



Session Three

CHRISTIANS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

*Eternal God and Creator of all things,
Who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth
By your almighty power,
on this day you brought forth light by your command
and separated the light from darkness
Let the light of your mercy shine upon me and keep me away
From the darkness of evil thoughts.*

Hovhannes of Garni (13th c)



Did You Know?

The Nicene Creed was formulated in two Ecumenical Councils, Nicea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD). It was a difficult document to finalize since it had to outline the Christian faith as agreed upon by everyone! During the late 5th century, Catholicos Hovhannes Mantakuni instituted the recitation of the Creed in every badarak.



The Old Testament in Our Church

People sometimes ask, "Why do we bother with the Old Testament? Now that Jesus Christ has come, hasn't the New Testament replaced the Old?"

To answer, we have to know something about the way God works with His people. He does not want to "spring" things on us when we are not prepared for them. Human beings need to prepare for things. Think of a diver just before the dive, mentally and physically getting ready. Think of a groom and bride, planning and arranging for months before the big event of the wedding. Consider an actress rehearsing lines by the hour before opening night, or the new store owner arranging displays before opening day.

The Old Testament is the long and beautiful story of God preparing His people for the coming of the promised Messiah (another word for Savior). All the events of the Old Testament were times when God was with His people, teaching them and bringing them to a point of maturity where they would be ready and able to receive and recognize His Son as the Christ (which also means Savior or Messiah). This preparation was very necessary, since human beings are creatures who need to be prepared for things, so the Old Testament is very important to Christians.

God Keeps Working for Us

The Nicene Creed which we recite at each Divine Liturgy summarizes God's preparatory work: "We believe also in the Holy Spirit, the uncreate[d] and the perfect; who spoke through the Law and through the Prophets and through the Gospels; who came down upon the Jordan, preached through the apostles and dwelled in the saints."

These words tell us that God's Holy Spirit was speaking His word to us through the Old Testament law, in the words of the prophets, in the Gospels, in the manifestations of Jesus' divinity such as His baptism in the Jordan, in the apostles' preaching and letters to churches, and in the holy examples of the saints. In all these ways, God worked through the millennia to prepare us to accept everlasting life through His Son.

Interpreting the Bible

When Jesus Christ did come, He established a community: the Christian Church. Because the whole Bible leads toward Jesus Christ, it is the community He established, the Church, that can rightly interpret the Bible. The Holy Spirit dwells in the Church, and inspires the Church's members to understand the Bible in the truest and deepest way. Saint Peter wrote about it this way:

“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 human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” *2 Peter 1:20*

Do these words mean that we have nothing to learn from those who study Scripture and write about their interpretations of it? No, there’s a lot we can learn from good Bible scholarship. And these words certainly are not telling us we should not read Scripture on our own—in fact, Bible reading is one of our main privileges as Christians. But we believe that the Bible “lives in the Church” and it is there, as part of the community of believers, that we will find its meaning most surely and clearly.

Match-Up

Let’s look at some passages from the Old Testament that are basic to our worship today. This will help us see how the Old Testament is God’s way of preparing us, His people, to be part of the Church that was founded by His Son, Jesus Christ.

Here are some things that we believe, or that we do as part of our worship, today. Match them up with their sources in the Old Testament by writing the correct letter in front of the statement.

1. ____ The Savior’s birth will be a virgin birth.
2. ____ As the priest prepares to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, he puts on vestments modeled partly on those of Old Testament priests.
3. ____ The Savior is one who will suffer and die for us.
4. ____ In the Divine Liturgy we sing a song of the angels.
5. ____ In the Requiem Service we call out to God in our grief.
6. ____ At the end of the Divine Liturgy we declare our intention to continue praising God as we go out into the world.
7. ____ The Savior will be like a shepherd who gives his life for his sheep.
8. ____ The Savior will come from a small, insignificant place.
9. ____ The Savior will be silent before His accusers.
10. ____ A special child will be born.

Word Watch

Heen Gdagaran:
Armenian for Old
Testament.

Havadamk:
Armenian for The
Creed; lit: "we
believe."

Genesis: from
the Greek for "ori-
gin" or "beginning," the
name given to the first book
of the Old Testament. In the
original Hebrew, however, the
Book of Genesis is called
"Bereshith" which means "in
the beginning" and is the first
word of the book. In fact,
most books of the Old
Testament are named simply
for their first words.



Here are ten Old Testament passages:

- a. *Psalms 131:9*
- b. *Isaiah 53:4-5*
- c. *Ezekiel 34:11-12*
- d. *Isaiah 9:6*
- e. *Psalms 34:1*
- f. *Micah 5:2*
- g. *Isaiah 6:3*
- h. *Psalms 130:1*
- i. *Isaiah 7:14*
- j. *Isaiah 53:7*

The Book of Genesis

Would you say this statement is true or false: "The early chapters of the Book of Genesis are the Church's literal account of how God created the world."

