

The Holy Scriptures: Nourishment of the Faithful, Part One

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The name of the holy scriptures is derived from the Greek word “Biblia,” which literally means “books.” This term passed into most languages, and it was called the “Bible” in languages of European origin.

The faithful regard the holy scriptures as God’s personal message to them, devoting themselves to reading them daily, and meditating on their verses and their impact on their lives. Thus, the holy scriptures contribute to their growth in their life in Christ, refining them morally and spiritually. The holy scriptures are an indispensable nourishment for the faithful, irreplaceable by any other book, no matter how divine or important.

Getting to Know the Holy Scriptures.

The holy scriptures comprise a considerable number of books, not just one book as the reader might think at first glance. Even in their composition, they differ from each other as they form a library containing several works. This library contains seventy-three books, divided into two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The Old Testament comprises forty-six books (although there are differences in Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant editions) divided into four sections: the books of the Law (Torah), history, prophecy, and wisdom.

The New Testament consists of twenty-seven books, beginning with the Gospel in its four narratives (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), followed by the Acts of the Apostles, then the fourteen Pauline epistles, the general epistles, and ending with the Book of Revelation by John the Evangelist.

These books cover various and extensive topics, spanning a period from Abraham, the first among the faithful (around 1800 B.C.) to the end of the first century A.D., when the last book of the New Testament was completed.

The multiple themes of these books are presented in a variety of literary styles. There are long tales, short stories, epics, poems, proverbs, and hymns. Moreover, many writers contributed to their composition. Additionally, the Holy Scriptures were not written in one language but in three languages: Hebrew, the language of most Old Testament texts; Aramaic used for some of its texts; and Greek, used for all the books of the New Testament. The Orthodox Church considers the Old Testament

translation into Greek known as the Septuagint (from the second century B.C.) as a divinely inspired and authoritative reference.

The first book of the holy scriptures deals with the beginning of the world and the origin of life: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1), and the last book ends with a call anticipating Christ’s second coming: “Surely, I am coming quickly. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20).

This book tells of the beginning and the end of the universe.

Many have considered the Bible a history book, because it recounts God’s revelation throughout the history of a people called the Hebrews. Others saw it as a book of science, because it tells stories of the creation of the world and includes wisdom containing much of the science of the time. Those who consider it a philosophical book are not few in number, either, as it contains a particular view on life, God, pain, and death.

The Holy Scriptures: Nourishment of the Faithful, Part Two

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What, in reality, is this book?

The Bible is, first and foremost, a theological book, presenting the mystery of God to humanity in a practical, not theoretical, manner. God, whose mystery cannot be comprehended, reveals Himself to humanity little by little, progressively. God accompanies humans with astonishing patience to open their minds to understand Him as He is, not as they imagine Him to be. Often, people misunderstood Him (and still do), attributing their whims and perceptions to Him, distorting and desecrating His image. The perpetual sin of mankind is to restrict God according to its measure, instead of raising itself to the measure of God. Therefore, God chose to reveal Himself by using those whom He designated, those to whom we refer as prophets and apostles. However, He began to practically reveal Himself through accompanying the people to whom He chose to reveal Himself. From Abraham, the father of the fathers and the father of many nations, to Jesus Christ, God patiently waited over eighteen centuries for His image to be truly revealed to humanity – yet people still want to perceive Him in their own image and superimpose onto Him their ideas and interpretations.

The Bible is, therefore, a divine book, gradually unveiling the truth of God using the style that is understood by those to whom He reveals Himself. If the book speaks of history, it is to show God's work within it, thus revealing His nature. Let us use the following image as an example of this:

According to the understanding of the peoples of the Near East, when two ancient peoples confronted each other in war, their respective gods were believed to take part in the war alongside them – isn't this what we see in the religious thinking of people even today? So, when one people is victorious, their god is deemed as the strongest; thus, the defeated people worship him, while the victorious offer him thanks. In this manner, the believers of the Old Testament believed that God fought on their side when they won; but when they were defeated, unlike all of the other ancient peoples (and herein lies the divine work in the holy scriptures), they understood it that their God abandoned them because they had sinned. Therefore, they had to repent and return to obeying their God's commandments to win and be liberated.

Thus, God revealed Himself as the Master of history. God used history as a stage to reveal His attributes. When the holy scriptures narrate a historical event, they do so

not historically but theologically – meaning that the purpose is not a historical record of the event, but a religious perspective on the God Who is revealed through it. The protagonist of the event is not the prophet or the king or the leader, but God, Who is hidden behind what is happening in history, or rather, moves the strings of history while holding them all in His hands.

In this way, we should read the holy scriptures as a message from God addressed to us personally – a message telling us that we are loved by Him; that the meaning of our lives and existence is in Him, with Him, and through Him; and that we are called to remove the dirt of sins accumulated on us to see the truth of God as He is.

Anyone who has experienced the extent to which his sins conceal him from God realizes well the way in which human beings pollute and distort the image of God. God's continuous work in the holy scriptures was to constantly reveal Himself each time to the extent that people could understand and comprehend until "the fullness of time" arrived, when God fully revealed Himself to them in the person of His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14).

God did not complete this revelation independently, apart from man. That is to say, God was not solely the actor and man solely the receiver. Man needed to grow in the knowledge of God so that God could reveal Himself more and more. Thus, an educational program was initiated by God for the benefit of man. This divine program required the gradual elevation of man's spiritual level until it could rightly come to the knowledge of God. The fallen, sinful man, enslaved to Satan and incapable of enjoying the grace of God – whose mind was darkened and divided against himself, his brother, and nature – longed for his origin but did not know it and could not reach it; he could not begin to walk the right path. The solution was in God's hands, and the initiative came from Him.

