Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy

Posted on January 4, 2011 by Fr. Ted

I have over the past couple of years written several blog series on various Biblical themes related to interpreting the Scriptures. The longest of these was God Questions His Creation: Genesis 4-11 (links to all of those blogs available in PDF can be found at http://frted.wordpress.com/2010/07/02/god-questions-his-creation-genesis-11-as-one-pdf-document/). More recently I wrote Reading the Bible Means Opening a Treasury and Reading the Bible: Hermeneutics and Typology.

In this new series, I will look at three scriptural themes, this time mostly related to the Christian Old Testament, also known as the Jewish Bible or Tanakh: the Old Testament, Prophecy and Torah.

These are not scholarly researched blogs, though they will consist mostly of quoting scriptural scholars or patristic writers on these topics. My method in writing these various scriptural blog series is not to research the topic, but rather to use quotes that I have tagged in my readings over the past several years. Basically when I read a book I highlight passages of interest to me. When I’ve finished reading the book I go back through the book and look at the passages I’ve highlighted and assign a tag (a theme) to each one, and then record the tag, the book and page number in a Microsoft Excel file that I created years ago. I alphabetize the list by the tags. I will say this idea occurred to me when I first began using a computer and is probably the only really creative use I’ve made of all the marvelous things a computer can do. I instantly grasped how the
computer made saving these quotes easy, possible and readily accessible. Being an avid reader, the database has grown rapidly. When I have the time and like the material, I easily read a book a week. Of course if I had the time and energy I could type in each quote into a database and have a much more useable database of actual quotes rather than just tags, which would allow me to search for many words rather than limiting a quote to one theme. However, I find simply having the tags, books & page numbers works for me in compiling and using the quotes (currently I have about 5500 such tags in my Excel Books File). Originally I tagged the quotes for use in the weekly parish bulletin, but now use them in my blogs and the weekly bulletin.

So I am not doing research as such – picking a theme and then trying to find quotes and information. Rather, when I see one of my tags/themes has a number of quotes, I can then compose a blog series around it and I pull together the quotes which may have nothing to do with each other, being linked only because I imposed a tag/theme on them. Sometimes this means discovering quotes around a theme which have very diverse or even conflicting views. When it comes to reading Scripture, however, because I do accept the Patristic notion that the Scriptures are a treasury whose riches are to be discovered, I find the diversity in ideas about approaching the Bible to be enriching and adding depth to my own understanding of the Word of God.

I’m going to venture a guess about the development of the canonical Scripture of the Christians and biblical interpretation. St. Paul mentions in his writings that in the Christian assemblies, several people moved by the Holy Spirit might speak God’s word (prophecy) to those gathered together (1 Corinthians 14:26-33). St. Paul argues for order in the assemblies: perhaps at first anyone could speak about any topic which they believed the Spirit was inspiring them. Fairly early on this brought about too much
chaos as people spoke whatever came to mind without discerning anything. So then the Spirit had to be tested, and only those that declared that Jesus Christ was Lord were thought to be truly moved by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). My guess is that over time, to curtail people saying aloud with no spiritual discernment anything that came to mind, the communities began to insist that those speaking the Word – prophesying or preaching – must be tested and shown to be saying things that conformed to what the Christian communities already accepted as true. As the Church became more organized this could be readily done by studying the canonical writings of the Church and using them to evaluate the prophet or preacher. Thus Scripture was given a prominent role in the Christian assemblies, and those speaking were expected to speak/prophesy things conforming to if not related to those ideas contained in the authoritative Scriptures.

Eventually as the Church continued its growth and thus the diversity of its membership, the Christian communities further tested those speaking, prophesying, preaching, or teaching and began to allow only recognized teachers to speak in the assemblies. This corresponded in the Church to the rising historical need to oppose heresies – twisting the truth or narrowly focusing on only certain aspects of the truth at the expense of the fullness of the faith. The acceptance by the Church as a whole of the canonical Scriptures and also of a recognized leadership – the apostolic succession – was thus part of the organic development of the Church to remain faithful to its core message and apostolic truth. In each individual community this initially meant expanding the number of writings they could rely on as authoritative (those communities which read only one Gospel, came to accept that the Gospel is authoritatively recorded according to four different evangelists). This evolving history also helped insure adherence to the core truth of Christianity, a recognized means to determine false or distorted teachings (heresies), and faithfulness to the same message that the Apostles had proclaimed. By the time of St. John Chrysostom (4th Century), there still were several speakers who spoke/preached at each assembly (as there had been in the more charismatic stage of Pauline Christian communities), but in his day, the speakers were the priests and bishops of the community and their message
was based on the readings from the canonical Scriptures. The prophetic message was now coming through the correct interpretation of the accepted and authoritative texts. Thus we can see how what Paul describes in his day as several people moved by the Spirit prophesying or preaching in each community’s assembly was changed to combat spiritual abuses by individuals in the communities (moved by spirits that did not claim Jesus is Lord for example) to help the Church remain faithful to the Apostolic proclamation of the Gospel of Truth and to help distinguish between true and false teachings. The Church continued to rely on the Holy Spirit, but now accepted that the Holy Spirit worked through the laying on of hands and through an ordained clergy to help maintain faithfulness and order in the Christian congregations.

