

The Old Testament and the Resurrection: Christ in the Psalms and Prophets

The word “resurrection” does not appear in the whole of the Old Testament (OT), but there is a Jewish tradition of life after death.¹ Furthermore, as will be considered later, there are numerous references throughout the OT to “the anointed” and “the anointed one”—of great significance for the Resurrection of Christ. As Father John Breck points out in *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church*: “All of Scripture is uniformly inspired, all of it points to Christ.... Every passage of the OT as well as the New bears direct or indirect witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is Truth itself in incarnate form (‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,’ he declares, Jn 14.6).”² This understanding of the unity of the OT and the NT is especially evident in the Psalms.

The Psalms: Gateway to the Resurrection through the Crucifixion

Both the suffering and the glory of Jesus Christ are present throughout many of the Psalms. As Father Patrick Henry Reardon explains in *Christ in the Psalms*: “It is the profound Christian persuasion that Christ walks within the psalms, and this is the reason that the Book of Psalms is the OT book most often quoted in the NT.... Ultimately the words of the psalms are the mighty name of Jesus broken down into its component parts. Thus has it always been.”³

Psalm 1, verses 1 and 2, begin: “Blessed is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the ungodly.... But his pleasure is in the law of the Lord, and in his law he will meditate day and night.”⁴ Father Patrick asks: “Just who is this ‘blessed man’ of whom the psalmist speaks? It is not man in general. In truth, it really is not simply a ‘human being.’ The underlying words, here translated as ‘man,’ are emphatically masculine—that is, gender specific—in the original Hebrew (*ish*), as

¹ See S. P. Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (Rowman and Littlefield, 3rd edition, 2019).

² (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press [SVSP], 2001), pp. 33, 43.

³ (Conciliar Press/now Ancient Faith Press [AFP], 2000), pp. xvi, xvii.

⁴ Translation from the Septuagint (LXX) of Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton (Hendrickson, 1851/1995), p. 699.

well as in the Greek (*aner*) and Latin (*vir*) versions. They are not the Hebrew (*adam*) and Greek (*anthropos*) nouns accurately translated as ‘human being.’ The ‘man’ of reference here is a particular man. According to the Fathers of the Church, he is the one Mediator between God and man, the Man Jesus Christ. The Law of the Lord, which is to be our delight and mediation day and night, finds its meaning only in Him. Christ is the one who fulfils it, and He is the key to its understanding,” concludes Father Patrick. As a note in *The New American Study Bible* [NASB] on 2 Samuel 7.14 (“I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me”) states: “This familiar language expresses the special relationship God promises to maintain with the descendant(s) of David whom He will establish on David’s throne.... In Jesus Christ this promise comes to its ultimate fulfilment (see Matthew 1.1; Mark 1.11; Hebrews 1.5),” concludes that note.

In Psalm 2, verse 2, the conflict between Christ and the kings of the world is stated clearly: “The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered in counsel, against the Lord and against his anointed (Messiah in Hebrew, Christ in Greek).”⁵ That reference to “the anointed” or “the anointed one” occurs some 140 times in 19 of the 49 books of the Orthodox OT. These verses from Psalm 2 are cited in the Book of Acts, chapter 4, verses 25 to 28 and applied specifically by St Peter and St John the Theologian to Jesus Christ Himself.

Furthermore, this psalm is closely linked to the actions of the resurrected and ascended Christ in the Book of Revelation. Father Patrick writes: “The parallels of Psalm 2 with the ‘last days’ described in the Bible’s final book, Revelation, are quite remarkable: the anger of the nations and the wrath of God (Rev 11.18), the political conspiracy against God (19.19), the Messiah’s ‘rod of iron’ inflicted on His enemies (2.27); 12.5); 19.15),⁶ concludes Father Patrick. Thus, what emerges from these opening two psalms is a sense that King David and his descendants will be greatly blessed; and that from this lineage Jesus Christ Himself will be born.

⁵ Translation from Father Patrick Reardon. Many translations are similar, but Sir Lancelot Brenton has simply “against his Christ,” following the Greek of the LXX.

⁶ *Christ in the Psalms*, p. 4.

Father Patrick points out that “the psalm’s meaning, to those [early] Christians, was not something in the distant past; it was something contemporary to ongoing Christian history,”⁷ he concludes. For us today, Christ’s journey from heaven to earth for the Incarnation, His life, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection and His return to heaven with the Ascension are still “something contemporary to ongoing Christian history,” of great significance for each of us.

