way to keep Israel from adapting to the idolatries around them.

THE SACRIFICES

Doubtless, the traditions of Abraham, Isaak and Jacob had been passed on by the elders. Moreover, the Hebrews had the conscience of God as "the Living One Who sees me," even if only in a confused form. By the time of Moses, there had been changes in the mentality of the Hebrews in Egypt and some degree of mental assimilation. The simple focus and faith in the promise was no longer sustainable in and of itself.

In order to keep Israel from participating in the sacrifices to idols – even a sacrifice of their own children, Moses develops a sacrificial liturgy for Israel. Much of the sacrificial liturgy will deal with thanksgiving and repentance, rather than attempts to assuage

wrath and anger. Only one offering will be said to "bear the sins" of the people. This was the scapegoat. The scapegoat was said to bear away the sins of the people. It was not sacrificed, rather it was driven away into alienation in the wilderness, driven out of the camp and cut off.

The place of worship and the sacrifices offered by Israel were intended to give a point of unity for the nation and a concept of God that transcended all the idolatry and false religion encountered by Israel. This was manifested first of all by the Tabernacle at Sinai. The Ark of the Covenant was the focal point of that centre. The Ark, the temple and the sacrifices were given for the sake of the people, not for the sake of God, Who would later exclaim through the holy prophet, "If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High...." (Ps.50:12-14-KJV). "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hos.6:6)

Since the death of Joseph in Egypt, the Hebrews had been essentially leaderless. Moses appears as both

prophet and judge of Israel. With the return of Israel to the promised land, the role of “judge of Israel” is established. It is from this point in the Old Testament that we will continue our journey. The judges were not only arbiters of the laws. Joshua and Jephtha, for example, were also warlords, Eli was a priest. We will look at the lives of only two of the judges: Jephtha and Samson. Both men give us insights into ourselves and our human nature.

THE CYCLE OF THE JUDGES

34

JEPHTHAH, THE TENTH JUDGE¹⁶

Hasty and Ill-conceived Vows

Trying to influence God's judgment and decisions is nothing new. It is often difficult to open heartedly and simply accept God's will. When one receives a distressing diagnosis from a doctor, the reaction is frequently "bargaining" with God, making promises and vows in return for healing. Simple prayer or even the Church healing service sometimes do not seem to be enough.

Making vows to the Lord is a serious matter, and both the motive for and the nature of such vows should be given great consideration before making

16. Jephthah was judge for six years in Gilead. There appears to have been some overlapping of the tenure of the judges. It may be that some of them did not serve as judges over the whole of the twelve tribes, but over various tribes or regions.

them.

Even in more simple matters, we may be tempted to offer even foolish vows. Jephthah was a leader of Israel, one who should have been well grounded in faith and certain of God's love for Israel. As he led his warriors into battle, it was certainly right and pious to offer prayers to God, and even sacrifices according to the law of Moses. If one decides to offer a special vow, however, it ought to be done with great care and seriousness. Jephthah makes a vow to God that could only be seen as careless and foolhardy. The motive for his foolish vow brings us once more to the revelation given in Eden, and through Cain: Egoism.

In the days of Eli, the 9th Judge of Israel, Jephthah was born in Gilead. While he proved himself to be a valiant and capable warrior, since he was born of a prostitute, his brothers prevented him from having an inheritance from their father. Jephthah departed with a company of men.

Sometime later, there was an invasion of the land from Ammon and the elders of Gilead sent to beg Jephthah to come and lead them in battle. Jephthah agreed to lead them only if he would become the chief and judge among them if he was victorious.

We are told that the "Spirit of God came upon Jephthah and he advanced against Ammon. With such a blessing from God, why did not Jephthah simply trust in the Lord? Why did he feel he had to "encourage God" with a vow, perhaps made in haste? But he vowed that he would offer as a burnt offering "whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me" if the Lord would give him victory. The reward would be elevation to be chief and judge among the Gileadites.

Almost predictably, as the triumphant Jephthah approached his house, his only child, his daughter rushed out to meet him. Scripture assures us that Jephthah fulfilled his vow just as he had spoken it to God. Was it necessary to have made such a vow, or any vow, to God rather than just trusting in Him – especially, since we are told that the Spirit of the Lord had come upon him as he headed toward the battle?

It is far better to pray to God that His will be done in our lives, and offer him a humble heart and our sincere repentance. We may wish to strengthen our way with vows, but we should approach the making of vows with great caution and humility, lest we not weigh the consequences and fail in fulfilling them. God had not only never required a human sacrifice but had

even forbidden them, yet Jephthah entrapped himself in his ill-considered vow and paid a heavy price for it. Vows to God ought to be made with some trepidation, and not in the hope of material gain or power.

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SAMSON, THE TWELFTH JUDGE

Even Those Chosen and Called Can Fall

Samson is one of the most singular figures in the Hebrew scripture. He was chosen by God even before his birth for a unique service. On the surface of the story, Samson appears to have fallen so short of his calling and vocation that one wonders that he comes down to us as a hero. Did Samson fulfil his calling? Let us take another perspective on what that "ministry" actually consisted in. Perhaps with such a perspective we can grasp how this violent, less than moral womanizer, fulfils a prophetic role in Israel.

Samson was one of those prophetic persons born by an intervention of God. Manoah of Zora of the tribe of Dan, was childless. He and his wife fasted and prayed for a long time until at length, God chose them to give birth to a child whom He would call to a special mission.

Having endowed Samson with unique strength

and power, God commanded him to follow the path of a Nazarite. He could drink no alcoholic beverages, live in chastity, focussed on his calling, and demonstrate a pious life. Like all Nazarites, he was forbidden to cut his hair as a sign that he was "under power." His mission was to break the Philistine oppression of the tribal confederacy of Israel.

God has never turned His servants and faithful into puppets or robots, but rather He demonstrates His own strength through our weaknesses, as Apostle Paul tells us (1Cor.1:25; 2Cor.12:9). Samson is not compelled in his actions. He will fulfil much of his calling to help push back the Philistine oppression, yet he will succumb to his human passions in failing at his vocation as a Nazarite, and this will cost him his life.

From the beginning of his career, Samson appears far more like Esau than Jacob. Although under a Nazarite vow and a judge of Israel, he is unruly, lacking in self-discipline and displays no particular moral strengths. Beautiful Philistine women appear to be his primary interest. He shows little concern for the commandment and tradition of marrying within the tribe and nation of Israel. Finally, Samson takes a Philistine wife, contrary to the law, and this becomes

the source of his destruction.

While Samson does begin to weaken the Philistine's control over Israel, he does so as much from personal vengeance as from concern for his people. Indeed, he seems to have spent as much time carousing in Philistine territory as he did at home.

In the end, Samson is defeated by his Philistine woman. Most of you know the story of Samson and Delila. It is well known even among many who have never read Scripture. Delila, after several failed attempts, hears from Samson that his super-human strength is due to his uncut hair. While Samson is asleep, apparently from over indulgence in the strong drink that he is forbidden to touch, Delila has his hair cut off. With his hair shorn, Samson is powerless against a band of Philistine warriors who take him captive.

The Hair or the Vow: The Mystery of This Story.

Samson's uncut hair is central to this story, but it is not the message. His hair is certainly not the actual source of his strength, rather it is the primary symbol of his unique covenant with God, and God is the

source of Samson's strength.

The mystery and revelation here is that Samson is a "type" of Israel. For since the salvation from bondage in Egypt, Israel is under the Law of Moses and in a covenant relationship with God. Not that Israel yet grasps the nature of that covenant. We will see later how the holy prophets seek to make its meaning clear to Israel.

Samson may conceive that his strength is in the length of his hair. Just as Israel learned in the time of Eli that her strength is not in the Ark of the Covenant (1Sam.4:3-17), but in her relationship with God, symbolized in the Ark and the covenant that it stands for, so now we learn from Sampson.

For all that he has accomplished, Samson has not kept his Nazarite vows. Not only has he associated with harlots, but as a Judge of Israel, he ought not to have sought a wife outside the holy nation. The cutting off of Samson's hair was not something magical; rather it was symbolic of his violation of his vow and his failure, not as a warlord but as a spiritual judge of Israel and custodian of her laws and traditions. Samson has become unfaithful, his human passions have overpowered him. Samson did not suddenly lose his great

physical strength because his hair was shorn. His uncut hair was an integral aspect of his Nazarite vow. He had already broken that vow, and revealing the secret of the Nazarite order to an alien woman who had already attempted several times to deceive him was to further degrade his vow.

When Samson is captured, blinded and set to work in the mill, he does not recover his strength simply because his hair has regrown. Rather he has spent the time in repentance, seeking forgiveness for his sins, for his foolish violation of his Nazarite vow and the flippant manner in which he treated it. He received the fulness of his strength one last time in order to pull down the idolatrous temple, killing the leaders of the Philistines and at least interrupting, for a time, the oppression against Israel.