Next: Reading the Scriptures in the Earliest Christian Communities
Many in Israel followed Christ: not all believed in Him.

This is the 2nd Blog in this series dealing with Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy. Christianity saw itself as the continuation of the Israel of God; it saw itself as being the people who believed in God’s promises and prophesies and who saw their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Christianity thus from its beginnings had a Scripture: the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament. It wasn’t the Scriptures which were new to the Christians, but the understanding of them which had been made clear in and through Christ. Eventually the Christians add to their Scriptures the New Testament writings: texts which the Christians believed contained the true and faithful interpretation and fulfillment of the Old Testament. The Scriptures of the Jews pointed to Christ, to help everyone recognize Him and the revelation God made through Him. Conversely it was Christ who made clear the witness and purpose of the Old Testament.
“... when the Hebrews were given the law, their approach to it wasn’t exactly personalized, but something of a personal relationship developed between them and the Torah. They did not see the law as a code, much less an arbitrary set of rules to be followed. They saw it as a help, a treasure, and a blessing. They also saw it as an expression of reality—the way things are, the way they are ordered in relation to each other and to their Creator. ... The law, for the Hebrews, was an object of love. ... Early Christians approached Jesus Christ and the teaching about him (dogma) in the same way that Jews approached the law. Even as St. Paul taught that the person of Christ, and life in Christ, supercedes the law, his Epistles began to define who Christ is, how he is both divine and human, and how God exists eternally with his divine Son and his most holy Spirit. ... Christians sang about this dogma as the Jews sang about the law. ... Dogma (general truth) or dogmas (which are expressions of that truth) do not describe a code, a set of fixed and sterile rules. Rather, dogma describes and defines reality, what is. Dogmas give a true understanding of God, creation, and human personhood. They orient our lives. From dogma, we derive an understanding of reality, an ethos of life, an understanding of how to live, how to stand in relationship with God, the cosmos, the other, and the self. In other words, they tell us how to ‘do the truth.’” (Peter Bouteneff, SWEETER THAN HONEY: ORTHODOX THINKING ON DOGMA AND TRUTH, pp 37-38)
Century described how they read the Scriptures of Israel (since the New Testament had yet to be formed – the earliest Christian communities often knew only one of the four versions of what would become the canonical Gospels, and knew only one or two of the New Testament Epistles) as the people of God:

“First of all, the assembly meets to worship God. In that context it both hears from God, through prophecy and teaching, and speaks to God in praise, prayer, and hymnsinging. ... Both in speech from and speech to God, and in speech to one another, the assembly especially recites its foundational stories and considers how they can best embody those stories in their life together in the world. These foundational stories include the Scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament); the creed about the saving acts of God in Christ’s death and resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-8) or incarnation, death, and exaltation (Phil 2:6-11); brief narrative summaries focusing on the significance of Jesus’ death (Gal 1:4; Rom 3:21-26); and narratives of Jesus’ instituting the Lord’s supper (1 Cor 11:17-34). The assembled believers hear the story and discern the mind of Christ. Guided by the Spirit, plus the words of Scripture, tradition, and Paul, they look together for God’s specific call to them to be a countercultural community of people infused with the Spirit of Christ, a Christophany—a manifestation of Christ—in and for the world.” (Michael Gorman, READING PAUL, pp 137-138)

Next: Reading the Scriptures with the Early Church: In Christ

Reading the Scriptures with the Early Church: In Christ

Posted on January 11, 2011 by Fr. Ted

This is the 3rd Blog in this series which began with Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy. The immediate preceding blog is Reading the Scriptures in the Earliest Christian Communities. In this Blog Fr. John
McGuckin offers a glimpse at how early Christians read the Scriptures – and read them differently from how we read them today.

“A modern reader, used to interpreting the Bible according to its sequential narrative content, and its historical or ethical significances, is singularly ill-equipped to realize that throughout the vast majority of Christian history this is not how the bible was generally read. In earlier Christian ages (and the style still applies predominantly to most of the bible as it appears in Church in the form of liturgical poetry) the scripture was read in fragmented pericopes, each one turning around a Type (tupos): namely a figure or symbol or story from the old text that was reworked symbolically in line with the evangelical mystery.