Notice that each aspect of the historical life of Jesus Christ leads directly to the next phase of Christ’s journey—first, from heaven to earth with the Incarnation; second, to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ on earth; which culminated (that is, reached its climax) with, third, the Crucifixion; fourth, the Resurrection, and then, fifth, back to heaven with the Ascension. While we can come to believe in Christ initially through an appreciation of any one of these five parts of Christ’s journey, all five are present in our unified experience of Christ. The unity of these five aspects—these five movements—of Christ’s life are set out in the beautiful Psalm 8.

St Augustine’s commentary on Psalm 8, verses 3 and 4, reflects on the relationship of heavenly life to earthly life. St Augustine writes: “‘Man’ ... in this context is earthly, whereas the ‘son of man’ is heavenly. The former is separated from God at a great distance; the latter is present with God.... The former class is also called the old man; the latter the new man; but new is born from the old, since spiritual birth begins with a change from an earthly and worldly life (cf. Ephesians 4.22-24); hence the new self is called son of man.... This son of man, then, was first visited in the person of the Man of the Lord Himself, born of the Virgin Mary. The frailty of human nature which the Wisdom of God deigned to take upon Himself, and the humiliation of the passion, make the psalmist declare with truth: ‘Thou hast made him little lower than the angels’ (v. 5/6 LXX). But [the psalmist] hastens to proclaim the glory of His resurrection and ascension into heaven: ‘with glory and honour hast Thou crowned him, and hast set him over the works of Thy hands (v. 6/7 LXX)’” concludes St Augustine.

⁷ *Christ in the Psalms*, p. 3.

This “new self” that is called “the son of man” of which St Augustine writes is the individual person who has “put off [the] old nature which belongs to your former manner of life... and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God... (Ephesians 4.22-24).” It is this person with a “new nature” who is then visited by “the Man of the Lord Himself, born of the Virgin Mary.” St Augustine’s exegesis here—his interpretation of this Biblical passage—is both bold and helpful. For each human being “spiritual birth begins with a change from an earthly and worldly life” to reach out to God, who then visits each of us and the Church so that we can each say in the closing line of this psalm: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!”

One other psalm of great importance for seeing the presence of Christ in the Psalms is Psalm 110/109 LXX that begins: “The Lord says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.’” This a coronation psalm written for the coronation of a king, as was Psalm 101 among others. A *NASB* note leans to the view that “it may be ... that David composed the psalm for the coronation of his son Solomon, [and] that he called him ‘my Lord’ (v. 1) in view of his new status, which placed him above the aged David, and that in doing so [David] spoke a word that had far greater meaning than he knew.” However, the same note acknowledges that “before the Christian era Jews already viewed it as Messianic. Because of the manner in which it has been interpreted in the NT—especially by [Our Lord] Jesus [Christ] (see Matt 22.43-45; Mark 12.36-37; Luke 20.42-44), but also by Peter (see Acts 2.34-36) and the author of Hebrews (see especially Heb 1.13, 5.6-10; 7.11-28)—Christians have generally held that this is the most directly ‘prophetic’ of all the psalms”⁸ concludes the *NASB* note.

In *Christ in the Psalms* Father Patrick reflects on this first verse of Psalm 109 LXX/110: “In all of the Psalter, is there a line more precious and beloved than this? [“The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand...’].... In this one line of the psalm

⁸ The prophetic interpretation is certainly supported by *The Orthodox Study Bible*, with further evidence given in the extensive notes in *The NET Bible—Full Notes Edition*, pp. 1032-1033. How to translate this psalm, especially when to use capital letters for the word “Lord,” poses major questions in interpreting the psalm.

... we profess, in summary form, [the] profound doctrines of the foundation of our whole relationship to God—the eternal identity of Jesus Christ, His triumph over sin and death, and His glorification at God’s right hand: ‘God ... has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, ... who ..., when He had purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ [as is written in the Book of Hebrews, chapter 1, verses 1 to 3],” concluded Father Patrick. So it is that these four psalms—1, 2, 10 and 109 LXX/110—help us to understand how Christ shines forth from many psalms.

The Prophets: The Voice of Christ

In the book, *The Face of Christ in the Old Testament*, Georges A. Barrois cites three important events in the life of Jesus Christ.⁹ First, there is the boy Jesus Christ “in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers,” as set out in the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 2, verses 46 and 47. Second, in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus Christ opened the scroll and read the words of the Book of Isaiah chapter 61, verses 1 and 2 (“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me....); and then He said “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” as set out in the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 4, verses 16 to 21. Third, on the evening after the Resurrection Christ spoke to two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus “and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself,” as set out in the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 24, verse 27. Professor Barrois continues: “We should not need anything more than these three episodes to be convinced that we may confidently seek the face of our Christ in the OT.... The prophets did speak, but it is, of a truth, the voice of Christ we hear,” he concluded. However, as Jesus Christ has not yet been born, how do we hear the voice of Christ in the OT?

