



# PROCLAIMING THE (NEW) OLD TESTAMENT

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Creation of the Birds and  
Sea Creatures from the  
Morgan Crusader Bible;  
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## I. SILENCING THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Scriptures of the Apostles and nascent Church were those of Israel, the Old Testament. Read through the rule of faith, these were the texts by which the Gospel was preached. “Written for our instruction,” (Rom 15:4), the Old Testament was, in the words of Christopher Seitz, “sufficient to preach Christ, to prophesy Christ, to adumbrate Christ.” And yet it is commonplace that the Catholic pulpit only rarely touches upon the Old Testament. We remind ourselves that the Scriptures of Israel, “written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable” and even “shed light... and explain” the New. Yet, we remain, to our own detriment, functionally Marcionite (cf. *Dei Verbum*, §§14, 16).

It is easy to sympathize. Obstacles to preaching well on the Old Testament are many, not least among which are its arcane references to political and religious entities, the peculiarity of its genres, and the simple fact of our unfamiliarity with the texts. Even so, I wonder if perhaps a principle factor in our neglect is a lapsed understanding about just what we should expect to find in reading the ancient Scriptures—in what way, that is, we may rightly read them in a Christological key. As on the road to Emmaus, we may wish to interpret, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” all that refers to Jesus (Lk 24:27). But the notion of fulfillment is a complicated one. As is customary, it is correct to speak of the Old Testament as preamble and prediction of Christ; yet, this approach misses much since it underestimates the presence of Christ in the history and Scriptures of Israel. Did not Jesus say to the Jews, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad” (Jn 8:56)? Perhaps we should take to heart something of the illuminated manuscript

tradition with its depiction of Jesus in the moments of Old Testament theophany. To this end, we might consider the words of St. Catherine of Siena: “All the way to heaven is heaven, because [Jesus] said, ‘I am the way.’” *Mutatis mutandis*, we could say that all the way to Christ is Christ, for “the Law and the Prophets bear witness” to him (cf. Rom 3:21).

In what follows, I offer a brief rehearsal of this idea, focusing on Scripture’s progression from Law to the incarnate Logos. In doing so, I hope to show that the gift of Torah anticipates the Incarnation and is itself a privileged *locus* of God’s presence. As such, it is something to which we should look in our desire to know and to preach Jesus Christ. My telling of this will no doubt be familiar to many, but perhaps it is worth the hearing, especially as it might provide the right vantage from which to view and understand much of the Old Testament in a Christological key—if not for the first time, then at least with renewed vigor.

## II. LAW AND COMMUNION

In the commentary of Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus, we encounter the question “Why were the Ten Commandments not given at the beginning of Torah?” The response comes as a parable. A king’s request to rule over a new province is rebuffed by the people: “Have you done anything good for us that you should rule over us?” So the king then builds them a wall, supplies them water and fights their battles. “Then when he said to them: May I be your king? They said to him: Yes, yes.” And so, the rabbi remarks, “Likewise, God” (*MekhY, Bab, 5*). Had the Lord not shown Israel the same kindness, they should have no reason to believe in him, to accept his commands. Israel needed to see, as St. John would later say, that “God loved us first” (1 Jn 4:19). And so it is that the short preamble to the Decalogue in Exodus gives a summary of this love, and with it, reason to assent to what is next commanded: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex 20:2). It is the Lord who loved Israel first, and who is now within his rights to command, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3).

What follows, however, both in Exodus and elsewhere in the Pentateuch, encompasses a corpus of law which often seems capricious if not altogether odd: what to eat, where to defecate, rules for returning a lost ox. The link between redemption from Egypt, the lordship of YHWH, and the prohibition of shellfish seems tenuous at best.

What Scripture asks us to see, however, is that the concern that brackets these statutes—that defines their scope—is God’s promise to Israel that “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). With these words God recapitulates the Abrahamic covenant with its promise of land, progeny, and blessing (cf. Gen 12:1-3; 22:15-18), adding to it a liturgical character. And the purpose of Israel’s becoming “a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” is itself revealed as God gives his command for the building of the Tabernacle: “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (Ex 25:8).

