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## Reading the Old Testament

The Old Testament is filled with imagery that may disturb and mystify us. Early heretics such as Marcion concluded that the God depicted in the Hebrew scriptures was not the same God who is the Father of Jesus and therefore rejected the Old Testament. In response to such false thinking the Holy Spirit led the early Church to affirm that the Old Testament is inspired and does faithfully speak of the same God revealed by Jesus.

So from the very beginning, the Church has struggled with the Old Testament and sought to understand it more fully in the light of who Jesus is. Here are some basic points that we should keep in mind as we read the Bible of Israel:

1. Jesus is the Word. God the Son, in the flesh as the man Jesus Christ, is the revelation of God. Therefore, all other descriptions and revelations of God - including the Bible itself - must be interpreted in the light of what Jesus reveals about God's nature.

Jesus reveals God to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Jesus we see that humanity is adopted and included in the perfect relationship of love that is the heart of the Triune existence of God. In Jesus we see the true heart and nature of the Father: a nature of love, of adoption, of forgiveness, and of inclusion.

We cannot ever allow any statement in scripture, including the Old Testament, to undermine or undo what Jesus shows us about God. If a scripture seems to tell us something that contradicts the nature of God as revealed in Jesus then we need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us see the meaning of scripture that fits with who Jesus is and who he reveals the Father to be.

For example: we might read about the sacrificial system of Israel and conclude that God wants sacrifice. We might conclude that the Father's wrath against sin cannot be placated until something has been killed. Yet Jesus says "go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matt. 9:13, 12:7). Just this simple phrase helps us see that the sacrificial system was instituted because of Israel's need not because of God's need. St. Gregory the Great put it this way:

For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke, and whoever wishes to climb to a mountain top climbs gradually step by step, and not in one leap. It was in this way that the Lord revealed Himself to the Israelite people in Egypt, permitting the sacrifices formerly offered to the Devil to be offered thenceforward to Himself instead. *A History of the English Church and People*, Book 1, Chap. 30.

2. When we look back on human history, especially as it is reflected in Israel's experience, we realize what profound blindness has enveloped our human nature in Adam's fall. We have believed that God is a blood-thirsty ogre demanding his pound of flesh before he will grant forgiveness.

But God did not need the sacrifices. He was accommodating our blindness because he knew that we could not imagine ourselves as loved and welcomed in his presence unless we came bearing such gifts.

What we see in Jesus is that he is the end of the sacrificial system of thinking about God. We are loved and welcomed into the Triune Life because the Son has joined his nature to ours by becoming human. In fact, that was always the basis of humanity's relationship with God. Even when God was welcoming sacrifice because of our hardened hearts, it was not the sacrifices that made humanity acceptable but the Son of God who made us acceptable.

3. We know that Adam's fall plunged humanity into blindness; we also know that the Holy Spirit has been patiently educating the human race about the truth of who God is. This has been a process that has been worked out over thousands of years and finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, the light of the world and the healer of our blindness.

Therefore we should not be surprised if those who lived before Jesus sometimes expressed darkened and blinded perspectives on God. Just because their words are to be found in the inspired pages of the Old Testament doesn't mean their words represent God as accurately as Jesus does.

When the Psalmist prays that the infants of Babylon will be smashed against rocks (Psalm 137:9), we know that the Holy Spirit did not dictate those words to the Psalmist. Those words are found in the inspired scripture, but the Holy Spirit did not whisper in the Psalmist's ear "and now I want you to wish for the murder of babies." How do we know the Holy Spirit did not dictate those words? Because we know Jesus, and that is not who Jesus reveals God to be!

In Psalm 137, as in some other places in the Old Testament, we are seeing the blindness and fallenness of humanity. These words are inspired in the sense that the Holy Spirit has preserved them as a faithful record of Israel's pain and of her blind and fallen response to that pain.

Based on all of this, we have to conclude that every verse of the Old Testament must be filtered through the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We have to look at each passage and ask ourselves "Do these words express the fallen human perspective on God's nature, or do they foreshadow and express the truth that would be later revealed in Jesus?" What does the process of answering this question look like? To see one example read the article "Israel's Ogre Revealed" in the September, 2008, issue of *The Adopted Life*.

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