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Wisdom from OT.docx

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Sunday wisdom from the Old Testament: Yahweh loves us too.

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ALMOST every Sunday the Church reads for us lessons from the Old Testament, lessons that parallel in some way the Gospel readings. And we are reminded by the reader that both of these are "The Word of the Lord."

This system of parallel readings can lead to a problem in understanding the role of the Old Testament. Is the Old Testament of value to Christians just as a series of stories or reflections that are parallel to, similar with, or quoted in, the Gospels?

A look at just three of the Sundays in October will furnish us with some examples. On October 10, a miraculous cure from leprosy appears in both the Old and New Testament readings. On October 17 the power of continuing prayer is shown us in parallel readings. On October 24, we hear, in both Old and New Testament lessons, the kind of person whose prayer will be answered.

For most hearers and readers of the Old Testament, the stories have a certain flavor that keeps us from appreciating what is really at stake. After all, the Abana and Pharpar Rivers, and the desert of the Amalekites are simply not part of our everyday conversations. The story of the curing of the leprous Naaman (Oct. 10), and the battle of the Hebrews against Amalek (Oct. 17) have an unreality about them, similar perhaps to courtly tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

We cannot claim, of course, that medieval tales of knighthood and romance are the "Word of the Lord," but what is it that allows us to answer "Thanks be to God" to similar unusual tales from the distant past?

Voice of God

Our basic stand should be that these readings from the Word of the Lord are reminders that God could and did speak to men. Further, we must admit that what God has said and done for the men of past ages continues to have value for us today. We admit it because Christianity has always understood the Old Testament as the Word of the Lord. We find a basis for this in such citations from the New Testament as this: "Scripture says: 'Man does not live on bread alone; but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' " (Matt. 4:4).

For example, God shows us, through His word in II Kings 5, that He has power over physical diseases, as well as over the stubbornness of heart that the general Naaman showed (Oct. 10). God tells us, through these written words, that He can work His will through a despised people, or through the poorest of means (here, the River Jordan). These are lasting messages, which have a special force since they have come out of the reflections of God's Old Testament people, under the guidance of His Spirit.

"A desert skirmish"—that is what a modern news release would the battle with Amalek (Exod. 17:8ff; Oct. 17). Yet this insignificant event is read to us in 1971, some 3000 years later. Why? Because that day the Hebrews experienced the power of constant prayer.

Jesus ben Sira, who wrote in the third century before Christ, a rather long book of reflections on life and on Israel's experience, is met on October 24. In his book (called at times Sirach or Ecclesiasticus), he reflects on the way a person should pray. Humble prayer, unwearying prayer—this is the kind of prayer that the Lord listens to, he advises us. This, too, is a good lesson for 1971, just as timely and important as it was in 200 B.C.

We should, then, let the Old Testament speak to us on its own terms. This record of God's activity is not just a way to remind us of New Testament events. Neither is it merely a series of stories
which foreshadow or prophesy coming events. Nor is it just the collected recollections of an ancient people. The Old Testament embodies in some way all of these factors, to be sure. But it does much more. The Old Testament is a record of God's love for man from most ancient times, in which His activity, guidance, and care for His people are given written form and a certain systematic meaning.

Old Testament Answers

In order to gain some idea of how the Old Testament writers understood God's love, it might be well to look into that eighty percent of the Bible called the Old Testament and see how Israel faced the following supremely important questions: Who is God? Who am I? Who is my neighbor?

It should be stated at the outset that just as with the New Testament, the Old Testament is not just one book. Although it is bound in one modern "book," the Old Testament is a series of writings. Besides prayers and prophecies, these writings contain remembrances of historical events as far back, perhaps, as the 1800's before Christ, and reach up to the second century before Christ. Consequently, we should expect to see a diversity of outlook in 1600 years. The peoples involved lived first as nomads, then as small farmers, as a civilized mercantile power, as exiles from their ruined homeland, and finally as a small province within larger empires. Because of the complexity of their thought, only a very few examples can be given here.