His first call went to Abraham. Thus, Abraham knew a God Who makes and fulfills His promises, as when He promised him that Sarah would conceive. He is a God Who does not accept human sacrifices, but as seen in the narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac, instead asks for animal sacrifices (Gen. 22:1-19). He is a God different from other gods. Abraham's righteousness lies in his loyalty to God. God did not change much about Abraham's habits and moral concepts, but was content to be Abraham's God, and for Abraham to be merely loyal to Him and His teachings. Thus, God was first known as the God of Abraham. Then, with the descendants of Abraham, He

became the God of Abraham and Isaac, and later Jacob was added. Thus, He was known as the God of our fathers.

This was not strange to the concepts of those days. Each tribe had its god, each clan had its deity, and often a clan had more than one. However, the God of our fathers was different because He did not accept any other god beside Him. He is a jealous God, restricted by nothing: no idol, no image, no place. He initiates and commands, and He is obeyed. He is the God Who makes a covenant with man and remains loyal to this covenant, so long as man reciprocates this loyalty. When man breaks God's covenant, as he often did and still does today, God's response is to leave him until he repents and returns to Him – then He accepts him quickly and resumes His commitments. Even in God's temporary abandonment of man, there is an educational objective. Such a dynamic and vital relationship is unknown in the history of religions: A God calls, and a man responds. Man often falters and disrupts this covenantal relationship, yet God waits for His creation to recommit to the terms of that covenant and resume the journey with Him towards the completion of its salvation. Ours is a God who endured for eighteen hundred years the harshness of man, his narrow-mindedness and his ignorance. Such a God could not be the creation of human beings because humanity was not capable of contemplating such a God.

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Then what?

After revealing Himself as “the God of our Fathers,” God began to reveal Himself through His attributes by practical application. The people He had chosen were ignorant and ungrateful: “Not because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Deut 7:7). They were a stubborn people who understood only practical things with great difficulty: “For you are a stiff-necked people” (Deut 9:6). Is this not the reality of human beings even in our present day? God first revealed to Moses that He is the Existing One: “I am who I am” “ehye ‘ášer ‘ehye” in Hebrew (Exodus 3:14), and the journey effectively started. God became known through His action in nature: He became our God, the One Who takes care of us. He is the God Who made the Red Sea into dry land, Who fed us in the wilderness with manna, Who brought water out of the flinty rock, Who healed us from snake bites, etc. Thus, God appeared as the Master of nature.

Confrontations began with other tribes and nations. These conflicts were common in those ancient days, especially among nomadic peoples (we can recall the tribal invasions, the raids of the Bedouins). The land was still under various forms of colonization and occupation. Here, God appeared as the Master of history, but His program with His people was different. Although He is supremely powerful and mightier than all gods, He does not always grant victory to His tribe. When they win, He is the victor and the strongest, and when they lose, He has withdrawn from them His support yet remained the strongest. Why did God abandon us? This question recurs many times in the Old Testament. We still ask today why God left us in this or that ordeal. Why does He allow temptations? Why doesn't He stop evils from happening to us? Do we not often behave like the people of the Old Testament? Do we not act as though God is exclusively our God, as if we were His chosen people and other peoples are not of His creation, and are, at best, of a lower rank?

God's answer was, I am with you as long as you are faithful, but when you abandon My covenants, I leave you to what you have left Me for. They knew, then, that He is the sovereign God and that they must obey Him. His laws and commandments require moral change and spiritual transcendence.

It was time for humans to rise to the level of justice. God's law for them became to establish justice: “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:24). This was

a qualitative leap for a society dominated by vengeance and disproportionate retaliation.

What does this God want next?

Justice is good, yet it is merely a step towards knowing God, but not in itself sufficient. Man must move from the letter to the spirit, from the laws to their goal, from the canons to their purpose, from the rituals to the heart of the Lord. He must move from the flesh to the soul. Mercy is more important than justice (see Matthew 9:13). Animal sacrifice is a symbol of the sacrifice of the heart: “Sacrifices to God are a broken spirit” (Psalm 50:17). Worship is not in hymns, incense, and grand celebrations but in mercy, justice, and kindness. This God seeks hearts of flesh, not stone (read from the prophets, especially Isaiah and Joel).

However, the harshness of man drives him to resist spiritual transcendence. Hence, exile was a means of purification from worldly and eternal impurities. God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to destroy the ancient temple, thus mocking the people who tried to confine Him to it. In the exile in Babylon, they had spent a thousand years with this God, yet they still were unable to grasp that He is the one true God, not confined to any place – not even the temple of Jerusalem. They lamented: “By the rivers of Babylon... how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 136:1). Their concern was whether He would hear their song, as if they were far removed from Him. The shock of exile was severe yet purifying and cleansing. The Babylonian captivity created the faithful remnant who remained loyal to their God’s teachings and aligned their lives with His commandments. From them would come the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, and all who would accept Jesus Christ.

In light of this reading, we understand the holy scriptures and hear God’s word directed to us personally. Such a reading recognizes that the holy scriptures are a religious book, not a history book, although they contain elements of history. They are not a book of science and secular knowledge, even if they mention information that may align or conflict with contemporary scholarship. They are not a book of human wisdom, although they used the wisdom of the time to educate and refine humanity. They are the journey of God with humanity – a personal journey and intimate companionship – culminating in His death on the cross for them and their salvation. They are a book where we encounter our God, get to know Him, and hear His word.

Shall we now begin to understand our Christian reading of the Holy Scriptures?