So, for example, the old story of Abraham and Isaac's sacrifice becomes, by reference to the inherent symbols of the ‘Beloved Son’ carrying ‘the wood’ (the Cross) of his own sacrifice ‘up the hill’ (Calvary), for the establishment of ‘a new covenant’ of grace (the foundation of New Israel) ... Type, in this case, means that this reference to the passion-covenant theology is ‘really’ what the Abrahamic story is all about. Its ‘other meaning’ (what one might call the literal or first-sight meaning, as something to do with the patriarchs and the establishment of the covenant with Israel) was understood as a level of revelation on the surface, meant to be passed through by the enlightened reader (the one who had been given the key to the mystical interpretation through the acceptance of the Gospel story).
The mechanism of this form of interpretation was based upon three central notions common among the Fathers of the Church namely: that (a) all scripture was a single inter-related text telling the same story of the Incarnate Word; (b) that all scripture had superficial levels of meaning that deepened in a mystical significance made visible according to the initiation possessed by the disciple of Christ; and (c) that there were clues within the text, at surface level, that gave signs to the initiate reader who would read the old story (the Old Testament) ‘back from the new,’ not forward as if reading historically.*  Like the ‘type’ of an old machine-press, which was reversed so that its impression on the paper would render the letters in their correct readable alignment, so too the biblical ‘type’ was an enigmatic symbol, or story, hidden in the Old Testament whose ‘real meaning’ became apparent to the careful (initiated) observer only in the light of the Gospel, and only according to the degree of the illumination which the Divine Spirit of God gave to the heart of the faithful reading it ‘In Christ.**”

[Notes:  **”Mar Theodore of Mopsuestia, described the issue succinctly in his argument that if the scripture is a sacred literature that transcends historicity, being of the eschatological moment, then it cannot be exegeted solely by linear historical methods of interpretation.”]
"""Reading the text, en christo (1 Cor 4:10; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:9) or with the ‘mind of Christ’ phronema Christou, (cf. 1 Cor 2:13-16), it passes from simple textual reading to become a sacrament of divine revelation. The Church Fathers, then, believed that the Scripture really only became ‘sacred revelation’ when it fulfilled that function in Christ, and through Christ. His was the presence that sanctified the literature and made it revelatory for the purpose of salvation. It was in this sense that Origen called the scripture, the ‘sacrament’ of the body of the Logos....”"

(John McGuckin, HARP OF GLORY, pp14-15)

Next: Reading the Scriptures with St. John Cassian
This is the 4th Blog in this series which began with Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy. The immediate preceding blog is Reading the Scriptures with the Early Church: In Christ. In the preceding blog we learned how the early Christians read the scriptures in a different way than most modern biblical readers do, focusing more on the transcendent meaning of the Old Testament: the meaning which is found in and through Jesus the Christ. In this blog we will consider how St. John Cassian (d. 435AD) read the Scriptures and taught others to read them. His methodology, consistent with the educational methods of his day, is repetitive reading of scripture in order to commit it to memory.

“To gain this scriptural undergirding of the life of prayer, Cassian taught that it is good to memorize passages of Scripture. Then the texts will recur to the mind, again and again. They will recur at times when the soul can hardly think about them because occupied with business, or under temptation. And at other times they will recur—most fruitfully perhaps during the silent hours of the night—and then they will be understood and will feel like an illumination.

Just as Cassian had a view of the holy life as an illimitable depth into which the soul penetrates little by little, so he had a sense of the Bible as a book with obvious meanings, but behind the literal sense a series of deeper truths, which will be more and more understood by the soul as it advances morally. ‘As we strive with constant repetition to commit these readings to memory, we have not the time to understand them because our minds have been occupied.’ (Conference 14:10). But later when we are free from the attractions of all that we do and see and, especially, when we are quietly meditating during the hours of darkness, we think them over and we understand them more clearly.” (John Cassian, CONFERENCES, pp 14-15)
“Cassian... is also conscious that truth is not won in a moment. It is given in meditation or digestion or rumination. You read, for example, a piece of Scripture; you say prayers about it; and then one night a few nights later you wake up and realize that it has a very profound meaning for you, of which you had not been conscious in your waking hours. It is a sudden realization, as though a heavy sleeper is woken by a light.” (John Cassian, CONFERENCES, p 3)

In St. John Cassian’s own words:

“If you wish to achieve true knowledge of Scripture you must hurry to achieve unshakable humility of heart. ... Then, having banished all worldly concerns and thoughts, strive in every way to devote yourself constantly to the sacred reading so that continuous meditation will seep into your soul, as it were, will shape it to its image. Somehow it will form that ‘ark’ of the Scriptures (cf Heb 9:4-5) and will contain the two stone tablets, that is, the perpetual strength of the two testaments. There will be the golden urn which is a pure and unstained memory and which will preserve firmly within itself that everlasting manna, that is, the eternal, heavenly sweetness of spiritual meanings and of that bread which belongs to the angels. ... Therefore the sequences of holy Scripture must be committed to memory and they must be pondered ceaselessly. Such meditation will profit us in two ways. First, when the thrust of the mind is occupied by the study and perusal of the readings it will, of necessity, avoid being taken over by the snares of dangerous thoughts. Second, as we strive with constant repetition to commit these readings to memory, we have not the time to understand them because our minds have been occupied. But later when we are free from the attractions of all that we do and see and, especially, when we are quietly meditating during the hours of darkness, we think them over and we understand them more closely. And so it happens that when we are at ease and when, as it were, we are plunged into the dullness of sleep, the hidden meanings, of which we...
were utterly unaware during our waking hours, and the sense of them are bared to our minds.