Can we not see in this an image of ourselves, when we also violate our relationship with Christ, moved by our passions, only to find ourselves spiritually weakened and blinded in our souls? It is not the Philistines that make sport of us then, but the demons, including those that exist in the chemistry of our own brains.

EPILOGUE: VOW AND COVENANT

Allow us to suggest that the mystery of this story is far more than meets the eyes. Samson is a type of Israel and his Nazarite vow is a type of the covenant. Since the deliverance from the bondage in Egypt, Israel has been subject to the law of Moses, and in a covenant relationship with God, symbolized by the Ark and its contents, and before the building of the temple, the Ark itself might have become an idol for some in Israel. We will discuss this when we examine the epoch of Eli as judge of Israel. Samson's hair may have become a personal idolatry to him. He seems to have forgotten that his strength came from God, not from his hair. In the time of Eli, we will see that the presence of the Ark does not ensure victory for Israel. Only fidelity to God can ensure this.

Samson's vow is symbolized by his uncut hair. Like circumcision, the uncut hair and the Ark were symbols of something far more profound. Outward symbols, however, are of no value without an inner transformation, as our beloved father Paul says, "a circumcised heart." (Acts 7:51)

The covenant was not a legal agreement, it was

intended to be a spousal relationship. Such a relationship involves mutual love and trust, and certainly fidelity. This is why the prophets use spousal language in critiquing the apostasies of Israel.

Samson is thus a type of Israel. He was certainly "gone a whoring" (Hos.4:12) in an idolatrous nation, as Israel so often did. He has exposed the mystery of his vow in the midst of violating it. As his spiritual eyes were blind, so now his physical eyes would now be blinded. Just as Israel fell into bondage through betrayal, so, in the same manner, Samson falls into bondage. He has "eyes but cannot see and ears but cannot hear" (Is.6:10) In the end, as Samson repents and restores faithfulness to his vow, he has a moment of redemption as he pulls down the temple of idolatry, at last fulfilling his vocation, the idol and its temple collapsing. Samson's life ends, no longer in alienation, just as Israel is recalled by the mercy of God, from its apostasy and alienation from God, time and time again.

Let our personal idolatries pass away also so that we know in the fulness of our hearts that fidelity to God, faithfulness to our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ are the only source of real victory for us.

THE SONS OF ELI

The Father's Virtue Does Not Guarantee

That of His Sons.

(1 Samuel 1:1-2:36)

Eli appears to have been the thirteenth judge of Israel. He also served as High Priest of the tabernacle, then located at Shiloh; this is where the Ark of the Covenant was kept.

Little is known of Eli, but he is seen as a diligent and pious priest. He was mentor to the holy prophet-judge Samuel, whom he taught well. Eli's two sons Hophni and Phineas, were priests serving in the tabernacle, however they betrayed their father's trust and training. They were careless about their service in the tabernacle, regularly committed adultery and abused the sacrifices offered on the altar.

We get an insight into the personality and piety of Eli by observing his mentorship and training of the child Samuel, the future prophet who would oversee the transfer of Israel from the era of the judges to the epoch of the kings. There is no reason to think that Eli

trained Samuel any differently than he had taught his own sons. Nevertheless, the sons betray both their father and God, bringing tragedy onto the family and descendants of Eli.

Positions of authority, power and privilege can develop negative traits in those whose will, faith and resolve are too weak to sustain them. This appears to have been the problem with Eli's sons. The narrative also tells us that Eli himself was lax in dealing with his sons' transgressions.

By comparison, the young Samuel, who was Eli's ward and helper, developed in a humble and obedient manner, serving God and the elderly Eli with zeal and piety. It fell to Samuel, whom God now called as a prophet, to reveal to Eli that his sons would soon perish and that the priesthood would depart from his family. Eli's own reverence and faith are demonstrated by the calm manner in which he receives God's will.

Rank, privilege and a sense of entitlement destroy many people, including many of our own clergy who can become arrogant and emotionally sterile once they have established themselves in their clerical rank. Often enough, however, it is an imaginary entitlement or sense of superiority that corrupts people, any one of us

might be susceptible to this.

COMMENTARY

THE ARK IN CAPTIVITY

As Samuel grew, both in age and in stature, all Israel understood that he was a prophet of the Lord. Israel was much in need of a prophet. The nation was spiritually scattered. Idolatry abounded and only the threat from the Philistines kept the tribes somewhat united.

While Eli was still judge and priest, the tribes of Israel gathered to go to war with the Philistines. They gathered their forces at the Eben-Ezer while not far away the Philistines marshalled at Afek.

When the battle finally came, Israel was defeated and withdrew.

As the elders of Israel pondered the defeat, they wondered why God had allowed it. They said, "Let us go to Shiloh and bring the Ark of the Covenant so that it might save us from our enemies." They sent to Shiloh to the defiled sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, demanding that the Ark be brought, saying, "Bring down the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of Hosts

Who dwells between the two Cherubs."

When the Ark arrived in the Israeli camp, they rejoiced greatly, but the Philistines were frightened by it, saying that the "gods of Israel" had come into the Israeli camp to help them.

Nevertheless, the Philistines engaged Israel in battle the next day and, perhaps to their own amazement, actually prevailed. Not only did they utterly defeat Israel, but they killed Hophni and Phinehas and captured the Ark itself, carrying it away as a trophy of war.

Surely the tribes of Israel were cast into despair and shock that God allowed their defeat and allowed the Ark to be taken captive. It would have seemed to them that God Himself was a prisoner of the Philistines.

This is the crux of the story. In their own idolatry, the Israelites had made an idol of the Ark. They had a superstitious veneration for the Ark but had not kept the covenant that it symbolized. The Ark was not the point, the covenant was. Nor did God literally live between the cherubim on the Ark, though His glory had appeared there on the Mercy Seat. It would now be for Samuel the Prophet to strive to bring them to a

vital faith in the Living God, turning their worship away from the object that testified of the covenant and toward a focus on God and the covenant itself. Like the staff with the bronze serpent, Israel had begun to make an idol of the Ark and been distracted from God Himself by it. Allowing the Ark to be captured was a step toward correcting this. God would not allow the Ark to remain in captivity. He would return it to Israel but it was necessary for the Hebrew tribes to realize that God is "everywhere present and fills all things." He is not limited to the space between the two cherubs on the Ark. As sacred as the Ark might be, it was neither God nor the dwelling place of God, for God cannot be limited in time and place.

Israel now moved a step closer to understanding the God with whom they had the covenant. There was a long way yet to go, and now the judges would pass into history and a new chapter of the story would begin, dominated by kings but led forward by the holy prophets. The struggle against idolatry in Israel was a long way from over.

RUTH

Whither thou goest, I will go
Finding God and coming to faith through
unselfish love

The story of Ruth is one of the most attractive narratives in the Hebrew scriptures. It is interesting that a book of the Old Testament would be dedicated to a gentile woman.

The elderly Naomi was an Israelite woman married to a man of a gentile tribe. She and her two daughters-in-law became widows and Naomi decided to return to her own people. Ruth was not willing to see her elderly mother-in-law set off on this journey alone. She evidently had a sincere love for the old woman. "I am going with you," she announced.

Naomi tried to discourage her. "You will be coming among a people who are strangers to you. I am old. When I die you may find yourself all alone."

Ruth's reply is so beautiful that it has found its way into poetry and songs ever since: "Do not entreat me to depart from you for whither thou goest, I will

go. Thy people shall be my people and thy God shall be my God."

Ruth travels to Israel with her aged mother-in-law, caring for her all the way. When they arrive, Ruth ekes out a living for herself and Naomi, with the back breaking labour of gleaning in the fields. She becomes a worshipper of God. Love has led her to faith in the Creator of heaven and earth, the true and living God. Her sincere love for the elderly Naomi was strong enough to lead her away from her own people, into a foreign land with very different customs and religion.

The thing that strikes one about this story of Ruth is that she came to a faith that was born of love. One's mind is drawn to the work of Apostle John that "whoever still has fear has not yet learned how to love perfectly."

Ruth had learned how to love, and her love overcame the fear of leaving her own people, her own family, perhaps abandoning the possibility of remarriage.

Ruth has something of a counterpart in the New Testament. The Canaanite woman who came to Christ seeking healing for her daughter was also a gentile. She dared to come to the Jewish teacher and healer, even

though she knew that the Jews would have nothing to do with gentiles. Her love for her ill daughter, however, overcame any fear that she had.