However we come to understand the minutia and occasional oddity of the Law—all of which, we should remind ourselves, was beloved of Jesus and, in a new fashion, commanded by him (cf. Mt 5:17, 20)—we must see that its animating force is the creation of communion between Israel and God. Said again, that love which grounds the giving of the Law shows itself also to be the Law’s end: God comes to Israel that he might dwell with them and that they might learn to “seek his face” (Ps 105:4). As the often repeated covenant formula reads, “They shall be my people, and I shall be their God” (cf. Ex 6:7; Lev 26:12 et al.). Or better, as Zechariah summarizes, “This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham, to set us free from our enemies, free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life” (Lk 1:73-75; cf. Ex 19:6).

If, however, the end of the law is the creation of communion between man and God, we might ask why God should have commanded *this* law and not another. With a view to Christ as the fulfillment of the Law, we will want to respond with Paul or the Letter to the Hebrews that the Old Law was “only a shadow of what is to come” (Col 2:17; cf. Heb 10:1). That much is true, but, as often happens in exegesis and preaching, we dampen the voice of the Old Testament when we move too quickly to hear it through the New. For now, let us bracket any Christological reading.

Returning to the words of the rabbis, we might venture an answer if we hear in their response a second layer of meaning. The seventy or so chapters from creation to Sinai not only characterize the God who will give the Law; *they thereby also characterize the Law itself*. Torah is derivative of God’s own life, and it effects in those who take up its yoke a likeness of the divine. The sundry commands of the Law allow Israel to enter into a type of mimetic relationship with God—a relationship through which, as is commanded them in Leviticus 19:2, they might “be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.”

Intimations of this correspondence between God and the Law appear already in the accounts of creation. The revelation that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” references not only God’s work of drawing things into existence—“Let there be light”—but also, and perhaps even more emphatically, his work of ordering that creation by imposing distinction—“And God separated [*bdl*] that light from the darkness” (Gen 1:3-4). In fact, the main verb of 1:1 (“created” [*br*]) can just as well be translated “fashioned” or “formed.” We should perhaps understand the main work of creation not as God’s *creatio ex nihilo* but as his right ordering of what was “formless and void” (Gen 1:2). In other words, it is the gift of law. And at least in the case of man, this right order bears God’s own “image and likeness” (Gen 1:26).

In much the same way Israel emerges from what is “formless and void” (Gen 1:2). In her youth—if we might steal a common refrain from Judges—“there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Jdg 17:6 et al.). Through the gift of the covenant, God creates and orders Israel in like wise as once he did for all of creation. “I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator [*br*] of Israel, your King.” Those who already bore his image and likeness receive then the command to conform to his holiness.

This ordering of Israel bears an intrinsic link to the ordering of creation. The somewhat inscrutable dietary rules of Leviticus 11, to take one example, reflect (not without some remaining difficulties) the divisions established on the days of creation. Whichever straddle those categories are forbidden. Consider the lobster: it lives in the water, but its appendages were judged more appropriate to creatures of the land. “Everything in the waters that has not fins and scales is an abomination to you” (Lev 11:12).

This correspondence between creation and law shows itself most clearly in the regulation of Israel’s worship. The words, heard above, which express God’s desire to dwell with Israel open the account of the Tabernacle construction (Ex 25ff.). The deep structure of what follows consists in the designation of what is holy and in the maintenance of its separation from the profane. This right ordering, in the likeness of the first creation account, is punctuated with seven-fold repetitions, the culmination of which sees God’s coming to dwell—or perhaps we should say coming to “rest”—in the sanctuary (cf. Ex 40:34). The creation of the Tabernacle mirrors, and recapitulates, the creation of the world. We even find in the rabbinic tradition the notion that creation was not firmly established until the erection of the Tabernacle (cf. *PesRK* 1.4) And just as man was created in the “image and likeness” of God, so too the tabernacle is fashioned after the plan of the heavenly



**Jacob's Vision of a Ladder to Heaven (ca. 1160);  
Kupferstichkabinett (Berlin-Dahlem);**

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temple given to Moses (Ex 25:9; Heb 8:5). In the creation of the world, and in the creation of Israel, God imprints the order, or law, of his own life.

