

Theological Reflections on the History Books of the Old Testament

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The Nature of God

The existence of God

Holy Scripture presupposes the existence of God. For the "scriptural mind," the reality of God and of the supernatural is obvious, a fact of religious experience. Thus, the Bible contains no arguments for the existence of God.

The existence of spiritual beings was not problematic for the writers of scripture and other citizens of the ancient world. Their question was not, "Does God exist?" but rather, "Where can I find the true God, and what is the nature of that true God?"

The attributes of the divine nature

Building upon holy tradition and upon the biblical revelation of the Lord and his mighty works, Orthodox theologians have developed a detailed description of the activity and fundamental attributes of God. The central declaration and constant affirmation of the Orthodox Church is that God is, that God lives, and that God acts. Moreover, the being, life, and activity of God are directed both toward himself and toward his creation. That is, God is, lives, and acts in and of himself (within his own essence); and God also is, lives, and acts toward and in his created order ("the heavens and the earth...all things visible and invisible"). God's being, life, and activity are both transcendent and immanent. Because they are immanently present in the created order, it may be said that God – who is, in and of himself, "ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, [and] incomprehensible" – "shows" or "reveals" himself in and to his creation. God reveals himself in the creation at large and to those of his creatures who are endowed with intelligence (i.e., humans and angels). From the standpoint of Orthodox Christianity, it is not enough to say that God is an eternally real, living, and active being; we must also affirm that God has revealed himself to us, in Holy Tradition and in Holy Scripture.

The God of the Bible is a single, supremely perfect, spiritual (that is, immaterial), and personal being possessing all holiness, truth, goodness, joy, and power. God is one, personal, and spiritual; his being is infinite, eternal, and immutable; he is all-powerful (omnipotent) and all-knowing (omniscient); he is all-present (omnipresent), and yet he is above and beyond the world (transcendent); and he is the absolutely good (omnibenevolent) and perfectly free Creator of the universe.

In addition to these fundamental attributes of the divine nature, Orthodox biblical theology also holds that Holy Scripture reveals the trinitarian being of God. This is certainly true of the New Testament, where there are many references to the three persons of the Holy Trinity. There are also several places in the Old Testament where the triunity of God seems to manifest itself – for example, in the work of creation as depicted in Genesis 1, where God creates the universe in the Spirit and through his Word; and in Genesis 18, where the Lord appears to Abraham in the tripersonal form of "three men."

Four distinctive emphases

The Old Testament historical writings contain four distinctive emphases with regard to the nature and activity of God.

1. God is presented again and again as the one, personal, and universal Lord of all creation. This emphasis upon a strict personal monotheism is especially clear in the "revelation of the burning bush" (Ex 2:23-3:22), in which the absolute and universal sovereignty of God was made known to Moses. In that revelation, which transformed Moses from fugitive to prophet, the God of Israel – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – encountered Moses as the great "I AM." Moses asked God his name, and the Lord replied, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:13-15). That is to say, the God of Israel is the ground of all being, the source of all things – the

one, universal, and absolute Creator of the world. The God of Israel is not merely a local or tribal deity, one god among a multitude of other divine beings, but the absolute and universal Lord of all creation; and this supreme Lord has made his covenant with Israel and called Moses to be his agent in liberating the people of God from the oppression of Egypt. Such is the central content of the revelation at the burning bush, a central theme throughout the entire Old Testament history of Israel.

2. The absolute holiness and righteousness of God are made manifest in the revelation of the law as recorded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Lord's repeated judgment and condemnation of the sinfulness of Israel during the long period following the death of Moses and prior to the advent of Christ is a further expression of his moral perfection and supremacy.

3. However, the mercy and compassion of God, which are also aspects of his absolute goodness, are revealed in his abiding love for his people. While God judges and condemns sin, he also, time and again, forgives and redeems the children of Israel.

