

The Old Testament and the Resurrection - Job, Jonah and the three Holy Youths

In order to understand how the Old Testament prepares humanity for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ it is helpful to reflect upon three key passages: first, Job, chapter 19; second, Jonah, chapters 1 to 4; and third, the three youths in the fiery furnace in the Book of Daniel, chapter 3. This Lenten talk also seeks to answer questions about our own death with resurrection at the End Times. Elizabeth Rooney (1924-1999) has written in her poem, “Intermingling;” and I quote: “How can we all be born/ of a young man’s death? Birth is the work of women./ What is this other life—/this life we reach by death,/ his death and ours?/ What mystery/ lies at the heart of all,/ so that we taste, feel, see/ death in the midst of life/ and birth on Calvary?” she concluded [*Poems for Public Worship: Praying with Themes and Seasons* (Kevin Mayhew, 2005, p. 48)]. That question of how we learn to “taste, feel, see death in the midst of [our own lives]” is linked to gaining an understanding of how the Cross on Calvary became the way that Jesus Christ took to the Resurrection. How and why did “birth on Calvary” happen?

Job and His Successful Struggle to Affirm His Faith in God

In chapter 19 Job is struggling with the misleading advice of his unhelpful friends. Job asks; and I quote: “How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?” he asks. Job feels that “there is no justice;” and that God has “walled up my way, so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths.” Job realises that “God has put me in the wrong, and closed his net about me,” yet he does not understand why this has happened. However, it is this challenge to Job from God and his friends that leads him to a deeper faith in God.

In *The Trial of Job: Orthodox Christian Reflections on the Book of Job*, Father Patrick Reardon has written; and I quote: “This is arguably the finest chapter in the Book of Job, containing his most memorable profession of faith... [in chapter 19, verses 23 to 27], the truly shining lines of the book, where Job places all his hope

in God, his ‘Redeemer’ or Vindicator in the latter days.... Job’s desire for God’s vindication dominates [chapter 19] ... Job’s appeal here is entirely eschatological. That is to say, he lays all his hope in God’s final, future, definitive judgment. Until that day, and in testimony to that hope Job wants these words inscribed in stone. Here we have the Hebrew Scriptures’ clearest expression of hope for the resurrection of the dead and the final vision of God. This chapter is one of direct preparation for the New Testament and the glory of the Resurrection,” concludes Father Patrick [p. 57]. Job’s suffering becomes the framework in which he seeks justice and judgment, grounded in hope and confidence in both his love of God and God’s ultimate love for him.

Job’s affirmation of his Redeemer is very strong indeed. I quote chapter 19, verses 23 to 27: “Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were graven in the rock for ever!” For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” concluded Job. Contrary to what some modern commentators have written about the confusion and anguish of Job, a fourth-century bishop Julian of Eclanum, stresses that Job; and I quote: “[wants what I] said seriously to be fixed in the memory and remain in the mouth of many people. Therefore, also holy Job, intending to show that he had not poured out what he had said with a troubled mind but that his words were truthful and reasonable, wishes that his words are not only written on paper but also engraved on lead and stone, so that they may be preserved for a long time,” concluded Julian of Eclanum.

Job knows that “the hand of God has touched me,” chapter 19, verse 21. St John Chrysostom cites the Septuagint translation of chapter 19, verse 26, and I quote: “He will raise up my body [or skin] that endures these sufferings, for it is the Lord who caused them.” St John then asks the question; and I quote: “Did Job know the doctrine of the resurrection? I believe so,” writes St John, “and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body [as well], unless he says here that the resurrection he

speaks about is the deliverance from the afflictions that pressed him...” concluded St John. Now, Job’s words here are subject to different interpretations, but verse 25 in the Septuagint version, “For I know that he is eternal who is about to deliver me,” supports St John’s interpretation.

What is in question here is the relationship between time and eternity. In the final chapter of her book, *Time and Despondency: Regaining the Present in Faith and Life* (Ancient Faith, 2017), Nicole Roccas cites verses from T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Four Quartets, East Coker V;” and I quote: “Home is where one starts from. As we grow older/ The world becomes stranger, the patterns more complicated/ Of dead and living. Not the intense moment/Isolated, with no before and after,/ But a lifetime burning in every moment,” concluded the poet.