As our mind is increasingly renewed by this study, Scripture begins to take on a new face. A mysteriously deeper sense of it comes to us and somehow the beauty of it stands out more and more as we get farther into it. Scripture shapes itself to human capacity. ” (John Cassian, CONFERENCES, p 164-165)

St. John Cassian’s methodology of unlocking the treasury of Scripture is to make oneself so familiar with the text of the Bible by frequent reading of it in order to commit it to memory. Once texts were memorized, they would penetrate into one’s heart and mind, and like seeds would begin to grow and bear fruit. This fruit would come, not necessarily as one read the Scriptures, but at some later time when in prayer or mediation: inspiration and insight would be given by the Holy Spirit because one had made the Scriptures the main preoccupation of one’s mind and heart.
“I treasure Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You.” (Psalm 119:11)

Like most of the Church Fathers, Cassian does not assume that inspiration comes randomly to just anybody – the heart must be made pure, the ground of the heart must be prepared to accept the Word. Thus an integral part of reading the Bible is repentance and prayer: struggling against self centeredness, selfish desire and temptation in order to love God and neighbor. A person cannot hear God if they are always preoccupied with themselves, neither can they love; fasting and repentance are ways to deny the self and take up the Cross in order to hear and obey God (Mark 8:34).

Next: How to Read the Old Testament and How Not to Read It

How to Read the Old Testament and How Not to Read It

Posted on January 18, 2011 by Fr. Ted

This is the 5th Blog in this series which began with Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy. The immediate preceding blog is Reading the Scriptures with St. John Cassian. In the previous blog, we considered the method by which St. John Cassian advocated Christians to allow the written Word of God to enter into their hearts and minds: repetitive reading and memorization of the Scriptures as the planting of God’s Word as seed in the heart, which would then bear fruit at later times in prayer and meditation.
Memorizing passages, or simply reading them so often that we become intimately familiar with them, is not the same as memorizing spells that we can cast like Harry Potter or other wizards and witches. We are not domesticating God’s word for our personal pleasure and use! Rather we are endeavoring to make ourselves servants of God, learning His will, rather than trying to conform Him to ours. As has oft been noted, if we only read or memorize those biblical passages we like or approve of, then we are listening not to God but to ourselves when we recite those passages!

Memorizing the Scriptures allows various passages to percolate in our hearts and minds for a time in order for us to be able to connect the verses from the Bible to our personal experiences and meditations. We then can draw on the wisdom of Scripture to inform our minds, to form our hearts, and to conform our personal will to God’s will. This is not a passive process – waiting for God’s Word to work on us. It is a process of actively engaging the Word and of preparing the soil of our heart to receive the fecund divine seed from God so that it can produce good fruit in us. It is not magic, like Jack and the beanstalk, but is more organic farming, requiring patience and hard labor to produce the harvest despite spiritual draughts, disease or adverse conditions. Fr. Paul Tarazi, Orthodox scripture professor, warns about reading the Scriptures with a magical outlook.

“The first and basic scripture of Judaism is the Torah or Pentateuch. As with any set of scriptures, even those containing apparently independent ‘rules’ within them, this one was never intended to be used as it were ‘magically,’ by a reader who would pick
and choose passages that seem at face value to apply to any given situation. But for those who read it both then and now, the temptation to do that is too strong to resist. Consider, for example, the typical section in a present-day Bible where the reader is given a list of biblical passages to read and refer to for each and every situation in life: birth or bereavement, sorrow or joy, success or failure, and so forth. It is as though the biblical God were the sum total of a collection of pagan deities, each in charge of a different area or aspect of our lives!* But as I have shown throughout my Old Testament Introduction series and am now showing again with regard to the New Testament, the scriptural books are individually and collectively written as a story with a beginning and an end, a story whose meaning cannot be gathered except when taken in its entirety.” [*Note: “This is a best a slothful attitude: while the poor pagans had to remember the name and the function of each deity in order to make the proper request and insure prompt answer, we circumvent this nuisance and ask from the same god whatever behooves us and according to our need or pleasure. At its worst, this attitude makes out of the living biblical God who does ‘what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived’ (1 Cor 2:9), a web-site masterminded by humans to satisfy their whims of the moment.”] (Paul Nadim Tarazi, THE NEW TESTAMENT INTRODUCTION: PAUL AND MARK, pp 29-30)
The Bible is not a book of magical incantations. It is a written witness to God’s Word becoming flesh. It is a treasure of the depth and riches of God’s Wisdom. It is theology in the form of narrative, guiding us to the Kingdom of heaven. It is the revelation of God’s plan through history, and of our salvation. Though the Bible contains historical fact, it is not mostly a history book, rather it is a book of theology which in turn reveals what it means to be human.

“For Orthodox, then, the Old Testament doesn’t function as a history book or as a science text. We believe it’s a book that exists to point to Christ, to give understanding about who Christ was and what he achieved through his life-giving death. The New Testament, for its part, wasn’t written as a cold recitation of uninterpreted events. Merely recording the ‘historic facts,’ to the extent that it’s possible, wouldn’t have been enough to convey the gospel for all to see. The apostles saw everything Jesus did and still didn’t understand and internalize the meaning of it all until after he was crucified, when their minds were opened to who he is and how the Scriptures spoke of him. They
then recounted the events in the Gospel in such a way that reveals Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture, his significance for us and for our salvation. The Gospels simultaneously recount and interpret the events of Jesus Christ’s life.” (Peter Bouteneff, SWEETER THAN HONEY: ORTHODOX THINKING ON DOGMA AND TRUTH, pp 88-89)

The main purpose of the Old Testament was not to simply record the deeds of God’s people in history, nor to preserve the Ten Commandments. Its purpose was and remains to reveal Christ to us.