When the Canaanite woman beseeches Christ to heal her daughter, Christ reminds her that He has come to the Jews. He appears to reply to her in a cruel way, but only so that He can reveal something to those around them. "It is not proper to give the children's bread to dogs." She could have been deeply offended and walked away. Instead she humbly replies, "True, Lord, but the dogs eat from the crumbs from the Master's table." Christ then proclaims aloud for all to hear, "I have not found such great faith in Israel. Let it be as you wish," and her daughter was immediately healed. Here again is a faith born of love; a deep and unselfish love.

In the case of Ruth, she ended up marrying Boaz, an Israelite land owner. When he saw Ruth gleaning for grain that had been left on the ground in his field after the harvest, he instructed his fieldhand to leave plenty of grain on the ground for Ruth and her mother-in-law. After Ruth married Boaz, she became the mother of King David's grandfather, and thus an ancestor of Christ according to the flesh. She is one of only four

women named in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

A sincere and unselfish love led both these gentile women to faith in the living God and salvation. Such unselfish love is the key to a life in Christ. It is one of the primary goals that we struggle toward. Unselfish love is the path to real holiness and it is a force that defeats Satan, for he is the very antithesis of such love.

Love can overcome fear and Christ has proclaimed to us that love for God and our neighbour is the very hinge pin of all the law and the prophets. There is no other way to defeat the power of Satan in our lives than by struggling to acquire a deep, sincere, unselfish love for others, and with the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit, to strive to rise to a genuine, co-suffering love for others.

That the story of Ruth has a unique book in the Hebrew Scriptures tells us that her story had a great significance in the spiritual mentality of sincerely faithful and believing Hebrew people. Her inclusion in the genealogy of Christ in Matthew's Gospel also announces to us that the Gospel is intended for the gentiles as well as for those born of the promise. We understand that, through Christ, the promise reaches out to all of humanity. Above all, we suddenly realize

the power of love to conquer fear, to defeat evil and bring one to faith in the living God, and to everlasting life.

PROLOGUE TO THE
CYCLE OF THE
KINGS AND PROPHETS

Lawful authority can come from God; power is often from Satan. For every Cincinnatus there are a thousand Caesars, and among them there are more Neros than Octavians. Israel, nevertheless, desires a king, not by God's will, but by their own.

Samuel the Prophet has lawful authority according to God's will. He will give them a king, because they so ardently demand it, but he warns them that there is a serious downside to having a crowned warlord. Absolute monarchs, autocrats, do not handle power well. As we well know, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Even among those who are given authority with limited power and checks and balances on that power so often yield to the allure of the power and the ego-building passion that it induces, and strive to overcome the checks and defeat the balances. So it will be with the kings of Israel and even the prophets with

their divine authority will often fall victim to their lust and ego. As Cain killed Abel because of his offended ego and self-centredness, many prophets will also become martyrs.

It should be no mystery to us why the epoch of the holy prophets begins at the same time as the era of the kings in Israel.

Because the tribes around Israel had warlords (kings) who could call together and lead warriors against other tribes, the Hebrews felt insecure. After the Philistines defeated the Hebrews at Antipatras and even captured the Ark of the Covenant, the people of Israel began to desire to have a warlord king also. Samuel, who was the last of the judges of Israel and the first great prophet since Moses, was called upon to choose a king and anoint him in the name of God.

When the Hebrews demanded to have a king like the nations around them, in place of the judges who had led them, God consents. He warned them, however, that they would have regrets. No matter how well a king would begin his reign, power and the lust for power would corrupt him. Nevertheless, having a permanent, commanding warlord to lead them seemed necessary to the Hebrew tribes that made up Israel.

They felt the need for an authoritarian source of unity, not only for defence, but also for a concrete form of statehood.

In order that there would be a powerful and authoritative voice to rebuke those kings who overstepped bounds or violated the covenant, God raised up the holy prophets.

As we have seen, from Samuel the judge-prophet, to Malachi and John the Baptist, the moral voice of the prophets counterbalanced the actions of the kings. Some of the prophets were martyred, laying down their lives for this witness. The prophetic ministry that now arises is there not only to warn and chastise the kings if they begin to lead Israel away from the covenant, but also to defend the poor against the wealthy and the weak against the powerful.

The kings, even those chosen by God and with good beginnings, cannot avoid the lure of power, and the pitfalls of vanity. The only voice that could prevail against them was that of the prophets who lawfully spoke in the name of God and by direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The stories of the first four kings, the only ones that ruled a united kingdom of Israel and Judea, we

again see as our own story. We see the story of faith and betrayal in Saul, of faith and deep dedication overcome by the passions in David, of wisdom turned to avarice and foolishness in Solomon. We see how arrogance, great power, lust and a refusal to hear sound advice led King Rehoboam to later destroy the unified kingdom. Though called by God, they could not remain fully faithful to Him, nor could they govern the people with justice and integrity. The kings may have become the sceptres and swords of Israel, but the prophets were the conscience of the nation.

Let us see now how the actions of these kings reflect our own passions and inner struggles.

A NOTE ON NATHAN THE PROPHET

Samuel the prophet not only sought to guide and correct King Saul, but he also protected and saved David when he fled to Ramah; and it was Samuel who anointed David as king. However, it was Nathan the prophet who had the greatest influence on both David and Solomon.

Like King David, Nathan was a musician and composer. Nathan strove to guide King David and aided him in his efforts to

end idolatry in Judea and Israel. It was Nathan who told David that his sins made him unworthy to build the temple when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. Nathan brought David to repentance for arranging the death of Uriah in order to have his wife. (2Sam.12:1-15) The 50th Psalm was written as part of David's repentance. It was Nathan who warned the dying King David of the conspiracy of Adoniya to usurp the throne, and had Solomon proclaimed king. (2Ki. Ch.1) It was Nathan who also had a huge impact on King Solomon.

Nathan also wrote a history of the reign of King Solomon along with the Prophet Akiya and Joel the Seer. (2Chron.9:29, Sept)

The impact of Holy Prophet Nathan cannot be overestimated.

KING SAUL

Chosen, Anointed, Destroyed by Envy

ENVY IS AN ACID

THAT CORRODES THE SOUL.

As we know, Saul of Benjamin was anointed by Samuel to be king. He was given great authority in Israel and proved to be a good warrior and military leader. However, Saul began to yield to his ego and a lust for more power and wealth came to afflict him. Eventually Saul fell to a point that, while he still had a fear of God and of Samuel, he hearkened to neither and followed his own self-will. Kingship involves power and power is a corrosive spiritual acid. Saul further alienated himself from God by disobeying His command and turning to a "medium" or "channeller" as they are often called. Here, in brief, is the story of Saul, and our lesson:

When some of Kish of Benjamin's livestock went missing, he sent his son Saul and a herdsman out to search for them. Eventually, Saul decided to give up the search. The herdsman however convinced Saul to go to

the village of Ramah where a well-known clairvoyant named Samuel lived. Perhaps this man could help in the search.

At this time, the Hebrew tribes of Israel formed a loose confederacy and they were demanding that a king be appointed to knit the tribes together into a centralised kingdom.

Samuel the Prophet was also the Judge of Israel and he alone had the authority to anoint a king, for he also combines his position with the priesthood.

By revelation, when Samuel meets the young Saul, he secretly anoints him. He will later publicly select Saul as king in a religious ritual.

Saul proves to be a capable leader and courageous warrior. His relations with the prophet/priest Samuel began to deteriorate, however, when Saul repeatedly disobeys Samuel's instructions.

As both priest and prophet, Samuel's injunctions are to be taken seriously and followed. In the end, Samuel informs Saul that his kingship will be rejected by God. This means that none of his sons will become king. He will not even be replaced by anyone from the tribe of Benjamin, but rather a dynasty will be formed by a king from the tribe of Judah.

We are told two different stories about how David became involved with King Saul so we will pass over that matter. Whatever the case, David soon became famous as a military leader and songs began to be written about his military prowess. As David became more famous and more popular, Saul fell more deeply into envy. He developed a fear that David might take his throne from him. To make matters worse, Saul's son Jonathan became a devoted friend and supporter of David. Saul could not help but remember Samuel's words that the kingship would be taken from him. Saul's envy became so great that he made attempts on David's life and drove him away, declaring David to be an outlaw.

When Saul learns that the High Priest Akhimelech has assisted David, he murders the high priest and eighty-five other priests and then has every citizen of the priestly town of Nob slaughtered. His envy has driven him mad.

Once Saul has allowed himself to become consumed with envy toward David, he appears to have lost control of himself and weakened his own self-confidence. He becomes consumed with fear that somehow David will force him off his throne and take

the kingship for himself. True, Samuel told him that God would reject his kingship. He might have spent more of his energy in repentance, restoring himself to God's favour. Instead, he consumes so much time and energy pursuing David that he hardly has time to administer his kingdom. Envy consumed Saul and devoured his energies.