4. The love of God for Israel is actually an expression of his love for the entire human race. For in Israel, the Lord was preparing the world for salvation from sin and death. In Israel, the existence, nature, and saving activity of God were to be proclaimed to the world; and through Israel, the final redemption of man and nature was to be effected in the person and work of the Messiah, of Christ. Thus, God's special relationship with Israel, as described in the historical literature of the Old Testament, was preparatory to the reconciliation of "all things" to God in and through Christ.

God's Covenant with Israel

God's special relationship with ancient Israel is grounded upon his covenant with Abraham and the renewal and extension of that covenant at Mount Sinai during the time of Moses. The renewed and extended relationship between God and his people is sometimes called "the covenant with Israel." In the covenant, God promised his people deliverance from their enemies and a free, peaceful, and happy life in Canaan, the land of fulfillment; and the fulfillment of God's promise was contingent upon Israel's faithful and obedient response to the Lord's love and will. However, because of the repeated disobedience and apostasy of ancient Israel, the covenant promises were never perfectly fulfilled during Old Testament times.

The failure of the Israelites to live up to the terms of their covenant relationship with God was, from a Christian point of view, a part of the divine plan for the salvation of the world. The all-knowing Lord of creation foresaw the faithlessness and disobedience that would make Israel's everlasting possession of the promised land impossible; and through the historical pilgrimage of Israel from the time of Abraham to the coming of Christ, God sought to make it clear to the human race that salvation could never be won by human effort alone. Only in the perfect faith and obedience of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would an Israelite measure up to the standards of the divine law. Only through the perfect and personal union of God and man in Jesus could the requirements of God's covenant with his people be met. The incarnation was necessary to the fulfillment of the covenant with Israel because no man could perfectly obey the divine law unless God became man. That, according to the Christian faith, is exactly what happened in Jesus Christ.

In Christ, the covenant with Israel was fulfilled, transformed, and transcended. After the coming of the Messiah – the incarnation of God the Son – only those who are "built into Christ" are counted among the people of God. In Christ, the old Israel is superseded by the Christian Church, the new Israel, the body of Christ; the old covenant is completed in the new covenant in and through Jesus Christ. Jesus – "the second Adam," the new Joshua, "the son of David," "the son of Abraham" – fulfills the old covenant and leads his people, the Church, into the true promised land, the kingdom of heaven. Through the Messiah of Israel, and through his fulfillment of the old covenant, a new covenant is established between God and the human race. In Christ, God's covenant with Abraham is extended, not only to the old Israel, but to the entire human race. However, like the covenant with Israel, the new covenant requires steadfast faith and an obedient spirit in those who would be reconciled to the Lord of all creation. Like all covenants between God and man, the new covenant in Christ is sealed with a sign: the sign of the cross.

The Revelation of the Divine Law

The giving of the law – as recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – is a revelation of the holiness of God, of the desperate sinfulness of man, and of the human need for salvation. The standards of the Old Testament law are extremely high; they are reflective of the moral and spiritual perfection of God himself. The Old Testament history of ancient Israel makes it quite clear that humankind is incapable of living up to the standards of God's law. As the ancient Israelites sinned repeatedly against the divine law, so do we all fall short of the perfect righteousness of God. As we have seen, the Old Testament law contains a ritual code (Lv 1-16) which establishes a way of atonement for the sins of Israel, a means by which violations of God's will might be forgiven. Thus, humanity's inability to measure up to the holiness of the Lord is both implicitly and explicitly recognized in the law itself.

Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:8, summarized the divine law as follows: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Mt 22:37-40; see also Mk 12:29-31). We are to love God with all the passion of our hearts, with all the life of our souls, and with all the power of our minds. On that basis, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves – i.e., we are to place the desires, interests and needs of others on at least an equal footing with our own. To believe that we are able to save ourselves through our own works of righteousness is to be subject to the most extreme moral and spiritual delusion; it is to ignore the entire content of Holy Scripture. For, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (Is 64:6). God's law shows us that, as St. Paul puts it, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one" (Rm 3:10-12). Thus, "no human being will be justified in...[God's] sight by works of the law [that is, through self-produced righteousness], since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rm 3:20).