In the book, *History, Truth, Holiness*, Bishop Maxim Vasiljevic sets out a three-fold response to hearing the voice of Christ: [First,] “let us remember that in the OT, God directs history by means of certain events and persons toward His great

⁹ (SVSP, 1974), p. 21.

purposes. [Second,] however, with his entrance into both [the] space and time of the world, Christ as the Eschatological Reality (namely, as the Alpha and Omega of history [that is, the beginning and end of history]) establishes the last days, that is, the *ultimate* truth of the world in history and thus *frees* and *heals* it. [Thus, third] here it is important to note how the Jewish linear concept of time has been complemented: if Christ is the Alpha and Omega of history, it follows that, in a certain way, the end of history in Christ through the Holy Spirit becomes present already *here* and *now*.¹⁰

In linear time one event follows another from the past to the future but always through at some point the present moment. Since Christ is the *eternal* Word incarnate, it is not only what he has done in the past which is to be found in the present moment but also what is yet to be by the promise of God from the future. And so it is with the kingdom of God which *has* come, *is* coming now and will come in its fullness in the end times. The present moment encapsulates all of this from both past and future in Christ who is the Alpha and the Omega of all histories *now*. This is also expressed liturgically in the anamnesis whereby the eternal God is acclaimed as acting in the present moment across all time. Moreover, we also confess that Christ is risen, not has risen - is born, not was born.

All of the OT prophets understood that God was directing “history by means of certain events and persons toward His great purposes.” They identified the specific events and persons that the communities and people, especially rulers, needed to see and to which a response of prayer and action was required. In this manner prior to the birth of Jesus Christ, our understanding of the characteristics of God was being defined and developed in human, historical experience. For example, as Bishop Maxim states: “The prophet Isaiah, who is characterized as the ‘prophet of the Holiness of God; emphasizes the uniqueness and particularity of God’s Holiness in the OT through the triple repetition: ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty’ (Isaiah 6.3).”¹¹

¹⁰ Italics in the text. (Sebastian Press, 2014), p. 30. Bishop Maxim is Bishop of the Western American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

¹¹ *History, Truth, Holiness*, p. 3.

Bishop Maxim's second reflection on Christ entering into the "space and time of the world" as "the Alpha and Omega of history" with "the last days" as "the *ultimate* truth of the world in history" offers an awareness that the New Testament and the Church Fathers saw and explained. To what extent individual OT prophets saw this reality is open to discussion in the context of the bishop's third reflection that "the Jewish linear concept of time" in which all of the prophets lived and worked "has been complemented" by how "the end of history in Christ through the Holy Spirit becomes present already *here and now.*" The theology is rather intense here, but the ongoing search throughout both the OT and the NT for the presence of the Holy Trinity is clear. Let us consider now the experience and teaching of two prophets, Isaiah and Ezekiel.

Isaiah: "Climb Up the Mountain" of Christ, All the Way to the Ascension

Chapter 2, verses 2 and 3, of the Book of Isaiah reads: "It shall come to pass in the last days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains.... and many people shall come and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths,'" conclude those verses. A note in *The NASB* suggests that "the latter last days" has "in view the Messianic era. In a real sense the last days began with the first coming of Christ (cf. Acts 2.17; Hebrews 1.2) and will be fulfilled at His second coming," concludes that note.

This is certainly the view of the Church Fathers. For example, St Augustine preached: "The central place they are all coming to is Christ; he is at the centre, because he is equally related to all; anything placed in the centre is common to all.... Approach the mountain, climb up the mountain and you that climb it, do not go down it. There you will be safe, there you will be protected; Christ is your mountain of refuge. And where is Christ? At the right hand of the Father, since he has ascended into heaven," concluded St Augustine. It is striking here, as noted earlier, that the decision to "climb up the mountain" leads directly to finding the Ascended Christ—all aspects of relating to Christ are a unity.

Isaiah, chapter 7, verse 14 states: “Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Emmanuel,” concludes that important verse. The Hebrew word here (*almah*) is open to interpretation as either “a young woman” or “a virgin.” The Church Fathers and the Gospel of St Matthew, chapter 1, verses 22 and 23, both took the view that “all this took place to fulfil what the Lord has spoken by the prophet” Isaiah about the birth of Jesus Christ. St Theophylact writes: “Whether the text reads ‘young woman’ or ‘virgin,’ it should be understood in either case that it is a virgin who will give birth so that the event may be a miraculous sign,” concluded St Theophylact. We might also reflect that in Israel in antiquity a young woman and the virginal state were one and the same reality. We must be careful not to read back into the Scriptures the looser sexual mores of the contemporary West!