The manner in which this story speaks to us should be obvious. While we might never be driven to commit murder, some people will try by slander, gossip and other means to destroy someone they are envious of. Moreover, we can destroy our own lives through envy. Envy can rob us of our peace and deprive us of happiness. We can become bitter, lose our self-confidence and create a state of depression for ourselves.

Saul was a successful military leader and held complete authority and power but he allowed himself to live a life of bitterness and consumed his time and energy trying to destroy the one he was envious of, when he could have made use of David for the welfare of Israel. Saul had ignored the instructions and admonitions of God's prophet, Samuel, and this led to his catastrophe. No king of Israel would reign without a

prophet to admonish him, defend the faith and seek to protect the poor and disenfranchised from the pride and power of the king and those considered "noble".

The life of King Saul is a clear example of what can happen even to one who is called and chosen when that person gains power and wealth. We can gather from the narrative in scripture that power had driven Saul into a psychiatric state. We often refer to people as "power mad," and this kind of madness afflicted Saul and brought him to destruction.

We should see this as a story about humanity, and particularly about ourselves. We may never have power or wealth (which is also a form of power). We can, however, see some of the manifestations in the petulance and pettiness of people who have authority and some imagined powers. We are all susceptible to such delusion and destructiveness. Lawful authority can come from God; Saul received that. Power, however, often comes from Satan. The lust for power is always demonic.

KING DAVID

**A man after God's own heart brought down
by his own power.**

**Even the most faithful are not immune to
destructive passions.**

King David remains an enigma. We will never know the full story of his life. His years in exile, fleeing from the malice and growing madness of King Saul remain unclear. He appears to have spent the time as a brigand with a following, though he was clearly favoured by the high priest and his company of priests.

What we do know is that, as king, David gave Israel a political and spiritual centre in Jerusalem. This helped to stabilise the nation and give the tribes a real sense of nationhood. More important than his political and military accomplishments, David attempted to end idolatry in Israel. He made Jerusalem a "holy city" not only by bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the city, but by keeping idolatry out of Jerusalem. For this, God called David "a man after My own heart."

For all of David's spiritual accomplishments,

however, he was still a man of the fallen nature and the passions. He was capable of deep faith and service to God, but he was also capable of deep falls and sins. We all know the story of David's lust for another man's wife, and how he plotted the death of her husband so that he could have her. This terrible crime was not the only flaw and sin that we saw in David, but it stands out in our memories more than the rest.

The last and longest of our ten commandments is the tenth one. It commands us not to envy our neighbours or desire what they have. In a way, this commandment instructs us to love our neighbour and be happy for her or him because of what they have. It also demonstrates, however, that we should never take our faith and our moral strength for granted. No matter how much we pray and struggle, no matter what our position is in the Church, we are all capable of succumbing to the passions. When we struggle with the passions, we might do well to think about the lessons learned from those who are addicted to alcohol or narcotics. When these people have gone through rehabilitation programmes, even once they have got the addiction under control, they never say "we are cured; we no longer have an addiction." They correctly

say, "we have got it under control now, but we must always be on our guard and strive to keep it under control." It is precisely the same with the passions. We cannot pretend to have fully defeated them, rather we may strive to have them under control, but we must always be on our guard and strive to keep them under control. When we fall for one passion, if we do not repent and sincerely struggle with it, this can open the door to other, often worse passions. No one is immune. Even the passion of religious fanaticism opens the doors to a host of other passions. This is why "guarding the mind" is such a vital element in our Christian struggle. David's struggle was no different than that of all Christians, even though he happened to have had the power to fulfil his passions in greater measure than most of us do.

SOLOMON

Having Wisdom and Using it Are Two Different Things.

We have touched only a little on the reign of Solomon. King Solomon had followed David's loyalty to God. He opposed idolatry and desired to give the Hebrews not only a political centre, but a concrete, visible spiritual and religious centre. He hoped that this would not only establish the worship of the God Who had created the heavens and the earth, but strengthen the nation and finish the work of David in uniting all the tribes of the Hebrews into one state of Israel that could withstand any attacks against it from the outside. Moreover, Solomon wished to strengthen the faith of the people and lead them from the temptations of idolatry.

Solomon made his kingdom a significant power and extended its trade and commercial interest all the way down the east coast of Africa. He was also a great builder. We read of all his construction projects in the First Book of Kings, but none were so significant as the building of God's temple.

Nevertheless, these building projects came at a great price. The people of Israel were taxed to the breaking point, so much so that the bond among the tribes was weakened. The ten northern tribes were never that strongly bound to the two tribes of Judea in any case. Judea and its mystique of Jerusalem began only during the reign of David. The city and its location had no special meaning before the combined tribes of Judah and Benjamin made it their capital.

The united Kingdom of Judea/Israel was to last for less than 100 years. It appears that the Kingdom of Israel was actually a brief era of Judean hegemony over the various Hebrew tribes. For all his vaunted wisdom, Solomon left his empire on the edge of collapse. He had instituted forced labour in his building schemes and grossly overtaxed the people. Few unwise blunders could be so great for a ruler as alienating his people and turning them against him.

Moreover, his wisdom did not prevent him from falling into bondage to lust. He began to engage in sexual relations with women from every nearby nation and to take women from tribes with whom God had forbidden Israeli men to become involved. Despite his reputation of obedience to God and being the one

chosen to build the temple, he not only pursued strange women but had many concubines.

This brings us to a weakness that so many men have, especially in our internet era. Although, in our society, men have only one wife and could not begin to compete with a king as rich and powerful as Solomon or, indeed, rich and powerful men in our own era, internet pornography democratizes lust and leads people into vain and unfulfillable fantasies that eat at their souls. In our own time one of the biggest problems facing marriages is that so many men become addicted to on-line pornography. In their minds, they commit all the sins that Solomon, and many of the rich and powerful throughout history, have done. They take no thought for their relationship with their proper wife or with God.

People engaging in watching or reading pornography would never be able to do those things, and they also have no hope of fulfilling the dark phantasies that pornography creates. In its own perspective, however, it is the same thing. The story of Solomon's folly is really your story if you have fallen into pornography. This is a story about you building a wall of separation between yourself and God as you build a wall between yourself and your wife. Solomon, in the end, was just another fallen human being like the rest of us.

REHOBOAM

“Like father, like son” (but sometimes worse)

Greed kills. Lust is about more than sex

When King Solomon died, his son Rehoboam became king. Solomon's tax burden, the forced labour and the fear and inflexibility with which he had governed, weighed heavily on the people, especially those of the subservient ten tribes of the North. They sent delegations to King Rehoboam seeking relief. More than one such petition was sent. Then, a leader was found in the person of Jeroboam, a man who had been in exile in Egypt for many years. He had returned after the death of Solomon and now the ten northern tribes, the actual Kingdom of Israel, sought his leadership. They approached Rehoboam for relief from their intolerable burdens; "The temple is built and your father left you a beautiful palace. The towns have been fortified. You no longer need to levee such heavy taxes and forced labour."

The elder advisers around King Rehoboam counselled him to agree and lighten the burdens. Then, however, some of the younger firebrands in the king's

entourage advised, "Go after these disobedient subjects with a sword and a whip. Put them in their place."

This is just what Rehoboam did, and as a result, the kingdom was split with much bloodshed and bitterness. Nothing was left of David's kingdom except for Judea, the lands of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Jeroboam became ruler of the ten northern tribes, the Kingdom of Israel.

None of us has the power or position to create the kind of cruel and tragic circumstances that Solomon and Rehoboam did. We do, however, have the ability not to listen to people and to become angry and vindictive when they disagree with us and decline to do what we want, or even demand, of them. We do have the ability to refuse to behave with more empathy and compassion, and an unwillingness to develop them is the key to the way in which this Old Testament story applies to each of us and to the epoch in which we live.

We might each think of how often we have been too harsh, too demanding, too condescending and too judgmental of those who work for us or work with us. It could be that if you are a supervisor, you are making life harsh, difficult or impossible for those over whom you have authority. It could be the parish priest who

lords it over the parishioners and turns his parish into a personality cult, using various forms of manipulation to control and often misuse his parishioners. It could be the arrogant and puffed up bishop who governs priests through fear rather than proper discipline or parents who bully their own children.

JEROBOAM

Ambition is the catafalque of aspirations.

A bit of paranoia goes a long way. Betraying God for the sake of power (1 Kings Chapter 11). [*Note: This is 3 Kings in the Orthodox Bible*]

Jeroboam ben Nabaht worked his way up in Solomon's empire. He became the overseer in the building of an important defence work in Jerusalem. This happened at a time when there were bitter complaints about the exorbitant taxes and forced labour that Solomon had inflicted on the people. This was particularly resented by the tribes in the Northern Kingdom.