To meditate upon the law of God, and upon the repeated failure of Israel to obey that law, is to see the difference between things as they ought to be and things as they are. Most of us, most of the time, are fixated upon the contrast between things as we think they are and things as we would like them to be. The Old Testament history of ancient Israel is therefore a spiritual and moral challenge to us: it challenges us to look at the world, ourselves, and God with a "scriptural mind." The revelation of God's law in the Old Testament is, in an important sense, a disturbing revelation. Many of us would like to believe that God demands nothing of us except that we be "nice people," living according to the commonly accepted moral, legal, and religious standards of our society. But our society and its standards, from a biblical point of view, are aspects of a fallen world that has departed from the path of God's righteousness. To conform oneself to the ways of the world is to set oneself in opposition to God and his law. The law of God, as expressed in the Old Testament historical literature, challenges us to face up to our desperate situation, to discern the vast differences between the way we are and the way God wants us to be, the way we ought to be. If we will acknowledge our lack of righteousness in the eyes of God, our utter failure to conform to the standards of God's absolute holiness, we will at least realize that we are far from the kingdom of heaven and that we will never enter that kingdom except through the mercy and grace of the Lord.

The law was given that Israel and all humanity might realize their need for salvation. For the law, when seen for what it is, shows us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rm 3:23). The Old Testament revelation of the divine law is intended to direct our spirits toward the redemption God has made possible in Jesus Christ. Only through faith in Christ, our Savior and Lord, can human beings even begin to make progress in their quest for the moral and spiritual perfection that will transform them into the "likeness of God" (see Ga 3-4).

The Tabernacle and the Temple: God's Presence with His People

God's presence in the lives of his people is a constant theme of the Old Testament history of ancient Israel. He is present in the world, which is his creation; he is present in the covenant with Israel and in the divine law which was given during the days of Moses; he is present in his prophets, priests, judges, and kings. But most of all the Lord is present, first, in the tabernacle, which was the center of Israel's existence from the time of Moses to that of Solomon; and, later, in the Temple, which was constructed during the reign of Solomon (965-931 BC). The Temple of Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC; but with the support of the Persians, who liberated the Jews from their Babylonian captivity, it was rebuilt during the late sixth century BC.

The biblical material on the tabernacle, the Temple of Solomon, and the rebuilt Temple of the postexilic era describes a change in the relationship between God and his people – a change based upon the failure of Israel to live up to the terms of her covenant with the Lord. In the tabernacle, God was literally present with his people in the cloud of glory which hovered over the sanctuary and the Ark of the Covenant. In Solomon's Temple, the Ark of the Covenant and the tables of the law remained as symbols of God's presence with and concern for Israel, but there is no cloud of glory, no literal presence of the Lord (see 1 Kg 8). In the reconstructed Temple of the late sixth century BC, even the Ark of the Covenant and the tables of the law were missing, having been destroyed during the Babylonian conquest of 586 BC. Then, during the sixth century BC, the prophet Ezekiel began to dream of the building of a new and heavenly temple in which "the glory of the Lord" would once again be literally present with his people (see Ezk 40-48).

The tabernacle-temple theme in the historical texts of the Old Testament points to the human need for the literal, and even physical, presence of God. Ezekiel's prophetic dream of the heavenly temple filled with "the glory of the Lord" was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. The gradual distancing of God from Israel during the Old Testament era was a preparation for the advent of Christ, in whom "the glory of the Lord" was made literally, physically, and personally present in the world. In Christ, God became human; and this human being is the true temple of the Lord (see Jn 2:13-22). In the incarnation, God united himself with the human race; the divine nature and human nature were made one in the person of Christ. Christ's body is therefore the temple of God (see Jn 2:19-21). Insofar as one joins oneself to Christ in faith and obedience, one becomes a member of the new Israel, the Church. St. Paul refers to the Church as "the body of Christ" (1 Co 12:27; Eph 1:22-23 and 5:30). As "the glory of the Lord" was literally and physically present in the person of Christ, so is that glory literally and physically present in the community of those who have "put on Christ." Through union with Christ, the Church has become "the mystical body of Christ," "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:23). In Christ and his Church, the full significance of the Old Testament tabernacle-temple imagery is made manifest, and the human need for the presence of God is satisfied.