Next: Reading the Old Testament in Consonance with the Saints

Reading the Old Testament in Consonance with the Saints

Posted on January 21, 2011 by Fr. Ted

This is the 6th Blog in this series which began with Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy. The immediate preceding blog is How to Read the Old Testament and How Not to Read It.

In the previous blog, we noted that the correct means of reading Scriptures is not to treat it as a book of magic incantations as if we were living in a Harry Potter world: memorize the appropriate talisman, and then bring it out in the appropriate occasion and voila you get your way magically. If you think about the Harry Potter stories, you come to realize it is not magic that wins the day for Harry and his friends. All the wizards and witches have the same magic at their disposal. There is no magic however that can make you courageous, virtuous, willing to suffer for the good, or willing to sacrifice yourself for others. The courageous and good were willing to sacrifice themselves for others. Those following evil were afraid and trying to spare their own lives. Moral fortitude is stronger than magic even in Harry Potter.
With Harry Potter in mind, one can note that in the Orthodox tradition of reading Scripture, an essential factor for reading with understanding, is to be living a life of Christian virtue. It is not magic, but courageous fortitude which enables us to follow the way of love and the way of the Cross. It is keeping our eyes on the Kingdom of Heaven, and actively choosing to move toward that goal which opens the treasury of the Scriptures to us.

“Consonance with the ecclesial tradition, as the primary requirement for the Orthodox Christian biblical interpreter, is exactly what Athanasius meant when he wrote this axiomatic passage about biblical interpretation in the DE INCARNATIONE...: ‘What are the requirements for the searching of the Scriptures, and for true knowledge of them? An honorable life is needed, and a pure soul, and that virtue which is of Christ. For the intellect must apply this to guide its path and then it shall be able to attain to what it desires, and to comprehend it, insofar as it is possible for a human nature to learn of things concerning the Word of God. But without a pure mind and the modeling of one’s life after the saints, a person could not possibly comprehend the words of the saints. ... Or take the case of a person who wanted to see a certain city or country. Such a person would surely journey to the place in order to be able to see it. It is exactly the same for someone who desires to comprehend the mind of those who speak of God. Such a person must begin washing and cleansing their own soul, and by addressing their manner of living. They should approach the saints by imitating their own works. By such consonance with the saints in the conduct of a shared life, a person may understand also what has been revealed to them by God.” (John McGuckin in SACRED TEXT AND INTERPRETATION: PERSPECTIVES IN ORTHODOX BIBLICAL STUDIES edited by Theodore Stylianopoulos, pp 309-310)
Consonance with the saints: that great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1) comes alive to us and inspires us in correct thinking and behavior. The icons which are present in our homes, and which surround us in the church, are transformed from boards on the wall into windows into heaven. We come to realize how we must live in order to be true disciples of Christ as we understand the lives of those saints who followed the Crucified Lord.

Thus reading the Scriptures is not an act separate from our daily lives. For the reading of Scriptures should form our lives and shape our hearts and minds. Conversely, as our lives conform to the Gospel commands, our hearts are opened to the Word of God (Luke 24:32), and we come to see and understand “greater things” (John 1:50).
The disciples said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” (Luke 24:32)

It is living in consonance with those who hearts were illumined and set on fire by Christ that we most and best understand the Bible.

Next: Reading Torah and Keeping God’s Word

Reading Torah and Keeping God’s Word

Posted on January 24, 2011 by Fr. Ted

This is the 7th Blog in this series which began with Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy. The immediate preceding blog is Reading the Old Testament in Consonance with the Saints.

For the Jews, Torah is God’s gift to His people. Torah is more than just God’s rules as it is God’s instruction to His people on how to live on earth – It is God’s eternal Wisdom offered in a manner accessible to humans. Torah is for the Jews what Jesus the Incarnate Word of God is for Orthodox Christians. St. Paul upon encountering the Risen Lord Jesus received a calling to proclaim a new agreement between God and His people and the world. St. Paul came to understand that Torah could not cure what was ailing humanity since the fall of Adam in committing the ancestral sin. Torah, for St.
Paul, is God’s Wisdom and instruction, but St. Paul came to believe its role was intended to be temporary serving to prepare the Jews and the world for the Incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ. The Torah could not make us righteous or holy, but it did point out our rebellious sinfulness quite well. With the coming of Christ, the Torah has been fulfilled and God’s new covenant inaugurated.