Against a situation in which “everyone did what was right in his own eyes,” God extends his life not only in the structure of creation itself, but more particularly in Torah. In both the regulations of ordinary life and in the functioning of the Tabernacle (and Temple), he designates a lived response to his presence among Israel. From the color of the priest’s vestments to the rules for returning a lost ox, the ordering of rites within the Tabernacle and the maintenance of that justice and purity that form the prerequisite to worship, grant Israel the capacity to answer the love shown to them. Israel is given a grammar of thanksgiving, a sort-of cultural choreography by which they might “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Dt 6:5) and by which they might be holy as the Lord God is holy (cf. Lev 19:2). Said simply, Law is the correlative of God’s dwelling among us, the instrument of our becoming *like* him so as to be *with* him. Our earlier question—Why *this* law?—amounts, therefore, to asking, Why *this* God? The answer: “The Lord is God; there is no other” (Dt 4:35).

Israel’s understanding of this correspondence between God and the Law matures in the wisdom tradition. As we will see, if Torah were earlier seen as an imitation of the divine life, it comes here to be identified with God himself and so intimates what will later be revealed in the Incarnation.

When, in Deuteronomy 4:6, it was said that the nations will recognize Israel as a “wise” people on account of Torah, the conception of law there present is one that bears a note of universality. It is reminiscent of Psalm 119, the great hymn in praise of law—which, we should mention, says nothing of Moses, Sinai, or the covenant. Rather, it speaks of law (*torah*) as the word (*dabar*) of God, “fixed in the heavens” (Ps 119:89), which orders all of creation. Commenting on this, Jon Levenson observes that Torah is understood in this psalm as a “protological constant,” a structuring principle of all creation and, in ways both more particular and more intense, of all Israel.

Sirach 24 voices this idea most clearly. Wisdom, which pervades creation (Sir 24:3-5) and “over every nation and people [holds] sway” (Sir 24:6), is said to have sought a resting place (Sir 24:7). “Then the Creator of all things gave me [sc. wisdom] a commandment, and the one who created me assigned a place for my tent. And he said, ‘Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance’” (Sir 24:8). “All of this,” writes Ben Sira, “is the Book of the Covenant of the Most High God, the law which Moses commanded...” (Sir 24:23). That which governs the whole of creation pitches its tent in the midst of Israel; the universal is particularized and concretized in service of God’s people as “the law which Moses commanded.”

What is most striking in this hymn is the proximity of Wisdom to God himself. If, on one hand, Wisdom says of the Lord, “he created me,” this creation is “before all ages, from the beginning” (24:9). She “came forth from the mouth of the most high,” and, like the “Spirit of God” which “moved upon the face of the waters” in Genesis 1:2, she “covered the earth like a mist” (24:3). Like the Lord in the Exodus, her “throne is in a pillar of cloud” (24:4), and Israel, the “portion of the Lord” (24:12), is referred to as Wisdom’s “own people” (24:1). Moreover, the Tabernacle, prescribed by the Law, in which the Lord comes to dwell with Israel (cf. Ex 25:8), finds a parallel in Wisdom placing here “tent” in Israel as the “Book of the Covenant.”

If earlier we developed the idea that the Law was derivative of God’s own life, here the claim is pushed even further. In a move that foreshadows the Incarnation, Wisdom, which comes to Israel as “the law which Moses commanded,” approaches an identification with God himself. “For she is a breath of the might of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled can enter into her. For she is the reflection of eternal light, the spotless mirror of the power of God, the image of his goodness” (Wis 7:25-26; cf. Heb 1:3).

### III: LOGOS AND COMMUNION

The step from Sirach or Wisdom to the Prologue of John is obvious enough to need little rehearsing. “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him ...” (Jn 1:1-3). Wisdom, who once pitched her tent in Jacob as the “Book of the Covenant,” does so yet again: “And the word became flesh and pitched his tent among us, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The desired communion between God and man, that communion which formed the scope of the law from the moment God commanded a sanctuary and obedience “that I might dwell among them,” comes now to fruition. The divine life of which Torah is derivative, becomes manifest in Jesus, “the only Son from the Father” (Jn 1:14), and it is he who is now “the way, and the true, and the life.”

### IV: VOICING THE OLD TESTAMENT

There are various ways to narrate the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New. Our concern has been to sketch the relation of Law to Logos, and in so doing, to view sacred history as the drama of divine mercy as it labors toward the restoration of communion. That we should find in Jesus the recapitulation and fulfillment of this drama is, to state the obvious, not a new claim. It is, however, a narrative worth re-telling, and in our struggle to exegete the texts of the Old Testament, the re-hearing of this narrative in the specific register of God-restoring-communion offers perhaps a helpful device in knowing what to teach when confronted with the even most confounding texts from the Lectionary.