This could well apply to our understanding of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. We search for and see “the intense moment,” but “the patterns [are] more complicated of dead and living.” For Jesus Christ and for each of us there is “a lifetime burning in every moment.” As Nicole Roccas writes of her own life; and I quote: “Whatever suffering I faced was no longer meaningless or chaotic, it was part of the story—a story that ends not with a cross but with an empty tomb,” she concluded [p. 172]. So it is for Job: his story ends not with suffering, but with many blessings.

The Prophet Jonah: From Imminent Death to New Life

Although some modern Biblical commentators believe the book of Jonah is a legend, both *The Orthodox Study Bible* and *The New American Study Bible (NASB)* confirm its historical character. As the *NASB* comments; and I quote: “It must be acknowledged that Biblical narrators were more than historians. They interpretively recounted the past with the unswerving purpose of bringing it to bear on the present and the future. In the portrayal of past events, they used their materials to achieve this purpose effectively. Nonetheless, the integrity with which they treated the past ought not to be questioned. The book of Jonah recounts real events in the life and ministry of the prophet himself,” concluded that *NASB* note [p. 1293].

In the context of the Resurrection of Christ, the most striking event in the experience of Jonah was that he remained “in the belly of the [great] fish three days and three nights,” as stated in chapter 1, verse 17. Furthermore, it should be noted that just as later in chapter 4, verse 6, when “The LORD God appointed a plant, and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head to save him from his discomfort,” so here it is “the LORD [who has] appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.”

Jonah himself recognised in chapter 2, verses 1 to 10, that water had “encompassed me to the point of death” and that the act of the great fish in swallowing him was a response from God to his calling out “of my distress to the LORD.” It is important to note that in the opening verse of the Book of Jonah, the prophet had been told to go to Nineveh and urge them to repent of “their wickedness.” However, Jonah had rejected this call from the Lord and departed in the opposite direction to Tarshish. Only when Jonah was drowning in a rough sea did he cry to God for help. Then he was swallowed by the great fish; and Jonah recognised in chapter 2, verse 4; and I quote: “I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless, I will look again toward Your holy temple,” he concluded. So, when Jonah was “fainting away” inside the great fish he “remembered the LORD,” and “the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.”

Then the Lord called Jonah a second time in chapter 3, verses 1 to 4. This time Jonah obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh. However, the people of Nineveh, led by their king, repented. Chapter 3 ends, and I quote: “When God saw their deeds, that they [had] turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it,” concludes chapter 3. However, this “greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.” A note in *The NASB* on chapter 4, verse 1 suggests that “Jonah was angry that God would have compassion on an enemy of Israel. He wanted God’s goodness to be shown only to Israelites, not to Gentiles.” This interpretation of Jonah’s excessive nationalism is rather more convincing than Jonah’s claim in chapter 4,

verse 2 that he knew God was “a gracious and compassionate God” who would not destroy the people of Nineveh.

Furthermore, Jonah’s anger remained with him and he told the Lord; and I quote: “Now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live,” spoke Jonah to the Lord. *The NASB’s* interpretation of Jonah’s response again rings true: “To Jonah, God’s mercy to the Ninevites meant an end to Israel’s favoured standing with Him. Jonah shortly before had rejoiced in his deliverance from death, but now that Nineveh lives, he prefers to die,” concludes that note on chapter 4, verse 3.

The NASB interpretation of the reasons for Jonah’s puzzling behaviour is precisely the view of St Jerome, who wrote; and I quote: “The prophet knows, the Holy Spirit teaching him, that the repentance of the Gentiles is the ruin of the Jews. A lover, then, of his country does not so much envy the deliverance of Nineveh as will that his own country should not perish.... Even more, [Jonah] feared that Israel might be wholly forsaken due to the conversion of the Ninevites through repentance by his own preaching. For he knew by the same Spirit whereby the preaching to the Gentiles was trusted to him that the house of Israel would perish, and he feared that what was at one time to be, would take place in his own time,” concluded St Jerome.

St Theodoret of Cyr focuses not on Jonah’s fears, but on the universality of the Incarnation that was to come. St Theodoret wrote; and I quote, “[Nineveh] was the greatest city in olden times, containing also the palace of the king of the Assyrians. When, you see, the only-begotten Word of God was due to be made manifest to human beings in his human nature and to enlighten all the nations with the light of the knowledge of God, even before his own incarnation he gives the nations a glimpse of his divine care so as to confirm what would happen from what went before, to teach everyone that he is God not only of Jews but also of nations, and to bring out the relationship of the Old and the New Testaments...,” concluded St Theodoret.