“It was probably during the exile in Babylon (my note: circa 597-538BC) that the so-called Five Books of Moses, also known as the Torah, were edited into their final form, highlighting the ancient story of slavery and freedom, of exile and homecoming, of oppression and Passover—but also setting out the pattern of life for the people who had thus been rescued. When God frees you from slavery, said the Torah, this is how you must behave, not to earn his favor (as though you could put God in your moral debt), but to express your gratitude, your loyalty, and your determination to live by the covenant because of which God rescued you in the first place. That is the logic underlying the increasingly focused study and practice of the Torah from the Babylonian exile to the time of Jesus and beyond.

The Torah was never intended as a charter for individuals, as though anyone, anywhere, might decide to try to keep its precepts and see what would happen. It was given to a people, edited by and for that people, and applied (in the postexilic period at least) to that people; and at is heart it was about how that people would live together, under God and in harmony—that is, justice—with one another.” (N.T. Wright, SIMPLY CHRISTIAN, p 82)
The Torah was never meant to be the Jewish book of magical incantations and spells, which any individual anywhere could pick up and learn how to use for his/her own benefit or to manipulate God. Torah was meant to inform, form, transform and prepare a people who would then accomplish God’s will on earth to be a light to the nations and bring all to salvation. The Torah was meant to be read and lived within the community of believers. For St. Paul, that community – the Jews – lost sight of what the Torah was meant to be to them and what they as the chosen people were meant to be to the world. In effect, the people of God, meant to be the ark of salvation as Noah’s ark was to him and his family, had failed in their mission to be a light to the nations. Instead they came to revel in being God’s chosen people who alone received God’s favor.
“The covenant may have been rock-solid on God’s part, but as Genesis tells the story, it was anything but solid on Abraham’s part. Right from the beginning we run into the problem that will haunt the narrative throughout: What happens when the lifeboat which sets off to rescue the wrecked ship is itself trapped between the rocks and the waves, itself in need of rescue? What happens when the people through whom God wants to mount his rescue operation, the people through whom he intends to set the world to rights, themselves need rescuing, themselves need putting to rights? What happen when Israel becomes part of the problem, not just the bearer of the solution? As cheerful old Rabbi Lionel Blue once said on the radio, ‘Jews are just like everyone else, only more so.’ The Old Testament underlines that on page after page.

But if the God who made the world out of free, boundless, energetic love now sees his world in rebellion, and his rescue operation flawed because of the people chosen to carry it out, what is he to do?” (N.T. Wright, SIMPLY CHRISTIAN, p 75)

The answer, so Christians believe, is that God sent His own Son into the world to save the world. Jesus Himself became what Israel was meant to be; for Jesus made incarnate in the world God’s revelation, wisdom and Word. Jesus did what Torah could not do – reunited God to humanity and healed all of the brokenness and divisions caused by sin.

Next: Jesus Fulfills Torah

Jesus Fulfills Torah

Posted on January 29, 2011 by Fr. Ted

This is the 8th Blog in this series which began with Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy. The immediate preceding blog is Reading Torah and Keeping God’s Word.

“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17)
A purely literal reading of John 1:17 might cause one to conclude that the Evangelist John was claiming that there is no truth in Moses, only law, and thus no truth in the Torah, our Old Testament. Of course that is not the contrast John the Theologian is making. He is not rejecting the Moses and the entire Old Testament as being void of truth, for it is the entire Old Testament which points to and makes Jesus Christ known to us all. Later in his Gospel, John writes: “You search the scriptures, 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” (John 5:39-40). John obviously doesn’t think the Torah is devoid of truth for it bears witness to Christ and thus is true. Jesus in fact fulfils Torah.
As the Fifth Century bishop Theodoret of Cyrus wrote: “It was the Law, after all, that guided us to Christ; so the one who believes in Christ the Lord fulfills the purpose of the Law.” (Theodoret of Cyrus, COMMENTARY ON THE LETTERS OF PAUL V 1, p 107)

Generally the New Testament writers understood that with the coming of the Christ, the Old Covenant (=Testament) had been fulfilled. Its purpose accomplished and thus the new Covenant which God had promised has been ushered in (Jeremiah 31:31-34). They describe the Law as being but a shadow of the reality to come or a custodian – a temporary condition until the time had come for God to reveal His perfect salvation.

“So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Galatians 3:24-26).

“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near” (Hebrews 10:1).

“The early identification of Jesus as, in the words of the Psalm, ‘a priest for ever’ and as ‘the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’ – therefore simultaneously and uniquely both the sacrificial victim and the sacrificing priest—became part of an elaborate scheme of interpretation by which the liturgy prescribed in the Torah, especially Exodus and Leviticus, was seen as having become obsolete now that the One it pictured had finally come into human history in the person of Jesus Christ. What had been ‘foreshadowed’ in the Torah had now been ‘overshadowed’ in him as the fulfillment.” (Jaroslav Pelikan, WHOSE BIBLE IS IT?, p 96)

The Torah foreshadowed Christ, but alas, also represents a stumbling block (Romans 9:30-33) because people can begin to trust in their own righteousness achieved through their own efforts rather than seeing that even the Law was a gift to those who believe the God of Love is working for their salvation. When we trust in our own efforts to keep the Law, we don’t even need God for our salvation! We can keep twisting our interpretation of the Law to make it more possible for us (and us alone!) to keep Torah. The downside? If we believe we save ourselves through our own effort to keep every detail of the Law, we will find ourselves condemned if we fail in any one detail of the Law.
“If you really fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well. But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ said also, ‘Do not kill.’ If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:8-13).