We should remember that David, Solomon and Rehoboam ruled over a minor empire, but it was the empire of Judea, and the ten tribes that made up the northern kingdom of Israel were essential under the rule of the Kingdom of Judea, made up of David's tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin.

Working with the tribes on the forced labour project in Jerusalem, Jeroboam heard the bitter com-

plaints about the taxation and corvee. He entered into a plot to pull the Northern Kingdom (Israel) out of the Hebrew federation, out of Solomon's empire. When Solomon learned of the plot, Jeroboam had to flee into Egypt and take shelter with Pharaoh Shishak.

When Solomon died and his son Rehoboam took the throne, he continued Solomon's harsh and extravagant government.

Jeroboam returned from Egypt. He then led a delegation from the Northern Kingdom (Israel) seeking to press Rehoboam to give some relief from the heavy taxes and forced labour (corvee). King Rehoboam responded by doubling down on taxation, and became more harsh in enforcement. As a result, the people of Israel declared independence from the Judean kingdom and declared Jeroboam king of Israel. The revolt was successful and Israel separated from the "House of David." Strife and warfare between Judea and Israel lasted throughout the reign of Jeroboam and Rehoboam primarily over the boundary between the two kingdoms.

Even with the strife, people from Israel still made pilgrimages to the Judean capital, Jerusalem, to the temple, where the Ark of the Covenant was. This

troubled Jeroboam greatly and he feared that these pilgrimages might rekindle a loyalty to the house of David and Judea. A movement to restore the united kingdom might develop.

In that era, while the "royal religion" of Judea was monotheist, the worship of the God of Abraham, the general population remained polytheistic, worshipping many gods. Jeroboam took advantage of this fact and after having built a capital for himself in Shechem, he build two temples, with idols of golden calves in them. The citizens of Israel were encouraged to worship in these temples instead of going to Jerusalem; the prophet Iddo confronted the king about having introduced this idolatry into Israel.

Initially, Jeroboam appears to have been concerned for the condition of the people of Israel, or perhaps he only saw in the troubles a path to power. Whatever the case, he was willing to betray God and the covenant in order to ensure his own power and wealth. Surely it would have been better to have trusted God and followed David's programme of overcoming the idolatry of the people rather than making idolatry the national religion.

We surely would never fall into something so

extreme, and most of us would never have power and wealth to defend. Let us reflect, none the less, that the problem with Jeroboam did involve his ego and self-focus. This is where the story can become our story. Anyone of us can yield to the pride generated by our ego and self concern that we can harm others in some way. Harming others with slander, derogatory remarks, trying to undermine someone else; all these are ultimately a betrayal of our relationship with God.

Eventually, Rehoboam's son Abijah, who had succeeded his father on the throne of Judah, defeated Jeroboam in a great battle. While he did not succeed in reuniting the two kingdoms, he greatly weakened Israel and captured Jeroboam's main temple of idolatry at Bethel, destroying the golden calf.

A SECOND CONTEMPLATION ON KING JEROBOAM I

We have seen how King Rehoboam doubled his father's foolishness and even tried to outdo him as a builder and as one who taxed and worked the people. This is especially difficult for the northern ten tribes which made up Israel. Saul, David, and Solomon were never actually kings of Israel. They were the kings of

Judea, and from David's time ruled from the city of Jerusalem within the boundaries of the tribe of Judah. Israel was really part of the petty Judean Empire. The first three kings came from the tribes of Benjamin and of Judah. They had managed to subdue the kingdom of Israel and expand the territory of Judea nearly to Damascus. David had built the Judean Empire and fully incorporated Israel into it, carrying the Ark of the Covenant from its resting place in Israel to the city of Jerusalem as a way of centralizing the rule over the various Hebrew tribes. Solomon had intensified control over the territories subject to Judea, and compelled forced labour and heavy taxation. His son Rehoboam, refusing to listen to the advice of his counsellors, made the tax and labour burden more heavy upon the people.

At length the people had had all that they could take. Now Jeroboam had returned from his exile in Egypt and took up leadership in the northern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel. The Israelites chose Jeroboam as a representative to go before the king in Jerusalem and state their case, asking for relief from the heavy taxation and the forced labour. Rehoboam was intransigent, unlike Pharaoh before and only increased

the forced labour and the taxation. Because of this, the tribes of Israel decided to break the relationship with Judea and elected Jeroboam as king, declaring their independence from Judea.

Much strife and warfare followed but eventually Israel succeeded in breaking their relationship of subservience to Judea. However, Jerusalem continued to be the place of the temple and the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, and therefore the centre of worship of the true God. Pilgrims continued to go from the ten northern tribes to Jerusalem to worship. This fact roused the suspicions of Jeroboam, and he became fearful that, since the people went to Jerusalem to worship there would again fall under the sway of Judea and King Rehoboam.

Israel had never actually been a monotheistic society. We know from archaeology that house gods and mountaintop temples had continued in Israel, but David the king had striven to centralise worship among the Hebrews and unite the country around the Living God. This had worked to a certain degree, but now King Jeroboam was worried about this centralization of worship and its focus on the Temple in Jerusalem. As his paranoia grew, as his lust for power grew also, he

began to plot ways to stop people from going to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple. The king determined to restore a pagan worship and lure people away from the Temple in Jerusalem. He caused two golden calves to be created, and then he founded a priesthood which is unlawful and had nothing to do with the Levites whom God had appointed as a source of priests.

Jeroboam had done this primarily to maintain his power and prestige. In fact, as I recall, he had included himself in this priesthood so that he was a kind of high Priest as well as being King.

When the city of Constantinople fell to the Turks, who are Muslims, many of the best and richest families in the city betrayed Christ and converted to Islam for no other reason than to maintain their wealth and their social status. The same thing was going on in the northern kingdom now. Jeroboam had betrayed God and led his people into idolatry for the sake of maintaining his power and his prestige. This is something that we have observed over the centuries. Many of the people in the territories conquered by Islam betrayed Christ and became nominal Muslims in order to preserve their wealth and positions.

And now let us see how this pertains to us. We

might profess to be strong and devoted Christians, and yet there comes a time when we may be tempted to turn our back on Christ for the sake of some worldly advantage or for the sake of fulfilling certain passions. It is something that we all are capable of no matter how much we want to protest that we are not. We can maintain the name “Christian” and yet live as if God did not even exist. It is done for political gain, compromising the teachings and life of Jesus Christ for the sake of political ambitions and donations, and pleasing the rich and the powerful, or just for the sake of being able to follow our own passions even when we know that they are wrong.

This is something we should always prayerfully contemplate and make sure that we are not making such compromises. This is something that can be so subtle that we do not at first realize that we are doing it. We can sometimes think that we have aspirations of doing something for others and end up yielding to our own desire for power and prestige and becoming ambitious. This is how ambition becomes the catalogue of aspirations.

KING JEHU

Even the chosen often fall

The struggle between lawful authority
and lust for power.

We are examining the reign of Jehu in Israel to see the tragedy that occurs when rulers lead their nation into catastrophe, and the people are swept along by the power of their leaders. This is also a large part of human history, not just Israel, because leaders and rulers are so often focussed primarily on power.

Judea, the tribe of Judah and Benjamin, centred on Jerusalem and the temple, managed, for the most part, to keep the faith intact. They did have some rather evil rulers, but in general, they managed to hold the faith better than the northern kingdom. As a result, we see that eventually the northern kingdom was permanently destroyed and many of its people were carried away into exile, and the kingdom itself vanished from history.

This scenario is sometimes troubling in the history of the church. We confess that the Orthodox

Church is the new Israel, and we often have some of these same clashes over power and territory within the church. Remember, however, that even though some leaders are carried away by power and the lust for power and wealth go quite astray, God is ever faithful to deliver us. One ought not to be surprised by this, it is to be expected because we are all fallen human beings. If, in the old Israel, when the rulers and people could see God's intervention and hear the words of the holy prophets, they could still go astray, then we must expect that it will sometimes happen among us as well. It is not surprising that it happens in our own day. But we can never allow ourselves to be knocked off the path or have doubts or have despair or become disheartened by these things because ultimately we depend on the one true King, our Lord, God, and Saviour Jesus Christ. Whatever goes amiss, whatever goes off the track or whatever goes wrong it will always be brought back into balance by the grace of the Holy Spirit. So our struggle is to say our prayers and to keep the faith and trust in God with the grace of the Holy Spirit to balance and bring all things back to where they should be.