The Church Fathers sought to apply the experience of Jonah to future generations, including us. St John Chrysostom preached; and I quote: “Tell me, are you running away from the master [Jesus Christ]? Then wait a bit and you will learn from the state of affairs themselves that you will be unable to escape...,” concluded St John. This is also the approach of St Jerome who reflects on the raging sea being calmed when Jonah is placed in it by the sailors. St Jerome wrote; and I quote: “If we will give consideration to the time before the passion of Christ, [we will see that time as one disturbed by the errors of the world and the headwinds of various opinions. The entire boat of humanity, that is, the creation of the Lord, was in peril. But then, after the passion, we see a world where there is the calm of faith, a world at peace and secure for everyone. We see a turning toward God. In this way, we may understand how, after Jonah goes into the sea, the sea is alleviated of its turmoil” concluded St Jerome.

Considering the Book of Jonah, the Church Fathers grounded both the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ in its universal application to all humanity. In four short chapters—only two or three pages in all Bible translations—Jonah is confronted with a God who loves and guides him to places he does not wish to go, as he moves from death to life. The experience of Jonah prefigures both the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, as well as our own journeys to and with Christ.

Elizabeth Rooney’s poem, “Dying/Rising” applies to both Jonah and to us. She wrote; and I quote: “There comes a moment/ when we lay aside/ life’s winding sheets/ and, springing from the tomb,/ of flesh, time, space/ go forth/ to meet our Lover/ face to face,” she concluded [*Poems for Public Worship*, p. 57]. God issues an invitation to each of us—as He did to Jonah—to listen to Him and to move away from whatever is bringing death to us in our lives, but we each have to “go forth” to meet Him “face to face.”

The Three Youths in the Book of Daniel: Where Does Faith in God Lead?

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah—all of the tribe of Judah—had been taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 598 BC after he destroyed Jerusalem

and its magnificent first Temple. These were “men of high rank” whom Nebuchadnezzar wanted in Babylon to advance his kingdom” [See David Rohl, *From Eden to Exile: The Epic History of the People of the Bible* (Arrow Books, 2003), p.430]. Furthermore, these four Judeans were judged by the chief of the king’s officials in the Book of Daniel, chapter 1, verse 4; and I quote: [to be] “youths without blemish, handsome and skilful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to serve in the king’s palace and to teach them the letters and language of the Chaldeans,” concludes that verse.

Now, Nebuchadnezzar’s commitment to learning is striking. As a note on this verse in *The NASB* points out: The language and literature of the Chaldeans included “the classical literature in Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform, a complicated [wedge-shaped] writing system. But the language of normal communication in multiracial Babylon was Aramaic, written in an easily learned alphabetic script,” concluded that note [p. 1228]. So, the king was seeking both for himself and his court increased knowledge of his linguistic heritage, learning for its own sake and learning that would deepen their understanding of their past. We can be fairly certain that none of the four Judeans had been previously interested in the king’s commitment to his linguistic roots; but they still agreed to teach him and his court.

Surprisingly, Nebuchadnezzar’s approach was similar to that of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber some 2,400 years later with a focus on “language-centered humanism” that enabled him to help his grandfather work in French and Hebrew translations. Buber explains in *Meetings*, a book of autobiographical fragments, that as a boy he became greatly worried “by the question,” and I quote: “What does it mean and how does it come about that one ‘explains’ something that was written in one language? The world of the Logos and of the Logoi opened itself to me, darkened, brightened, darkened again,” he concluded [p. 21; ed. Maurice Friedman, 1973, Open Court Publishing]. For Buber, this was a search for the Greek idea of universal divine reason, rather than the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

The king's chief official changed the names of the four Judeans from Daniel to Belteshazzar, from Hananiah to Shadrach, from Mishael to Meshach, and from Azariah to Abednego; but in their hearts and minds they remained faithful Jews who chose not to eat the rich food of the court (Dan 1.7-20). What is striking here is the manner in which the four Judeans adapted to the king's wishes, but did not desert their Jewish heritage. However, when Nebuchadnezzar demanded that a ninety-foot high image of him be worshiped, Daniel's three fellow Judeans refused and were thrown into a "furnace of blazing fire" (Dan 3.1-23). Yet they escaped unharmed and were seen by the king with a fourth person with "the appearance ... like a son of the gods" (Dan 3.24-25). The king recognised that these three men he had angrily sought to kill were "servants of the Most High God" and that their God had "sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him" (Dan 3.26-28).

