

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

## The Fathers of the Church and The Old Testament\*

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**THE FAMOUS PHRASE OF ST. AUGUSTINE** can be taken as typical of the whole Patristic attitude towards the Old Dispensation. *Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet. Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet.* The New Testament is an accomplishment or a consummation of the Old. Christ Jesus is the Messiah spoken of by the prophets. In Him all promises and expectations are fulfilled. The Law and the Gospel belong together. And nobody can claim to be a true follower of Moses unless he believes that Jesus is the Lord. Any one who does not recognize in Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed of the Lord, does thereby betray the Old Dispensation itself. Only the Church of Christ keeps now the right key to the Scriptures, the true key to the prophecies of old. Because all these prophecies are fulfilled in Christ.

St. Justin rejects the suggestion that the Old Testament is a link holding together the Church and the Synagogue. For him quite the opposite is true. All Jewish claims

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must be formally rejected. The Old Testament no longer belongs to the Jews. It belongs to the Church alone. And the Church of Christ is therefore the only true Israel of God. The Israel of old was but an undeveloped Church. The word "Scriptures" itself in early Christian use meant first of all just the Old Testament and in this sense obviously this word is used in the Creed: "according to the Scriptures," i.e. according to the prophecies and promises of the Old Dispensation.

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## The Unity of the Bible

The Old Testament is copiously quoted by all early writers. And even to the Gentiles the message of salvation was always presented in the context of the Old Testament. This was an argument from antiquity. The Old Covenant was not destroyed by Christ, but renewed and accomplished. In this sense Christianity was not a new religion, but rather the oldest. The new Christian "Scriptures" were simply incorporated into the inherited Hebrew Bible, as its organic completion. And only the whole Bible, both Testaments together, was regarded as an adequate record of Christian Revelation. There was no break between the two Testaments, but a unity of Divine economy. And the first task of Christian theology was to show and to explain in what way the Old Dispensation was the preparation and the anticipation of this final Revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The Christian message was not merely a proclamation of some doctrines, but first of all a record of mighty acts and deeds of God through the ages. It was a history of Divine guidance, culminating in the person of Christ Jesus whom God his sent to redeem His people. God has chosen Israel for His inheritance, to be His people, to be the keeper of His truth, and to this Chosen People alone the Divine Word was entrusted. And now the Church receives this sacred heritage

The Old Testament as a whole was regarded as a Chris-

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tian prophecy, as an "evangelical preparation." Very early some special selections of the Old Testament texts were compiled led for the use of Christian missionaries. The *Testimonia* of St. Cyprian is one of the best specimens of the kind. And St Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho* made an attempt to prove the truth of Christianity from the Old Testament. The Marcionite attempt to break the New Testament from its Old Testament roots was vigorously resisted and condemned by the Great Church. The unity of both Testaments was strongly emphasized, the inner agreement of both was stressed. There was always some danger of reading too much of Christian doctrine into the writings of the Old Testament. And historical perspective was sometimes dangerously obscured. But still there was a great truth in all these exegetical endeavors. It was a strong feeling of the Divine guidance through the ages.

## The Old Testament as Allegory

The history of Old Testament interpretation in the Early Church is one of the most thrilling but embarrassing chapters in the history of Christian doctrine. With the Greek Old Testament the Church inherited also some exegetical traditions. Philo, this Hellenized Jew from Alexandria, was the best exponent of this pre-Christian endeavor to

commend the Old Testament to the Gentile world. He adopted for this task a very peculiar method, a method of allegory. Philo himself had no understanding of history whatever. Messianic motives were completely overlooked or ignored in his philosophy of the Bible. For him the Bible was just a system of the Divine Philosophy, not so much a sacred history. Historical events as such were of no interest and of no importance for him. The Bible was for him just a single book, in which he failed to discern any historical perspective or progress. It was treated by him rather as a collection of glorious parables

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and didactic stories intended to convey and to illustrate certain philosophical and ethical ideas.

In such an extreme form this allegorical method was never accepted by the Church. One has however to recognize the strong influence of Philo on all exegetical essays of the first centuries. St. Justin made a large use of Philo. *Pseudo-Barnabas* (early 2nd century) once went so far as to deny the historical character of the Old Testament altogether. Philonic traditions were taken up by the Christian school of Alexandria. And even later St. Ambrose was closely following Philo in his commentaries and could be justly described as *Philo latinus*. This allegorical exegesis was ambiguous and misleading.

It took a long time before the balance was established or restored. And still one must not overlook the positive contribution of this method. The best exponent of allegorical exegesis in the Church was Origen and his influence was enormous. One may be shocked sometimes by his exegetical daring and licence. He used indeed to read too much of his own into the sacred text. But it would be a grave mistake to describe him as a philosopher. He was first of all and throughout a Biblical scholar, certainly in the style of his own age. He spent days and nights over the Bible. His main purpose was just to base all doctrine and all theology on a Biblical ground. He was responsible to a great extent for the strength of the Biblical spirit in the entire patristic theology. He did much more for an average believer; he made the Bible accessible to him. He steadily introduced the Old Testament into his preaching. He helped the average Christian to read and to use the Old Testament for their edification. He always stressed the unity of the Bible, bringing both Testaments into a closer relation. And he made a new attempt to build the whole doctrine of God on a Biblical basis.

Origen's limitations are obvious. But his positive contribution was much greater. And it was he who by his example taught Christian theologians to go back always for

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their inspiration to the sacred text of Scriptures. His line was followed by most of the Fathers. But he met strong opposition at once. There is no room to dwell at length on the controversy between the two exegetical schools in the Early Church. The main features are commonly known. The Antiochene school stood for "history," Alexandrinians rather for "contemplation." And surely both elements had to be brought together in a balanced synthesis.