How do we tie this together with "The Old

Testament is About You?" Because external piety can be simply a mask that covers something truly corrupt and ugly in people. Jehu was called to be king by God through His prophet Elisha. The holy prophet consecrated him because of his apparent piety, faithfulness and concern for the people. The minute he tasted power, however, he lost control and the kingly power no longer focussed on the proper worship of God, the truth and the commission of the prophet. Power enveloped and devoured his soul and this is something that we need to learn very deeply. Though consecrated to rule the nation with justice and peace, Jehu quickly showed himself to be a brutal tyrant and, as the scriptures says, he did that which was evil in the sight of God even though he had been sent by God in the first place.

In the New Testament, we see how our Lord Jesus Christ exposed the masks of the externally pious who were, in their hearts, cruel and vindictive. This kind of external piety is often feigned by people filled with malice, hatred and a self-righteous arrogance in their hearts. This is something that we will see many times in the Old Testament and among the Pharisees in the New Testament. We see it so many times around

us, and sometimes even in ourselves though we might be struggling against it. It is something that Jesus Christ seeks to deliver us from.

Christ spoke far more sternly to the self-righteous and hypocritical rulers of the people that he ever did to ordinary sinners. This is a warning to us as individuals and to groups. Our piety has to be something from the heart, a transformed heart, a heart that is transformed into compassion and into a desire to see people healed, not destroyed, healed, not punished. And if we can learn that, we will have begun to follow in the footsteps of Christ and have a life in Christ.

Jehu was called to be king by God through His holy prophet, and he was entrusted with the guidance and shepherding of Israel. The first taste of power corrupted him and he became more a servant of Satan than of God. This warns us that, while lawful authority can come from God, the desire for power always comes from Satan. There are two aspects of this story that make this Old Testament narrative about us — each one and all of us. The first is that wearing a mask of piety and faith in Christ Jesus instead of striving to live a life in Christ, corrupts us and not only destroys our own souls, but can deeply wound those around us

and even lead many others away from the path of salvation.

The other is that even if we gain lawful authority, such as becoming priests or hierarchs, we should resist with all our might the temptation to grasp at power instead of exercising the lawful authority that we have been given with humility, modesty and compassion, and with fear, lest we do fall into the lust of power and lose our salvation. "Many are called, but few are chosen."

MANASSEH OF JUDAH

**Gold Sometimes Becomes Our God.
The Righteousness of the Father is often not
shared by the Son.**

No king of Judah reigned longer than did Manasseh, nor was any more contrary to his father.

King Hezekiah-ben Ahaz, like David, was a reformer who strove to rid Israel, or at least Judah, of idolatry and bring his kingdom into a true monotheism and the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Moses. He also gave solid leadership to Judea, and brought the kingdom through perilous times. He centralized worship in the Jerusalem temple in order to curtail idolatry and attempted to restore unity among the Hebrew tribes by reinstating the solemn pilgrimage to the temple for Passover, but the ten tribes of the north spurned this invitation.

When the great Hezekiah died, his twelve year old son Manasseh became king, or rather he began to be co-ruler with his father, Hezekiah, in about 697 BC and he became king in his own right when his father

died. By this time, Samaria, the northern "Kingdom of Israel" had been destroyed and the ten northern tribes had been carried away to the east which meant that Israel no longer existed.

It should be easy to see why the chroniclers felt that God had allowed the destruction of Israel-Samaria because of their unfaithfulness, and that God had preserved Judea because of the reforms and faithfulness of Hezekiah. Whatever the case, Israel-Samaria vanished and Judea remained.

When King Hezekiah died Manasseh's reign was the longest in Judean history. Unfortunately King Manasseh very early began to undo his father's reforms. He allowed the reestablishment of the various idolatrous hilltop shrines around Judea. He did not do this as an act of a personal move into idolatry, rather he did it for economic reasons. Moreover, Manasseh submitted to become a loyal vassal of Assyria, and established the Assyrian astral cult in Judea. Worse still, he restored polytheism and permitted the worship of Baal and Asherah in the very temple itself. At length, Manasseh fell to the lowest level of all and participated in the rituals of Molech in which children were offered as burnt sacrifices, often thrown onto the burning coals

while still alive.

One can see a slow but certain move toward evil, and each compromise, each betrayal, leads one further into the depths of wickedness. Manasseh passed his own children "through the smoke of Molech." It was during this era of Manasseh's reign that the holy prophets were systematically murdered and those who supported God's prophets were in constant danger.

Manasseh's betrayal of God and of his father began for economic reasons; once one has put gold above God, it is easy, even inevitable to carry the betrayal and apostasy to the lowest depths, and King Manasseh did.

In the case of Manasseh, he was brought to repentance through a crisis. We too can be brought to repentance, and there is no sin or apostasy which will not be forgiven if we sincerely repent. Nevertheless, many do yield to temptations to put God in second or third place, and often enough for the sake of some personal gain. We are not immune to such temptations. Nor is it unusual for one to be led to repentance through some crisis.

KING AHAB

The Petulance and Banality of Evil

The era in which Ahab and his famous queen Jezabel reigned speaks to our own era, to our own contemporary society and the mentality of this age. We often observe the tremendous changes that have taken place in our world because of the developments in technology. If we look a bit more deeply, however, we are still the same fallen human beings. Let us see how the story of Ahab and his era speak to us today; to each one of us and to all of us.

As we gaze back over the centuries, all the way back to 900 years before Christ, we see many things that are familiar to us. In reading the story of both Judea and Israel, we are struck by the fact that, while these kingdoms were officially monotheistic, they were not so in fact. There was still a great struggle with the often very ugly idolatry round about these two states. Many people in both kingdoms still set up idols and made sacrifices in sacred groves and followed fertility religions. In this era, Asa, King of Judah, who had not

reigned well, had his power curtailed as the more devout Jehosephat began to reign together with him. Jehosephat was determined to bring an end to the idolatry and obey God's will.

Most of the action that we are focussing on, however, takes place in the northern kingdom, in Israel during the ministry of the holy prophet Elias the Tishbite and the reign of Ahab and Queen Jezabel. There were repeated wars with Syria, the worship of Baal was introduced into Israel, and it dominated also among the Canaanites and along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. Centres of fertility rites appeared everywhere, complete with both male and female slaves forced into prostitution at the temples. As a consequence, sexually transmitted diseases became common and often debilitating.

One could speak of Ahab's general wickedness or of Jezebel's negative influence on him. Ahab created sacred groves and altars to Baal. The temples of Baal were associated with temple prostitution (which, among other things, spread STDs and were associated with human sacrifices). However, let us look instead at his petulance and the weakness that underlies egoism. Hanna Arendt has suggested that evil can be quite

banal. It can also be infantile, petulant and narcissistic.

For our purposes in this discussion, the petulance and infantile emotions of King Ahab are a reflection of most of us humans. The petulance and banality of evil make it all the more terrible. The incident of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings, Chapter 21) is the best example.

Naboth owned a prime vineyard near Ahab's palace and Ahab desired to possess it. The vineyard had been in Naboth's family for generations, and local tribal laws as well as a very strong tradition, prevented Ahab from simply exercising kingly power and taking the land. Moreover, Naboth had considerable social status. Ahab attempted to purchase the vineyard but Naboth refused to sell his patrimony.

Ahab became irrationally distraught at not being able to possess the vineyard, and this became an obsession with him. So great was the King's emotions at having his will frustrated that he took to his bed and would not eat or drink. He was not able to use his power to have Naboth killed or dispossessed. No outright evil deed was available to him. Thus, frustrated, he retreated into an infantile petulance. His power had been thwarted and his heart smoldered with a wickedness that he was unable to fulfill. The more sly

and devious evil of Jezebel would succeed where he failed, with, however, unforeseen consequences. We can discuss this later. For now, the petulance and banality of Ahab's evil is our focus. It speaks to all of us with an admonition.

It is quite easy for us to do hurtful and nasty things to others, slander them or gossip about them, motivated by our own petulance. We may not have a Jezebel to set them up and have them killed for us, but we can deeply injure or even destroy the lives of other people, motivated by an infantile petulance or for the most banal reasons. In such cases, we are every bit as culpable as were Ahab and Jezebel.

GEHAZI

(2 Kings 5)

Using Religion for financial gain or as a scam is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

In our epoch, greed, deception and scams have been practically normalized. It is taken for granted in the banking, investment and religion industries. So many televangelists and mega-church preachers operate Ponzi schemes under such guises as "seed money" tithes and perverse and wilfully fraudulent interpretations of scripture (the "prosperity Gospel," for example) that such frauds and scams are merely taken in stride. Gehazi is an example of the religious/charity scam.

Gehazi, an assistant to Prophet Elisha, foreshadows this wickedness – especially among those who use religion and/or charity as a vehicle for it.

When the noble Naaman the Syrian had become ill with leprosy, he heard of Prophet Elisha, the man of God. Together with his retinue, he set out to seek healing through Elisha's prayers.

