

Divine Education: The Old Testament
By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Divine revelation in Christianity is founded on God's own initiative to reveal Himself. God revealed Himself fully in Jesus Christ: "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9); "No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6); "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Yet this divine self-revelation required preparing human beings to become capable of receiving it. God patiently endured centuries of human frailty until He formed a faithful remnant—people who, through the spiritual maturity they attained, were able to respond to His transcendent truth. This spiritual growth came about through a direct, gradual, and formative divine education, beginning with Abraham and culminating in John the Baptist. God's salvific plan required that He Himself take the initiative, drawing near to humanity step by step and revealing, at each stage of human spiritual development, something new about Himself.

After the fall of the first humans from Paradise, humanity lost the path back and became incapable of walking it. Yet the image of God within humanity, though distorted by the fall, continued to long for its original source and archetype. Humanity imagined its god to be found in the forces that frightened it or sustained its life, and so it worshiped the sun, the wind, the rain, and the like. Christianity understands the rise of pagan religions as the expression of humanity's longing for its origin—an origin it no longer recognized. When a child is thirsty, he puts whatever is available into his mouth, thinking it will quench his thirst—whether water or alcohol, because he cannot tell the difference. Only when he tastes does he realize his mistake. This is what happened to humanity. For this reason, no people before Christ existed without some form of religion.

We may liken the relationship between God and humanity after the fall of our first parents to two persons separated by many translucent silk curtains. God chose to remove these curtains one by one, to protect the eyes of His beloved—humanity—from the blinding brilliance of His light. This is what we call God's salvific dispensation in the Old Testament. Thus, He began with Abraham, and the process continued until John the Baptist. Then "when the fullness of time

had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4). Jesus Christ was born, and “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Humanity’s spiritual hardness compelled God to educate it anew, until it reached a level capable of receiving God as He truly is.

Was it by chance that God chose, on the one hand, a backward and uncivilized people? Certainly not. Had He revealed Himself to a highly civilized people, others would have regarded Him as the product of human thought. And was it coincidence, on the other hand, that Christ came at the heart of a civilized world, already prepared by philosophy that had reached the acknowledgment of one God? Many historians agree that the Roman Empire had attained a spiritual stage in which the true but unknown God, in the eyes of many at the time, lay hidden behind idols fashioned by human hands and minds. Consequently, esoteric religions reached their peak just before and during the time of Christ’s incarnation. Christ came at the most opportune moment, when humanity was spiritually mature and yearning for the true God. This is what is meant by the “fullness of time.”

What did God do in practice? He chose a backward people, distant from civilization, and through them revealed Himself to all humanity. “The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth—not because you were more numerous than any other people, for you were the fewest of all” (Deut. 7:6–7). Some translations even say, “the most insignificant.” Why? So that the power might be shown to belong not to human beings but to God. Some believe that God is a human invention. Our divine revelation teaches the opposite: human beings are God’s creation, and He is the One who revealed Himself to them and led them toward His true image.

Did all of them come to know Him? No. And can someone with poor eyesight perceive the delicate beauty of nature? The sight required to know God is spiritual sight. You know God to the extent that you are pure, humble, and loving. God delights in dwelling in pure hearts, and such hearts can taste His sweetness and delight in it.

God first revealed Himself through His actions. Thus the earliest community came to know Him and spoke of Him as “the God of our fathers,” “the God who delivered us from slavery,” “who drowned Pharaoh and his chariots,” “the God who fed us with manna in the wilderness,” “who brought water from the rock,” “who healed us from the bite of serpents,” and so forth. Then, through the Law, He began to raise them from the savage law of vengeance—“Sevenfold vengeance shall be taken on Cain, but on Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (Gen. 4:24)—to the law of justice, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Deut. 19:21), and finally to the law of mercy: “Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:17). He moved them from a law written on stone to a law engraved on hearts, from the circumcision of the flesh to the circumcision of the heart. He refined them through exile and dispersion, so that they came to understand that He is not bound to a single temple or a single land. After the exile, they recognized that God is the God of all nations and that “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 23:1).

It was a long and patient journey, in which God truly manifested His “long-suffering.” This practical revelation bore fruit in the “faithful remnant”—those who had matured spiritually to receive His full revelation, disclosed in the incarnation of His Word, Jesus Christ. Among them were the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, Simeon the Elder, Anna the Prophetess, John the Evangelist, and many others.

Jesus Christ is the center of Holy Scripture. In the Old Testament, there is an expectation of Him that unfolds gradually. In the New Testament, this expectation reaches its fulfillment in His complete manifestation: “that which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes... and our hands have touched” (1 John 1:1). If we remove Him from our Scriptures, we strip ourselves of the traces of Jesus Christ revealed throughout His long plan of salvation and dispensation, and hand them over to others. Does fidelity in love mean discarding the traces of the beloved? The challenge is not met by casting our heritage aside, but by preserving it and revealing its true meaning.