Well, the answer is false. Genesis is a *sacred* history, not a scientific or literal account, of God's creation of the world. It is also an account of how God loved His creatures and they failed to return that love. The consequences of this failure were terrible for humankind, but God never abandoned His creatures; His love never failed.

The first two chapters of Genesis declare that God is the creator and ruler of the world and of humankind, and this is the main message. Not every detail is literally true, and doesn't have to be. (For example, the statement that God created the world in six days does not have to mean, and probably does not mean, six 24-hour periods.)

The God of Israel

These first two chapters do give a picture of a God who is very different from the gods worshipped by Israel's pagan neighbors. First, of course, God is one rather than many. Israel was the first monotheistic people. Second, God is seen as the Lord of the whole universe, not just of Israel. (Many other countries at that time had "national" gods worshipped only by the people of that nation.)

The God of Israel is morally good and just. He transcends the needs and wants of humankind—and is even beyond gender; and yet He is full of love and compassion for the people He has made.

Finally, and most mysterious, the God of Israel is described as having created the earth out of nothing. Pagan gods are pictured as taking existing elements (earth, air, fire, water) and forming them into the world as we know it. Only the God of Israel can make something out of nothing at all. He makes it, we might say, out of His own love.

Creation, Adam, and Eve

Many Bible scholars agree that there are actually two accounts of creation presented in these first two chapters of Genesis. The “six days of creation” story ends with 2:1-3, and is followed in 2:4-25 by an account of the creation of the human race and the Garden of Eden. This may be because Genesis contains material from three or four sources, or documents, that were put together by Jewish priests and scribes during the fifth century B.C.

Genesis gives us a picture of God’s creation as essentially good, with man and woman as keepers and beneficiaries of it. According to the Church’s teaching, man and woman were also created entirely equal and good, but not yet perfect. It was God’s intention that they should grow to be more and more like Him, and to have perfect communion with Him.

But God, in His love, would not force this growth on them. They had to have a choice if they were to be free. They made their choice to follow the way of the world rather than the way of God. (This is the meaning of the “knowledge of the tree of good and evil”—it means to take part in the good and the evil of the world.)

It’s been said that Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis describe human life as God meant it to be, while Chapter 3 describes life as it is now, fallen because of human sin and our turning our backs on God. Believing the lie of the serpent, that turning away from God can give us power, we have all put ourselves out of the Garden, out of the immediate presence of God. Our task in life now is to grow spiritually as He meant us to in the first place, and to find our way back to Him. He has provided the One who shows us the way: His Son, Jesus Christ.

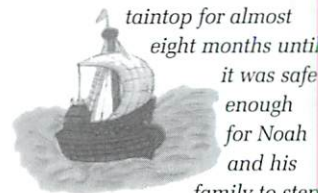
Read Chapter 3 of Genesis, and list three things that changed as a result of human disobedience.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The Armenian Angle

Noah’s Ark is said to have landed on Mt. Ararat (Genesis 8:4).

The Ark rested on the mountaintop for almost eight months until it was safe enough for Noah and his family to step out safely. Talk about being afraid of getting your feet wet!



Looking In

How can knowing that all things came into being through God make a difference in how you



see the members of your family? Your friends? The water you drink? The food you eat? Write down two ways it can change how you act towards the people and things just mentioned.

1.

2.

The Fallen World

The next chapters of Genesis show us human life falling more and more into dissolution and sin. Finally it reaches rock bottom in 6:5. Read from this verse up to 9:19. Some skeptical Bible critics point out that the Hebrew story of a great flood is a later version of a similar Babylonian tale. They seem to suggest that the story of the flood, Noah, and the ark is an unimportant story because it is not “original.”

But there is an important difference between the Babylonian story and the Hebrew one, and once again it has to do with God’s loving care. The Babylonian story gives no reason for the flood—it’s more or less an adventure story. But the Hebrew story of the flood does two things: it shows us that God will not tolerate continuous evil, and that He will always save those who make the effort to do His will even when evil and temptation surround them. Saint Peter, writing in the New Testament, compares Noah being saved by water to us Christians, who are saved by the waters of baptism. It’s the same loving God saving Noah and us.

Quick Quiz #3

- ① to ④ List four ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us. (Clue: It's in the Creed.)

- ⑤ to ⑧ Name four beliefs about our Savior that are predicted in the Old Testament.

True or False?

- ⑨ Israel was the first monotheistic nation.

☐ T ☐ F

- ⑩ There are two accounts of creation presented in Genesis.

☐ T ☐ F