Naaman was healed, and in gratitude he offered the holy prophet several kilograms of silver and many

other gifts. Elisha refused them all.

No sooner had Naaman departed than Gehazi began to be eaten up with greed. He concocted a scam in order to defraud Naaman, and ran after him.

As soon as Naaman had stopped his chariot and greeted him, Gehazi launched his scam. "My master has sent me to seek your help. Two young men have arrived from the country of Ephraim. Will you be so kind as to help them out with a talent each of silver (1 talent = 34 kilograms) and two suits of clothing?"

Naaman was only too happy to oblige, thinking that he was repaying Elisha for his healing with an act of charity. Gehazi took his ill-gotten gains and hid them in his house. Elisha was a prophet, however, and Gehazi's deed could not be hidden from him.

Since Gehazi had desired to receive what Naaman had, Elisha granted him to have the leprosy that Naaman had been healed of. According to the Rabbis, Gehazi refused to repent, and so was never cured of the disease.

While we may all be tempted to sin through greed and avarice, not everyone would stoop to such fraud and deception – except, perhaps in our minds. The true blasphemy of Gehazi lies in the fact that he used a

miracle of God's healing in order to accomplish his scam and fraud. Even more blasphemous is the premeditated use of such treachery in the name of Jesus Christ, and attributing fake miracles to the Holy Spirit. The religion industry brings literally billions of dollars into the tax exempt pockets of televangelists and mega church pastors every year. These scams generally involve fake healing, attributed to Christ and/or the Holy Spirit, second or third rate stage performances and appeals for charity. While few ordinary people would ever engage in such nefarious activities, we do have examples of ordinary people working scams. Moreover, we can all be tempted by greed, avarice and envy to do dishonest things. In this regard, the story of Gehazi gives us an insight into the depths of the fallen human nature, and if we will accept it, into a dark corner of our own hearts. To those scam artists in the religion industry, one can only say that blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is a great and terrible thing which has the most dire of consequences. Whether it be fake healings or fake “weeping icons,” or promises of a large profit in return for your tithes and offerings, the River of Fire will be terrible for such people.

PROPHET JONAH

**Can you hate someone whom God loves?
Hatred may be a form of blasphemy.**

There are peculiarities in the story of Jonah which can only be resolved by seeking the meaning of the narrative. There are aspects of the story of Jonah that certainly apply to all of us. The peculiarities of the story contain significant revelations about the nature of God and His relationship to us.

We come upon the story of Jonah at a time when the nation of Israel has become insular and particularist. It is also a time of great strife in what we now call "the Middle East." There was a clash of great empires as Egypt, Babylon and Nineveh fought for dominance.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which was the most cruel and vicious nation of all. So hated was the Assyrian Empire that when Nineveh finally fell, the Babylonians said that the earth itself heaved a sigh of relief.

We all know the story of the Prophet Jonah. God commanded him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance to them. Knowing the reputation of the empire,

and perhaps feeling the same revulsion toward them as everyone else, Jonah refuses to go. Instead, he boarded a ship sailing toward Spain at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea.

As the ship sails out into the sea, a great storm arises and the ship is in danger of capsizing. When Jonah reveals to the crew that his disobedience to God is the cause of the danger, and advises them to cast him into the sea, they refuse. However as the danger increases and Jonah continues to urge them, he is thrown overboard. We are told that, instead of drowning, Jonah is swallowed by a "great fish", likely a whale. The whale returns him to the shores of Israel, where it releases him onto the shore. Jonah had attempted to flee from God in order to avoid the mission God had given him.

Now there are two significant revelations about God in this story. First, God commanded the prophet to go to the most hated people on the face of the earth and tell them that God loves them. He loves them and will embrace them if they turn to Him in repentance; this is the true nature of God.

This should be a most profound revelation for us. We must always bear in mind that if we have disdain

and hatred toward anyone, we have hatred toward someone that God loves. Let us recall that Christ tells us, "The servant is not greater than the master." If, therefore, we have faith in Christ and believe Him, then how is it that we could despise one whom He loves, and for whom He gave His life.

We also realize that Jonah wanted to "flee from before the countenance of God." God, he discovered, is "everywhere present and fills all things." God is not limited in time or space.

Once Jonah has finally gone to Nineveh, it turns out that he, too, is in need of repentance. As the people of Nineveh repent, instead of being glad, Jonah becomes angry and bitter. Going out of the city, the prophet constructed a small shelter for himself from sticks and sat under it in anger and bitterness. God caused a gourd vine to grow up overnight and cover the shelter to block out the rays of the sun and give Jonah shade. Jonah was glad for the shade, but still bitter that God had been merciful to Nineveh. Then God caused the vine to wither away overnight. The next day, the sun beat down on Jonah and an east wind blew hot and dry.

Now, Jonah became angry because the vine had

withered. God said to him, "You had pity on the gourd, for which you had not laboured nor made it grow...Should I not spare the great city in which there dwell more than 120,000 who are unable to discern between their right hand and their left hand..."

God is more merciful than His prophet, and it would seem that God is also more merciful than so many of our contemporary preachers. This is the third significant revelation to us, about the true nature of God.

Let each of us prayerfully discern what these revelations about the love, compassion and mercy of God, and our own propensity for anger, malice and bitterness, say to each one of us, for truly the Old Testament is each one of us.

AMOS

Morality is about more than sex.

It is a great error to think of morality primarily in terms of sex and external behaviour. In the era of the holy prophets Amos and Hosea, the greatest immorality was injustice to the poor, to strangers and those who were destitute. Such immorality is a form of apostasy and it goes hand in hand with idolatry.

In this epoch, the Hebrew nation was still divided into two kingdoms. Judea in the south, with its capital at Jerusalem, tended to be the one most faithful to God. Israel in the north, despite the prophets and a few of its kings, was never a monotheistic nation; the people and several of its kings, were idolaters.

At the time when God called Amos of Tekoa, Israel was prosperous and had a large wealthy and upper middle class population. Indifference and disdain toward the lower classes and the poor was rife. Here is the condemnation of the wealthy kingdom of Israel: "Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not turn away destruction from

them; because they sell the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals. They heap dust on the heads of the poor and put stone on the path of the humble. And a man and his father will go into the same maid, profaning my holy name..."

Even to the land of Bashan, God commands Amos to admonish, prophesy against "the rulers of Bashan, that dwell in the hills of Samaria, they who oppress the poor and crush the destitute."

There were many other problems in both Israel and Judea in the era of Amos and Hosea, but the plight of the poor and disenfranchised is central to prophecies of both men.

This is an important gauge by which to measure yourselves. One of the relevant idolatries of our own time is the "prosperity gospel". Disdain for, or indifference to, the plight of the lower classes and the poor was rife. The prophets and leaders of this idolatry are generally our televangelists and mega-church preachers.

While many Christian bodies are reaching out to the poor, to homeless people and others in need, we need to look at ourselves as individuals and weigh our own concepts about morality so that we include, prominently, our attitudes and actions toward those in

need and the homeless in particular. We will be judged, not simply by our external behaviour but rather, as our beloved father Paul warns us, "the secrets of men's hearts will be uncovered."

It is certain that Amos is speaking as much to us, in our own wealthy nations, as to the rulers and citizens of Israel and Judea nearly three thousand years ago.

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HOSHEA (HOSEA) No Other Reason But Love

I wish to complete this text with an examination of the prophet Hosea partly because the revelation in this prophecy is so important and so all-encompassing, and partly because my health is failing me so rapidly that I need to conclude the book.

The holy prophets have been trying to teach us that the covenant relationship with God is not a legal agreement but a spousal relationship. I will suggest that this is a part of the preparation for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It seems that Hosea has given us a real awareness of what the spousal relationship means, and of the fact that alienation is the real problem, not simply “sin.” The suffering of Judea and Israel when they have become alienated, adulterous as the prophet say, from God, the bondage into which they fall, is surely a revelation to us of the bondage into which mankind has fallen and that deliverance from this bondage is to reunite ourselves with the heavenly bridegroom, as a community which represents the earthly bride. The

prophets have gradually weaned Israel away – we should say Judea not Israel – from the idea that the sacrifices can save anyone, or that the law can save anyone. They have brought us to a realisation that it is this relationship between the community and God, this spousal relationship, a relationship of love received and love given, that can deliver man from bondage, from his alienation. This is the context in which we wish to examine the book of the prophet Hoshea (Hosea).

Mankind had fallen into a condition of alienation from God. This is clear from the story of Cain after the murder of Abel. God had offered forgiveness to Cain but Cain had chosen to become further alienated, to wander away to go farther away from God. When God had made the Hebrews His chosen people, and apostles so to speak, He had indeed established a covenant with them. Let us observe that in the beginning He did not give them a collection of laws. And Abraham and Sarah He had given a promise, not a law. The law became necessary because the Hebrews repeatedly demonstrated that they needed a schoolmaster, a guide to keep them from falling away from God.