What happens to those who rely on their own ability to keep the Law is they forget the purpose of Torah was not to simply develop fanatical adherence to the details of the Law, but it was rather a way to help us remain faithful to God and to help us love God with all our heart, mind and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5, the great “Shema Israel”), and to love neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18). St. Paul recognized that demanding strict adherence to Torah meant God had no intention of saving the world, whereas he had come to recognize that it was faith in God which in fact was what God wanted from all His human creatures as witnessed in the life of Abraham who was the father of many nations.

“In other words, the law poses a religious problem for the apostle to the Gentiles. On what basis does a Gentile become a member of the community of Christ? Is it through circumcision and adherence to the law of Moses? Or is it on some other basis? In this regard, the apostle is clear. Obedience to the law of Moses is not an entrance requirement into the community of Christ for the Gentiles. Indeed, the law of Moses is not a universal requirement for the people of God in Christ. ... In effect, Paul has transformed Judaism from a national religion into a universal religion through the incorporation of Gentiles into the community of Christ. Paul did not perceive this to be
a negation of Judaism but a completion of Judaism and its task of being a blessing to the nations.” (James Aageson, WRITTEN ALSO FOR OUR SAKE: PAUL AND THE ART OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION, p 27)

Next: A Christian View of Prophecy

A Christian View of Prophecy

Posted on February 1, 2011 by Fr. Ted

This is the 9th Blog in this series which began with Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy. The immediate preceding blog is Jesus Fulfills Torah.

The first Christians came to see Jesus not simply as fulfilling specific promises prophecies about the Messiah, but also in fulfilling the entire Torah – the Law, the History, the Promises, the People, and the Covenant. This caused the first believers to rethink their relationship to or understanding of Torah, the People of God, Covenant, the Messiah and the Nations. I’ve mentioned some of this in the previous blogs. The final two blogs of this series will look at the nature of prophecy and the Christian understanding of it and of Christ’s relationship to it.

As we profess in the Nicene creed, God has through the Holy Spirit spoken to us by the prophets.
“In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets...”  
(Hebrews 1:1)

The New Testament mentions prophets and specific prophecies numerous times, but offers us only a few glimpses into what prophecy is or how it works.

“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”  
(2 Peter 1:20-21)

“... and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.”  
(1 Corinthians 14:32-33)
What we can glean from these verses is that God Himself speaks to us through the intermediary of the prophets – God uses a human intermediary to convey His message to us, presumably as the means for us humans to receive His divine message. The prophets are an interface point between God and humanity. Whether inspiration works such that the prophet is able to interpret the divine message into human images and language or the prophet for some reason can understand the divine message though the rest of us cannot is not clear. God uses the prophet to convey His message. “Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7).

The prophets don’t just offer what they think God might be doing or saying, they are not guessing or predicting what God is going to do. Rather God actually moves or inspires the prophets to speak. So the message of the prophets is a divine message. The message comes to us in human words and images, through a human intermediary, but it is God speaking to us. Much has been written about the nature of inspiration, which goes far beyond what I can say here. We receive prophecy as a message from God not a message from the prophet. The message from God has a purpose which is not limited by or to the human interpretation of that message. We can misinterpret the message, we can try to make sense of the message, but we have to be faithful to the message, even if we don’t completely understand it. This is where the Scriptures, as the written Word of God, are so important because they preserve the message. The community of the people of God have the responsibility to make sure the message is preserved and faithfully conveyed – only then can its meaning be faithfully discerned or debated. Finally, the prophets themselves are not mere puppets in the hands of God – they are inspired by God, filled with the Spirit – but the prophets have some control over themselves and speaking the prophecy. Prophecy is very different from demon possession. It must be noted that sometimes prophets do not completely comprehend the prophecy, and sometimes they may not even be aware that have uttered a prophecy.

“For the prophet is not always consciously aware of what he is saying. As the Fourth Gospel states of Caiaphas: ‘Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation’ (Jn 2:51). Caiaphas is an unwitting and involuntary prophet: he does not appreciate, with his conscious mind, the real meaning of the truth that he proclaims, but he says more than he intends or realizes. If God, without depriving the prophet of his free will, may yet use him as the mouthpiece of a message greater than his own understanding, cannot
the same be true also of the holy fool? Even when actually unbalanced on the psychological level, his mental disabilities may yet be by the Holy Spirit as a way of healing and saving others.” (Bishop Kallistos Ware, THE INNER KINGDOM, p 178)

Bishop Kallistos is offering a comment about something beyond the scope of this blog series – that prophecy continues in the Church to this day. The gift of prophecy still exists in the Church, and some people still exhibit this special gift even though they might not be aware they are doing so. For our purposes in this blog, the point is that prophecy does not deprive the prophet of his or her free will, though the prophet might be proclaiming something beyond the limits of their ability to understand.

The fulfillment of a prophecy is not understood until it happens; only then does it become clear to the people that a prophecy has been fulfilled.