Isaiah, chapter 9, verse 2 to 7 give a prophecy of the messianic king who is to come, bringing “peace” of which “there will be no end,” as “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” While some Church Fathers link these verses to the Crucifixion, St Ambrose sees these verses as calling “the nations to the grace of his resurrection” St Bede saw the unity of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection when he preached: “Surely the entire divinely arranged plan of our Redeemer’s [coming] in the flesh is the reconciliation of the world—it was for this purpose that he became incarnate, for this he suffered, for this he was raised from the dead—that he might lead us, who had incurred God’s anger by sinning, back to God’s peace by his act of reconciliation,” concluded St Bede. This focus on “the reconciliation of the world” linked to the spiritual renewal of each human being catches well what Christ has brought to us. An earlier Lenten talk has already considered the Suffering Servant in the Book of Isaiah, so let us turn now to the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel: A Prophet for His Fellow Jews in Exile and for Later Christians

Ezekiel was a priest of the Temple in Jerusalem and was among the Jews who were sent into exile in 598 BC where his prophetic words began.¹² As a priest without a place in which to worship, Ezekiel was in a difficult position; and his words to his fellow exiles focused on the divine judgment and how Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians led by King Nebuchadnezzar (chapters 1 to 24). After the Temple was destroyed in 587 BC, “Ezekiel’s message turned to the Lord’s consoling word of hope for His people—they would experience, revival, restoration and a glorious future as the redeemed and perfected kingdom of God in the world (chapters 33-48).”¹³

In a very real sense Ezekiel’s experience of the presence of God is captured in the poem “A New Hymn for Solitude” by Edward Dowden (1843-1913) in which the poet moved away from the altar to live in—as he puts it—“God unshrined”: “I found thee in my heart, O Lord,/ As in some secret shrine/ I knelt, I waited for thy word,/ I joyed to name thee mine./ I feared to give myself away/ To that or this; beside/ Thy altar on my face I lay,/ And in strong need I cried./ Those hours are past. Thou art not mine,/ And therefore I rejoice,/ I wait within no holy shrine,/ I faint not for the voice./ In thee we live; and every wind/ Of heaven is thine; blown free/ To west, to east, the God unshrined/ Is still discovering me.”¹⁴

“God unshrined” should not be an unfamiliar idea to Christians. It is true that the Orthodox have plenty of shrines and holy places. However, the presence of God is not confined to such holy places. The resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost dismantled forever the idea of one preferential place to encounter God. Christians are citizens of the kingdom of God and therefore they belong in every place with the Lord and in no single place. As citizens in this world Christians have local responsibilities in nations and empires, but this is quite separate from their identity as members of the body of Christ, the Church; “God unshrined” indeed! This local and nonlocal Christian identity came into sharper focus of course with the Roman destruction of the second Temple in A.D. 70 and

¹² For accurate dating of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple see David M. Rohl, *From Eden to Exile: The Epic History of the People of the Bible* (Arrow Books, 2002), p. 431.

¹³ *The Zondervan NASB Study Bible* (Zondervan Publishing, 1995), p. 1157.

¹⁴ Mary Batchelor (compiler), *The Lion Christian Poetry Collection* (Lion Publishing, 1995), p. 13.

then some 250 years of Jerusalem existing as a thoroughly pagan city but, nonetheless with a strong Christian presence.

Returning to Ezekiel, he remained a priest, and in his final vision he received detailed specifications for a new Temple in chapters 40, 43, 44 and 47 linked to restoration of “the fortunes of Jacob and ... mercy on the whole house of Israel” (Ezek 39.25). Gregory the Great preached of Ezekiel’s vision of this new Temple: “In holy Scripture those things that can be accepted according to the history are very frequently to be understood spiritually so that faith in the truth of history is retained and spiritual understanding is derived through the mysteries of [visions and] allegory [that is, stories in which the characters represent moral or spiritual ideas or messages].” As Chaim Potok writes: “[Ezekiel was] a watchman, a lookout, warning his people of the punishment that follows sin and urging repentance... Ezekiel urged the people to turn inward... [and] saw separateness and the exclusiveness of holiness as the only path through the desert of captivity.”¹⁵

Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture notes the many ways in which the Book of Ezekiel “leaves its mark on the New Testament: “The image of Jesus as the shepherd (Mt 18.12-14; Jn 10-11-18) finds its inspiration in the prophecy about the shepherds and the sheep (Ezek 34)... [The Book of] Revelation bears significant traces of the influences of Ezekiel: the vision of the chariot from heaven with the four living creatures (Ezek 1.5-10) becomes the heavenly throne room with the four creatures surrounding Christ (Rev 4.1-8); the prophet is bidden to eat the scroll (Ezek 2.8-9), as is the seer (Rev 5.1, 10); the whore is condemned (Ezek 16.23; cf. Rev 17.16; 15-18); and each book ends with a vision of the new temple (Ezek 40-48; Rev 21-22).”¹⁶

The Christian Biblical commentator, E. W. Heaton, writes bluntly: “In Ezekiel, God’s Judgment is not in the least mitigated by any reverence for Israel’s sacred tradition. Zion is nothing more than a ‘bloody city’ of pagan origin (Ezek 22.2; 24.6, 9; 16.3) and judgement is declared to begin at the house of God (Ezek 7.22; 9.6;

¹⁵ *Wanderings: Chaim Potok’s History of the Jews* (Hutchinson, 1978), pp. 148-149.

¹⁶ *ACCS OT XIII* (InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. xx.

24.21, 25). The promise to Abraham provides Israel with no guarantee of security (Ezek 33.23-29; cf. Gen 15.1-21) and no righteous remnant is to be spared; the few who manage to escape sword are to be regarded as witnesses not to God 's saving purpose, but to the evident righteousness of his judgment (Ezek 14.21-23; cf. 12.16; 6.8-10; 7.16)... Ezekiel's overriding conviction is that God should be acknowledged by the nations (Ezek 5.4-8; 14, 15; 20.14, 22; 32.10; cf. 25.7; 26.6, 39.7, 21-24). This was the purpose of Israel's deliverance from Egypt at the Exodus (Ezek 20.9) and it remains the purpose to the coming deliverance of Israel from Babylon (Ezek 28.5-26; cf. 36.36; 37.28)," concluded Prof. Heaton. The reality that "judgement is declared to begin at the house of God" remains a warning to all Christian communities today.

The OT Reference to the Resurrection

These copious references to the promised Messiah in the old Testament bring with them an expectation that God will finally establish his kingdom by sending to us a-son-like-David and in his line; but much more than that, a Messiah who will be the Prince of Peace and Emmanuel, that is God-with-us and the Son of Man. When this Messiah ushers in the kingdom of God it will be as a Suffering Servant who by His sacrifice will not only redeem Israel, but through her and the whole Church overturn death itself and offer the indestructible eternal life of the resurrection to the whole world. This Old Testament messianic promise is inconceivable without the death and resurrection of our Lord, which indeed has been the theme of these Lenten talks. It remains for us to consider why it is so important that all Christians including the Orthodox should study and venerate the Old Testament to understand the New Testament which fulfils it in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, together with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Why Should We Regularly Read the Old Testament?

To Unite Our Beliefs, Thoughts, Prayers and Actions to Christ

It is important to remember that the OT was written by authors inspired by the Holy Spirit for two quite different groups of people—for the People of God before the Incarnation of Christ, the Jews, as well as for the People of God after the Incarnation—all those, Jews and Gentiles, who chose to become followers of Christ and were then guided by both the OT and the NT. Many passages can be applied as prophecies to historical events that were to happen both to earlier Jews and to later Christians. For Jesus Christ Himself on earth, His Bible was solely the OT, as indeed it was for the early Church.

Furthermore, with the guidance of both the Church Fathers and later Christian interpreters we are drawn to unite our beliefs, thoughts, prayers and actions to Christ. This is a lifetime experience which we share together and in which we can rejoice. As St Symeon the New Theologian of the 10th century has written: “We need great soberness, great zeal, much searching of the divine Scriptures [that is, of both the Old Testament and the New Testament]. The Saviour has [said], ‘Search the Scriptures’ (John 5.39). Search them and hold fast to what they say with great exactitude and faith, in order that you may know God’s will [for you] clearly from the divine Scriptures and be able infallibly [that is, effectively and without error] to distinguish between good and evil (Hebrews 5.14)... Nothing is so conducive [that is, encouraging and helpful] for saving us as the following of the divine precepts [that is, the rules and guidance] of the Saviour.”¹⁷ Amen.

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¹⁷ Cited by Father Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *Encouraged by the Scriptures: Essays on Scripture, Interpretation, and Life* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), p. 38.