When Israel reflected on who God was, they arrived at a variety of expressions. In all their history, however, certain points were clear. They knew, without a shadow of atheism, that God truly exists. Hosea 11:9 tells us, in a marvelous affirmation of God's existence: "For I am God, not man." They knew also that God was active, active on their behalf. Psalm 44 (43 in the Latin and Greek versions) is given over to a recitation and celebration of God's deeds in Israel's past. Psalm 139 (138) praises God for His activity on behalf of a single human being, the love which fashioned the universe now concentrated upon the individual.

Israel came to know also that God had a close relationship to them. In the same book the prophet Hosea called Israel the bride of God (ch. 2), and the son of God (ch. 11:1). The vision of God’s tenderness toward His child is vividly expressed by Hosea 11:3-4, Knox):

Yet it was I, none other, guided those first steps of theirs, and took them in my arms and healed, all unobserved, their injuries. Sons of Adam, they should be drawn with leading straps of love; never waggoner was at more pains to ease bridle on jaw, fed beast so carefully.

A result of God's personal tender love should be the response by man of true love—that is inward—religion. (Amos 5:12-14):

Your often misdoing, your heinous guilt, never think I am blind to it; innocence hated, the bribe taken, the poor refused their rights at the judgment seat! And should wisdom keep silence in times like these, ill times like these? Set your minds on right that are now set on wrongdoing; so you shall find life.

In a world which operated without benefit of international law, nations regulated their dealings in terms of treaties or covenants Israel, too, symbolized her relationship to the Lord in terms of covenants. Although often violated by Israel, the covenants helped with God helped Israel visualize the absoluteness and supremacy of the demands God made upon them. (See Psalm 105 (104):9).

Decision for God

When individuals in Israel reflected on the basic question Who am I?, their answers were rich and varied. First, man is a creature of God; made in His image (Gen 1:26). Israel lacked the mental tools at
that early period to describe man in terms of soul and body. Still the insistence upon man as a whole person has a curiously modern ring to it. For Israel, the soul was not supreme, the body a wretched prison. Man is one, summoned to humanity and personhood.

Man, for Israel, secondly, is summoned also to a decision for God. The Psalms, especially, tell in many places of the happiness in store for the “just man,” the one who lives his life according to God’s will.

Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man who does not guide his steps by ill counsel, or turn aside where sinners walk... He stands firm as a tree planted by running water, ready to yield its fruit when the season comes, not a leaf faded; all that he does will prosper.

Third, despite the joy of the just man, the Old Testament writers knew vividly of sin. In Genesis, after the flood, the Lord is made to reflect (Gen. 8:21):

Never again will I plague the earth on man's account, that has all the thoughts and imaginations of his heart, even in youth, so bent towards evil.

Psalm 143 (142):2 echoes the same conviction: “Do not call thy servant to account; what man is there living that can stand guiltless in thy presence?”

Nevertheless, God offered man the possibility of repentance conversion. Psalm 51 (50):18-19:

Thou hast no mind for sacrifice, burnt-offerings if I brought them, thou wouldst refuse; here O God, is my sacrifice, a broken spirit; a heart that is humbled and contrite, thou, O God, wilt never disdain.

When Israel asked Who is my neighbor? the answers flowed from their knowledge of God and of themselves. Basically, all men bound by the covenant with God were brothers, and deserved to be treated with love, respect, and care. Possibly the best summary of this law of love for others was made by our Lord, quoting, after the fashion of the rabbis, two commands from the Old Testament (Matt. 22:37-39):

Deut. 6:5: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with the love of thy whole heart, and thy whole soul and thy whole strength.

Levit. 19:18: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself; thy Lord is his.

After Israel's purification in the Exile, the love and concern for the brothers extended itself. Israel began to understand her role in the world as one of prophecy to the rest of men, proclaiming God's ways to others. It was in this spirit that the books of Tobit, Judith, and Jonah were written.

In order, then, to appreciate the message of the Old Testament, we should take it on its own terms. This means that we listen and read with respect the Word of the Lord. This Word was put into writing by an ancient and gifted people, who reflected on themselves and on their experience of God. Because God is eternally God, and man remains man, the message of God to man in the Old Testament is always challenging and new.