Next: Prophecy in the Ancient Church

Prophecy in the Ancient Church

Posted on February 4, 2011 by Fr. Ted

This is the 10th and final Blog in this series which began with Reading Scripture: the Old Testament, the Torah and Prophecy. The immediate preceding blog is A Christian View of Prophecy.
This final blog in the series looks at how a few Christian writers from the Post-Apostolic and Patristic periods understood prophecy, especially that found in the Old Testament. Because the ancients Christians tended to read the Old Testament as typology or a prefiguring of Christ, they actually read much of the Old Testament as prophecy. They called Moses and King David prophets, and tended to view the importance of both Torah and Psalms as prophecies of Christ. They got their cue from Jesus Himself who in his Post-Resurrectional appearance interpreted the Jewish Scriptures precisely in this way: “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

First, we can consider the view of the Second Century Christian apologist St. Justin the Martyr (d. ca 166AD).

“One will remark the complexity of the very notion of prophecy in St. Justin’s view: it is the eternal Word himself who, through his Spirit and through a human instrument, announces in advance the mystery which he will himself accomplish later in time. Christ is at once both the supreme Prophet and the reality prophesied: the supreme Prophet as eternal Logos, the reality prophesied as incarnate Logos. He gives in prophecy a sign that makes it possible for one to recognize him when the prophecy is fulfilled.” (Bertrand de Margerie, AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF EXEGESIS V 1, p 37)
St. Justin holds to a very sophisticated view of prophecy: it is God’s Word who speaks to the prophets through the Holy Spirit. The prophets are thus giving form, though in shadow and foretype, to the Word. This was done so that when God’s Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ, He (His voice – that of the Good Shepherd) would be recognizable. Many of the Fathers believed that the Old Testament descriptions of the saints and prophets encountering God were actually encounters with the pre-incarnate Word, namely, the Son of God. God used this method of revelation to help the people of God recognize the incarnate Word when the fullness of time had come.

“Justin also uses Scripture differently in his two works. As the APOLOGY is written for pagans, he does not appeal in it to the Scriptures as an authoritative source of truth. Rather he appeals to them to provide evidence that the Gospel believed in by Christians is not simply the latest claims, but ancient prophecies, written in publicly available books, which have now been fulfilled in Christ.” (John Behr, THE WAY TO NICEA, p 94)

Thus prophecies show that God’s plan of salvation was being revealed throughout the history of the Jews. Jesus claiming to be God incarnate was thus not unexpected but had been revealed through the prophets. St. Irenaeus (d. 202AD), a generation after Justin, acknowledges God was revealing his plan through the prophets, yet before its fulfillment a prophecy remains in the shadows, not fully understood until the revelation comes to light when it happens.

“For any prophecy, before it is fulfilled, is nothing but enigmas and ambiguities. But from the moment that the prediction is fulfilled, it finds its proper interpretation.” (St.
Two Centuries later, the archbishop of Constantinople, St. John Chrysostom (d. 407AD), offered some thoughts on his own understanding of prophecy and inspiration.

“St. John Chrysostom (d. 407AD) says: ‘a thinker speculates on the future out of his great wisdom and personal experience.’ And he goes on to say that speculation is one thing and prophesy is another. The prophet speaks in the Holy Spirit ‘contributing nothing of his own’; whereas the thinker employs his own understanding. Thus there is a great difference between the Prophet and the thinker, ‘as much difference there is between human wisdom and divine grace.’” (Archimandrite Hierotheos Vlachos, THE ILLNESS AND CURE OF THE SOUL IN THE ORTHODOX TRADITION, p 43)

A contemporary and antagonist of Chrysostom’s, St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444AD) understood Christian prophecy to be one who properly interprets the Old Testament in the light of Christ.

“Prophecy means for Cyril the divinely given capacity to interpret the Old Testament. Indeed the Christian prophet is one who has received the charism of recognizing the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies in the New.” (Brevard Childs, THE STRUGGLE TO UNDERSTAND ISAIAH AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE, p 125)

The ancient Christian theologians saw Old Testament prophecy as a foretelling of Christ. But not all prophecies predicted future events; many prophecies occur in the form of typology, prefiguring, or foreshadowing the coming of Christ. So the Old Testament as a whole is largely prophecy, even though many of the Old Testament authors were not aware that they were being prophets. As the author of Hebrews says of the saints of the Old Covenant: “These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (11:13). They could not see Christ clearly, He was distant and they were in shadow, but they remained faithful to the hope. This is the sense of prophecy held by the ancient Christians. As St. Peter writes:

“The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of
Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.” (1 Peter 1:10-12)

Prophecy, forth telling God’s Word, has to do with Christ, God’s Word become flesh. Thus the Old Testament, whether Law or history or Psalm, is prophecy. It all points to Christ, was all written by those inspired by God to be prophets. The faithful reader of the Old Testament is also a prophet whenever he or she recognizes Christ in the words of the Old Testament. Thus the Old Testament is inspired by God in order to reveal Christ, and it inspires those who read it in Christ to recognize God’s Word.