The Human Need for Atonement

Sinful man needs reconciliation with God. The Old Testament history of ancient Israel insists upon the absolute holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, and the human need for atonement. In failing to obey the law of God, man's life is forfeit. But the Lord, in his mercy, provides a way of atonement that permits the sinner to save his life. Instead of shedding his own blood, the reprobate may make atonement for his sins through animal sacrifice. For blood, in the Old Testament, is the symbol of life, and life is the property of God. The blood sacrifices commanded by the law (see Lv 1-16) involved the ritual killing of unblemished and healthy male animals (lambs, rams, bulls, goats). The blood of these animals was accepted by God in place of the blood of human beings. The blood, as the essence of life, symbolized the rededication of the sinner's life to the service of God and the covenant. This form of atonement is often called "substitutionary" or "vicarious" atonement. In the sacrificial rituals of the old covenant, the blood of innocent animals was substituted for the blood of sinful human beings; and through this vicarious sacrifice, if offered in a repentant spirit, the sinners were able to achieve reconciliation, or "at-one-ment," with God.

The New Testament presents the crucifixion of Christ in terms reminiscent of the Old Testament code of ritual atonement. Christ is our passover lamb, our "sin-offering" to God. Christ died for our sins that we might live to be reconciled with God.

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them [because those sins had been atoned for by the blood of Christ], and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Co 5:18-21).

Should a sinner acknowledge Christ as his Savior and offer the blood of Christ to God as atonement for his or her own sins, then his or her transgressions against the Lord will be forgiven and the sinner will enter into the reconciliation with God wrought by the work of Christ. "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, [and] behold, the new has come" (2 Co 5:17).

According to the Bible, a sinner "lies under the wrath of God and is therefore lost and undone." The ritual code of blood sacrifice in the Old Testament is a response to the human need for atonement. However, from a Christian point of view, the animal sacrifices of the old covenant were not fully effective in bringing about an "at-one-ment" between man and God. Those ritual sacrifices point toward the death of Christ as the ultimate and final sacrifice of atonement. For "by the grace of God, provision was made for Christ to offer Himself as a sin-bearer... and God [the Father] was willing to accept the atonement of Christ so that the sinner himself secures the benefits of forgiveness, peace, and fellowship with God" (Harper). Christ

bore our sins in his body on the tree [or cross], that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls (1 Pt 2:24-25).

In this sense Christ's death counts as a "vicarious atonement" for our sins.

The Emergence of the Messianic Ideal

Prophet, priest, conqueror, judge, king

The Old Testament history of ancient Israel presents us with five archetypical human figures, representing several aspects of the ideal of a Messiah who would emerge from Israel to lead the world back to God. These figures are

Moses the prophet,

Aaron the priest,

Joshua the conqueror,

Samuel the judge, and

David the king.

During the centuries after the reign of David, the people of Israel, led by the prophets, began to long for and to expect the coming of a Savior called the Messiah (or "anointed one"). And the Messiah was to be all that Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Samuel and David were – and more.

As Moses was perhaps the greatest of the prophets, the Messiah would be the perfect prophet (referred to by Moses himself in Dt 18:15-19) and would pro-claim "the Word of the Lord" to all the universe.

As Aaron, the first of the Levitical priests, made atonement for his people through animal sacrifices, the Messiah would, as perfect priest, make universal atonement for the sins of the whole world.

As Joshua the conqueror had led Israel into the land of Canaan, the Messiah would be a perfect conqueror, defeating the powers of sin and death and leading all faithful people into the kingdom of God.

As Samuel had judged the tribes of Israel, the Messiah would be the perfect judge of the entire human race.

And as David had been a great (and almost messianic) king, the Messiah would be the perfect king, governing his people with an abiding love and an everlasting justice.