In scripture scholarship, much has been made in recent decades of a “canonical” reading of the Bible,

Said again, if formerly it were Torah that served as the correlative of God’s presence, choreographing our entry into communion, now it is Jesus, for “No one comes to the Father, except by me” (Jn 14:6).

In the words of Origen, “We who belong to the Catholic Church do not despise the Law of Moses, but accept it, so long as it is Jesus who interprets it for us. Only thus shall we understand it aright” (*In Jesu Nave*, hom. 9, n.8). This interpretation, Henri De Lubac notes, is no mere commentary; “He comes not to explain it intellectually, but to fulfill it in deed.” The right reading of Torah— itself the heart and superintending element of the whole Old Testament—is a reading from the Cross, for Christ is the “end” (*telos*) of the Law (cf. Rom 10:4).

by which is meant, roughly, a reading which considers the constituent parts of Scripture in light of the whole. This has its merits, provided of course that the unity envisioned between one text and the other is not merely the function of literary factors—an allusion between one book and another or, at the very least, the simple fact of books existing within the same one collection we call the Bible. The unity which grounds a genuine “canonical” exegesis, and with it the view of the whole of Scripture through a Christological lens, is not literary but historical. It is the “canon” of history, as it were, that binds together the various works we possess in the Bible. As Augustine summarizes: *in ipse facto, non solum in dicto, mysterium, requirere debemus* [In the very fact itself and not only in what is said about the fact

we ought to seek the mystery] (*In Psalmum 68*). We should search for the mystery not only in the word but in the thing itself. It is “by reason of their finality [that] the very facts have an inner significance” (De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 168). It is for this reason that we speak of all exegesis as a theology of the Cross. Attentiveness to God’s work of restoring communion, that long process from Law to Logos, opens the vistas of exegesis since it discloses what the one Author of history and Scripture alike intended from the first (cf. *ST I.1.10*).

Perhaps, therefore, we might treat the persons and events of the Old Testament in much the same light as the saints of the New. We find in the latter those exemplary members who “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col 1:24) and so they “attain to ... the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). This excuses nothing of their failures; rather, the sureness of their glorification—that is, of their *end*—allows us to see rightly, to discern in history the one Word who, being the *end* of the Law, gives shape to the whole. To preach christologically is not to find Christ in every sword and stone that the Old Testament delivers, nor in the more obvious types upon which we frequently fasten—as though the whole of the Old Testament were a code to be unlocked. Neither is it to pretend that the newness of the Gospel leaves the words and works of the Old Testament without their *telos* in Christ. Rather, the figures and events of the Old Testament are, prior to the Incarnation, what the saints are afterward: coruscations of the Word in history—not the self-same revelation of Jesus of Nazareth, but the Word nonetheless. The Logos which governs history is mediated to us in Scripture. The difficulty is seeing in these pages the Second Person not yet as become flesh but, in the words of St. Ephrem, as “dressed in a garment of words” (*HdF 32*). And since, as has been our argument here, we know Christ as the One through whom “God has reconciled the world to himself,” an attentiveness to the role of the persons and events of

the Old Testament as furthering (or hindering) the restoration of communion opens onto a genuinely Christological exegesis.

In this way, we might learn to view the Scriptures of Israel not only as preamble and prediction but, in like manner to those seventy-odd chapters which precede Sinai, as themselves both an intimation of the gift to be given and, paradoxically, the presence of the same. In a way proper to God’s economy, the Old Testament, to borrow a phrase from the Letter of the Hebrews, is already “the substance of things hoped for” (Heb 11:1, Vul: *substantia rerum*).

What then we might say of Elisha’s child-ravaging bears, the divided concubine of Judges 19, or the any of the other knotty passages from the Old Testament is, thankfully, a task for another time. However, bearing in mind the shape of the whole as the drama of God’s merciful restoration of communion, might just save us the Lord’s rebuke of being “foolish men ... slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” (Lk 24:25). It might, moreover, help us to give greater voice to the “Law and the Prophets” wherever the Word is proclaimed.



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