## **History or Preaching**

The main Alexandrian presumption was that, as being Divinely inspired, the Scriptures must carry in them some universal message, for all nations and ages. Their purpose was just to exhibit this message, to discover and to preach all these riches of Divine wisdom which have been providentially stored in the Bible. Beneath the letter of the Holy Writ there are some other lessons to be learned only by the advanced. Behind all human records of manifold revelations of God one can discern the Revelation, to apprehend the very Word of God in all its eternal splendor.

It was assumed that even when God was speaking under some special circumstances there was always something in His word that passes all historical limitations. One has to distinguish very carefully between a direct prophecy and what one might describe as an application. Many of the Old Testament narratives can be most instructive for a believer even when no deliberate "prefiguration" of Christian truth has been intended by the sacred writers themselves. The main presupposition was that God meant the Holy Writ to be the eternal guide for the whole of mankind. And therefore an application or a standing re-interpretation of the Old Testament was authorized.

The Antiochene exegesis had a special concern for the direct meaning of the old prophecies and stories. The chief

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exponent of this "historical" exegesis was Theodore of Mopsuestia, known in the East simply as "the Interpreter." And although his authority was gravely compromised by his condemnation for his erroneous doctrines, his influence on the Christian exegesis of the Old Testament was still very considerable. This "historical" exegesis was often in danger of missing the universal meaning of Divine Revelation by overemphasis of the local and national aspects of the Old Testament. And even more, to lose the sacred perspective, to deal with the Old Testament history as if it were merely the history of one single people among the nations of the earth and not a history of the only true Covenant of God. St. John Chrysostom has combined the best elements of both schools in his exegetical endeavor. He was an Antiochene scholar himself, but he was in many respects a

follower of Origen as well. Allegories may be misleading. But one has not to overlook the “typical” meaning of events themselves. Old Testament institutions and personalities were also the “types” or “figures” of the things to come. History was prophetic itself. Events themselves do prophesy, they did and do point out to something else, beyond themselves. The Early Fathers can hardly be described as “fundamentalists.” They were always after the Divine truth, after the Divine message itself, which is often rather concealed under the cover of the letter. The belief in Inspiration could rather discourage the fundamentalist tendency. The Divine truth cannot be reduced to the letter even of Holy Writ. One of the best specimens of Patristic exegesis was the Hexaemeron of St. Basil, who has succeeded in bringing forward the religious truth of the Biblical narrative of the creation with real balance and sound moderation.

## **The Old Testament and Christian Worship**

The Patristic attitude towards the Old Testament was

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reflected in the history of Christian worship. The Jewish roots of Christian Liturgy are obvious. But the whole system of Christian public worship was linked closely to the practice of the Synagogue as well. The Psalms were inherited from the Jews, and they became a pattern of the whole Christian hymnography in the early Church. The Psalms form the skeleton of Christian offices until now. They were the basis of all devotional literature in old days.

The student of public worship in the Eastern Orthodox Church would be impressed by the amount of Old Testament references, hints and images, in all offices and hymns. The unity of the two Testaments is stressed throughout. Biblical motives are superabundant. Many hymns are but variations on the pattern of the Old Testament songs, from the song of Moses at the crossing of the Red Sea up to the song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. On great festivals numerous lessons from the Old Testament are appointed and actually read to stress that Christian perfection was but a consummation of what was pre-figured and foreshadowed or even directly predicted of old. And specially in the offices of Holy Week this Old Testament preparation is particularly emphasized. The whole worship is based upon this conviction that the true Covenant was always one, that there was a complete agreement between the Prophets and the Apostles. And all this system was established just in the later Patristic age.

One of the most striking examples of this devotional Biblicism is the glorious *Great Canon* of St. Andreas of Crete, read at the Great Compline in Lent. It is a strong exhortation, an appeal for repentance, composed with a real poetical inspiration and based upon the Bible. The whole series of Old Testament sinners, both penitent and

impenitent, is remembered. One can be almost lost in this continuous stream of names and examples. One is emphatically reminded that all this Old Testament story belongs to one as a Christian. One is invited to think over again and again this

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wonderful story of Divine guidance and human obstinacy and failures. The Old Testament is kept as a great treasure. One has to mention as well the influence which the *Song of Songs* had on the development of Christian mysticism. Origen's commentary on this book was in St. Jerome's opinion his best composition, in which he surpassed himself. And St. Gregory of Nyssa's mystical commentary on the Song of Songs is a rich mine of a genuine Christian inspiration.

### **The Old Testament as the Word of God**

It has been more than once suggested that in the Greek Fathers the primitive Christian message was hellenized too much. One has to be very cautious with all such utterances. In any case it is the Fathers who have kept all the treasures of the Old Testament and made them the indispensable heritage of the Church, both in worship and in theology. The only thing they never did is this: they never kept fast to the Jewish limitations. The Holy Writ for them was an eternal and universal Revelation. It is addressed to all mankind now simply because it was addressed to all nations by God Himself even when the Divine Word was delivered by the prophets to the Chosen People alone. It means that one cannot measure the depth of Divine Revelation with the measure of some past time only, however sacred those times may be. It is not enough to be sure that the ancient Hebrews understood and interpreted the Scripture in a certain way. This interpretation can never be final. New light has been thrown on the old revelations by Him Who came just to accomplish and to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. The Scriptures are not merely historical documents. They are really the Word of God, the Divine message to all generations. And Christ Jesus is the Alpha and Omega of the Scriptures, both the climax and the knot of the Bible. This is the standing message of the Fathers to the Church Universal about the Old Dispensation.