A note in *The NASB* states: "Nebuchadnezzar was speaking as a pagan polytheist and was content to conceive of the fourth figure as a lesser heavenly being sent by the all-powerful God of the Israelites" [p.1232]. However, the trust of the three Judeans in God was sufficient to convince the king to order that in his kingdom Jews would now be protected and anyone who persecuted them be killed, "for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way" (Dan 3.29-30). Thus, the actions and calmness and praise of the three Judeans (see Dan 3.25-90 in the Septuagint translation of *The Orthodox Study Bible*) was instrumental in changing how the king treated Jews throughout his kingdom. However, it should be noted that these three devout Jews did not seek martyrdom. Commenting on Daniel 3.16-21, St Augustine notes; and I quote: "Notice carefully and understand in what sense Scripture says that anyone should deliver his body to be burned: not, certainly, that he should jump into the fire when harassed by a pursuing enemy but that, when a choice is offered him of either doing wrong or suffering wrong, he chooses not to do wrong rather than not to suffer wrong.... [These three men] refused to adore the idol, but they did not cast themselves into the fire," he concluded. We too should never seek martyrdom, but we can at times stand up with faith in God in the face of modern idolatry.

Many of the Church Fathers saw the protection given by God to the three Judeans as a foreshadowing—an indication of the coming of the Incarnation. For example, St John Chrysostom preached; and I quote: “Already now was death despised, since Christ as henceforth about to sojourn in the world. And as when the sun is on the point of rising, even before its rays appear the light of the day grows bright; so also when the Sun of righteousness was about to come, death henceforth began to withdraw himself. What could be more splendid than that theatre? What more conspicuous than that victory?” concluded St John. Appropriately, the opening verses of the third chapter of the Book of Daniel are read on Great and Holy Saturday opening the Vespereal Divine Liturgy of St Basil for the Victory of Christ.

What Should We Do Now, Lord?

“Awaken Your Faith” and Be “Purified from Evil”

A prayer of St Augustine applies to all three of these Old Testament readings that prepare us for the Resurrection of Christ. He preached; and I quote: "Let faith be yours, and God will be with you in your trouble. There are waves on the sea, and you are tossed about in your cabin, because Christ sleeps.... If you allow faith to sleep in your heart, Christ is, you might say, sleeping with you in your ship. Because Christ dwells in you through faith, when you begin to be tossed about, awake Christ from his sleep. Awaken your faith, and you shall be assured he will not desert you," concluded St Augustine.

This awakening of our faith in the Lord is a process that occurs throughout our lives. St Basil the Great wrote; and I quote: “We are not capable of glorifying God on our own; only in the [Holy] Spirit is this made possible. In him we are able to thank God for the blessings we have received. To the extent that we are purified from evil, each receives a smaller or larger portion of the Spirit's help that each may offer the sacrifice of praise to God. If we offer glory to God, in the Spirit, we mean that the Spirit enables us to fulfill the requirements of true religion.... The words of Paul are appropriate: 'I think I have the Spirit of God' (1 Cor 7.40)....

Likewise it is said concerning Daniel, 'the Holy Spirit of God is in you'" (Dan 4.8)," concluded St Basil.

Our awareness that we are not as close to God as we would wish to be is an important sign of our own increasing purification from evil and our increasing faith in His justice and mercy. Of Daniel's visions in Dan 4.13, St Isaac of Nineveh wrote in *On Ascetical Life* 5.14; and I quote: "One who passes the night with thought of him makes of God a housemate; and one who earnestly desires the will of God will find the watchers on high to be [their] teachers," concluded St Isaac. So it is that our earnest desire to find "the will of God" in our lives is met by God's desire to be our Teacher.

In the light of the immense significance of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Christ, our own hopes and confusions may at times seem to be puzzling. Elizabeth Rooney's humble poem, "Offering" is a helpful guide; and I quote: "The only thing I have/ to offer, Lord,/ is me,/ and I don't know/ quite who/ or what I am. Everything I can give/ is only what you first/ have given me—/ health, strength, intelligence,/ the power to love./ Please take/ from one small bit/ of holy dust/ praise and thanksgiving,/ love and joy and trust," she concluded [*Poems for Public Worship*, p. 122]. For me, there is an ambiguity in that poem: Is that "one small bit of holy dust" from within me, from the Lord, or perhaps both? Whatever your response, we can each offer to the Lord NOW "praise and thanksgiving, love and joy and trust," as did Jesus Christ in the midst of His Crucifixion and Resurrection.

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