Theocracy to human kingship to divine-human kingship

The relationship between the idea of kingship and the messianic ideal in the historical writings of the Old Testament requires special emphasis. In the period between the Exodus from Egypt and the rise of the Hebrew monarchy, Israel was ruled theocratically – that is, by God and his appointed agents such as Moses, Joshua and the judges. But as their faithlessness and disobedience led them further and further into anarchy, the people of Israel began to demand a king who might put things in order. For "in those days there was no king in Israel; [and] every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Jg 21:25). Although this demand was itself a failure to grasp the real causes of Israel's troubles, and at the same time a sinful rejection of God's theocratic rule, the Lord condescended to give his people what they wanted. Thus, the Hebrew empire came into existence; and the divine King was replaced by a dynasty of human kings.

The ideal of a divinely-anointed king, who would rule over Israel and save the nation from destruction, was very nearly fulfilled in the reign of David. The books of Samuel and Kings were written in the light of Israel's memory of David, and this section of scripture depicts the great king as a messianic figure. This tendency, in the books of Samuel and Kings, to present David as an anointed savior-king is often referred to by biblical scholars as "royal messianism."

As later Hebrew monarchs failed to live up to the standards set by David, a series of failures documented in 1 and 2 Kings, the people of Israel began to long for the coming of a "new David." The great prophets of the 8th, 7th, and 6th centuries BC predicted the eventual emergence of a king like David, a Messiah (the "anointed one"), who would save his people from evil and destruction. This prophecy was fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Although the Hebrew monarchy had its good moments – for example, in the reigns of David (1000-965 BC.) and Solomon (965-931 BC.) – the empire constructed during the 10th century BC was utterly destroyed within a period of 350 years following Solomon's death. Human kingship, like the theocracy it had succeeded, did not bring the peace and happiness sought by the people of Israel.

The movement from theocracy through human kingship in the Old Testament historical writings seems to be a revelation of the human need for a king who is both divine and human. Apparently, an exclusively divine kingship is too demanding for the human race, which has been morally and spiritually weakened by sin; and a merely human kingship – i.e., rule by men who are themselves sinful and thus morally and spiritually weak – cannot establish the conditions of life that would make peace and happiness possible. Again, therefore, an Old Testament theme directs our attention to the person of Christ, in whom the divine nature and human nature are united. Only he, the Bible tells us, can serve as a king who can bring us perfect deliverance from evil and lead us into the land of fulfillment, the kingdom of God. In Christ, theocracy and human kingship are made one.

Conclusion

The Old Testament history of ancient Israel is future-oriented (or "eschatological") and Christocentric. The fulfillment of the Old Testament longing for deliverance and happiness is to be found in Jesus Christ. Addressing the Pharisees, who were careful students of the Old Testament, Jesus said: "You search the Scriptures [that is, the Old Testament], because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (Jn 5:39-40). Here, Christ

himself tells us that the Old Testament is a preparation for and a foreshadowing of the proclamation of the New Testament.

Humanity longs for peace and happiness, for perfect fulfillment, for infinite completeness. This longing is expressed, but not fully articulated, in the Old Testament historical literature. It is clear that this human quest for redemption and salvation points toward union with God. For only in God, who is infinitely complete, can humanity discover its "promised land." God, and not Canaan, is the true promised land. The message of the New Testament is that the incarnation of God in Christ makes possible the union of humanity and God. Through Christ, who is both true God and true man, we can be adopted as "children of God" and attain the infinite completeness which, in our heart of hearts, we so deeply yearn for.

"Whenever we read the Bible, we must look for Christ. And we must go on looking until we see and so believe" (Stott). This is true of the Old Testament as well as of the New Testament. For the Old Testament was a preparation for the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible testifies repeatedly that the people of the old covenant did not maintain their faith in God, nor were they consistently obedient to God. This faithlessness and disobedience constitute the basis upon which the old covenant with ancient Israel was ultimately superseded by "the new and everlasting covenant of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."