Finally came the age of the prophets. We can see the prophets as a search party set out to find lost sheep.

The holy prophets were messengers attempting to bring the Hebrew nation back out of alienation and into the covenant. The error that Judah and Israel made was to understand the covenant as a legal agreement, and not understand that it was something much deeper; something that required much more than obedience to laws. The covenant was indeed a spousal relationship rather than simply a legal agreement. As we have seen in Scripture, God is always the faithful spouse, the nations of Judea and Israel, the Hebrews, were repeatedly the unfaithful spouse. We could cite all the prophets in order to demonstrate this, but we have chosen the prophet Hosea to exemplify this. Moreover, through the prophet Hosea, we can see how the words of the prophet are also about us, as individuals and as a community.

At the beginning of the book of prophet Hosea we see a unique way of revealing the truth to Israel and Judea. God has commanded the prophet to take a harlot as a wife, as some rabbis have suggested, a Temple prostitute. The significance of this is that Israel has become a prostitute. In many of the prophets, Israel is referred to as the prophet, as a spouse who has gone “a whoring” with other gods and other nations.

Hosea obeys God and marries a harlot named Gomer. After they are married, Gomer leaves and goes back into her harlotry. Thereupon, God commands Hosea to go and redeem her back.¹⁷

But why redeem her back after she has abandoned her husband and become a harlot again? For no other reason than for love. Here, the prophet represents God and Gomer is a type of the Church – in this case, of Israel, the Church of the old covenant.

It is clear that God is ever the faithful spouse, that His love never wanes. No matter how often Israel is unfaithful and betrays Him, He is always there for her, He will always receive her back. But in the fullness of time, God will not simply wait for His church to return to Him, rather He will come in the flesh and redeem her out of alienation. It is the church, not individuals, that has been redeemed. Christianity is not to be understood simply as a collection of individuals who have been “personally redeemed.” Rather as God’s chosen people, His “Holy Nation” which has been redeemed, and everyone is invited into the communion

17. The fact that she needs to be redeemed indicates that she was indeed a Temple prostitute. The idea of redemption is significant here.

of that Holy Nation. We enter into our relationship with Christ Jesus, not as isolated individuals, but “in communion” with the whole community of His Church, His “Holy Nation.” This is clear from the fact that the apostles and apostolic fathers considered the Church to be the “new Israel,” the Israel of God.

A novel doctrine appeared in the 1900s asserting that “Christ is our own personal Saviour” and that one had to have a “personal”¹⁸ relationship with Christ. However, this is not the apostolic doctrine. Apostle Paul indicates that Christ has redeemed His Church, that Christ is the Heavenly Bridegroom and the Church is His earthly bride. As he says, “Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her.”

There is so much more in the revelation through the prophet, but let us examine how all of this applies to us – how is the “Old Testament about you” to be found in this?

Perhaps this is answered in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In the parable, the son is unfaithful to the father. He has decided to take his father’s wealth – at

18. From the very beginning it was understood that our relationship with Christ was as members in particular of the body of Christ, the Church, which apostle Paul refers to as the “bride of Christ.”

least that portion which he would expect to inherit, depart and live foolishly and wildly. One of the prophets speaks of Israel as having taken her dowry and squandered it with other gods. But in both cases, the father of the prodigal son, and the spouse of Israel wait with open arms for the one in alienation to return and find again that love which has been offered to them. When they do return, they will find that they were forgiven the day they left, not the day they returned. But it was up to the one who went into alienation to return and receive that forgiveness, receive the warm embrace of that love that has always been there. Our repentance is primarily a turning around and returning to our Father and finding that His love has always been steadfast and pure. This is the great mystery of our relationship with God and it leads us to understand that our alienation is the problem, sin is only a symptom.

Confession should be understood as the healing of our alienation, not only from God but from the congregation, from the Church, from the “people of God,” “the household of the living God.” Indeed, in the older Serbian prayer at the end of confession, the priest directly indicates the healing of our broken communion with the congregation, the Church, the household

of God. It is in this context that confession is taken in front of the congregation, even though only the confessor can hear the confession. The priest is hearing confession on behalf of the congregation, and it is our communion with that congregation, and with the Church of the living God that is being restored. Saint abba Antony the great says that, “to suggest that God turns his back on the sinner is the same thing as saying that a man is blind because the sun has turned its back on him.”

The other point from the prophecy of Hoshea that I am interested in here is the word that he receives from God that “my people are perishing from lack of knowledge,” and his charge that “you can no longer be my priests because you do not desire knowledge.”

On a spiritual level, one of our problems is that we do things sometimes only because we are supposed to do them, and we do them without necessarily even wanting to know why. We do things by rote often without any knowledge of what they mean or what they are supposed to accomplish. In the story of Cain and Abel, we understand that Cain’s sacrifice was not accepted, not because of what he offered but of how he offered it. Abel offered his sacrifice with knowledge and

understanding and because of love; Cain offered by rote because he was supposed to, because it was “the law.” He offered it without knowledge, and here we refer to two kinds of knowledge: head knowledge and heart knowledge. We can know the rules and regulations and what is expected of us, without ever having any heart knowledge of what it means, what is the spirit of the action, what is the “soul” of the action. This is often the case in the divine liturgy and even in our own personal prayers.

The liturgy should never be “served” but rather “prayed.” The liturgy is a communion with our Lord Jesus Christ and with our brothers and sisters standing around us. We often do not even wish to explore the spirit or the “soul” of the liturgy. The liturgy is often “performed” according to rubrics, according to a choreography and instructions about various actions on the part of the clergy, without the “performer” knowing why and what is actually going on.

On a broader plane, even in life itself we play the game according to a set of rules without ever knowing why or what we are supposed to be accomplishing by following these rules. We have information without having any knowledge. Information is easily available,

knowledge comes from examining this information and looking at its deeper and broader meaning. Often when people argue a point from Scripture they simply quote what the Scripture says, but do not take into account what it actually means beyond the words that are written. Perhaps this is why so many in Judea and Israel failed to understand the meaning of the covenant itself and why they could fall so easily into idolatry.

This is too often our condition, we have hundreds of different forms of idolatry, and sometimes the very rules of life that we follow, the social norms that we conform to are really idolatry. We say we follow Christ but what does that mean? We can even make Christ and our following of Christ an idolatry. It can be an idolatry when we do it blindly without knowledge and understanding of what Christ is and what He taught and demonstrated in His own life. We cannot be the followers of Jesus Christ and slaves to the law at the same time. There is a higher law than that which is written in the Book. It is up to us, each of us and all of us, to seek knowledge and understanding rather than following an idolatrous image of Christ that we have created in our own minds, or an idolatry of the “Book.” In our ignorance, we sometimes set God the

Father in opposition to God the Son, to Christ Jesus and create an idolatry about both in the imaginations of our own minds and hearts. We do need to seek knowledge and understanding in order to avoid this. We cannot simply say, “I accept Jesus as my own personal Saviour” while we have an idolatrous concept of God and of Christ burning in our hearts. Indeed in that statement itself there is a lack of understanding even about the meaning of redemption.

Let me close this last segment of my book by calling on us to seek knowledge, to seek understanding. As Orthodox Christians, we find this in the study of the holy fathers and the divine services of the Church; study not mere reading – prayerful, heart study of the things that we might rise from indifference to knowledge.

EPILOGUE

To paraphrase our beloved father Paul, “time would fail me to speak of” every important person in the Hebrew Scripture. Yet of those we have and will speak of, the good, the righteous, the evil and the wavering, each story takes us back to the fall of Adam and Eve and Cain’s murder of his brother. Even the best are often defeated by their own ego and self-love. The birth of such ego and self-centredness is revealed in the fall of Adam and Eve, and carried to its terrible depth when brother murders brother. Wars and horrifying cruelty are manifestations of national ego headed by the ego and self-love of rulers and warriors. Power and lust for power — manifestations of great ego and self-focus — are shown in all their destructive force. Perhaps this is the central theme of our study. Ego and self-love are the main elements of our pride, and pride, whether false or real, whether individual, tribal or national, bring such great grief upon mankind and every level of human interaction, even the destruction of the earth’s life support system through the wanton misuse of the

earth's resources. These are themes that are an integral part of our own lives, and we realise that the Hebrew Scripture is a mirror into which we gaze and see the reflection of our own selves.

As we complete this journey through the Scripture, let us keep these primal themes in mind, and use the narratives in our Old Testament see more deeply into our own hearts and minds. This may be the most edifying use of the Old Testament Scripture for us. Certainly, it should demonstrate the need for a Saviour and open us more profoundly to the need for constant repentance.

