

OF WHOM THE WORLD WAS NOT WORTHY

*Sermons on the Lives and Works of
the Patriarchs and Prophets
of the Old Testament*



Protopresbyter James Thornton

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by
Protopresbyter James Thornton

*“They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were
slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins
and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;
of whom the world was not worthy: they wandered
in deserts, and in mountains, and
in dens and caves of the earth.”*

—Saint Paul, Epistle to
the Hebrews 11:37–38



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About the Author

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SERMON ONE

Introduction

The English word “Church” is a translation of a Greek word, “Ἐκκλησία” (“*Ekklēsia*”), which means an assembly that has been summoned, that is, a gathering of people who have come together because they have been called together by God. The Church has existed since Christ Jesus summoned His Apostles together, proclaimed His Church established, and sent the Holy Spirit upon this assembly of righteous men at Pentecost. Pentecost is the birthday, so to speak, of the Church, the New Testament Church.

However, if we understand the Church correctly as an assembly of men and women called together by God, we must acknowledge that, prior to Pentecost, the Church existed in another form, its Old Testament form. In that form it existed from the time God—more specifically, Christ God, since the God of the Old Testament is the pre-incarnate Second Person of the Holy Trinity¹—made His covenant with the Holy Patriarch Abraham, approximately four thousand years ago, a time so remote from us that it is only seen dimly, a minute speck of light, as it were, on a far, far distant horizon. Yet, that was indeed the Church, this rudimentary Old Testament Church of the Holy Patriarch Abraham, this nascent God-bearing assembly. And, by the Grace of God, that tiny assembly was the spiritual progenitor of the two-thousand-year-long history of the religion of our spiritual forebears, the Hebrew people. It

¹ “[T]he Fathers maintain that Jesus Christ, before His birth from the Virgin Theotokos, in His uncreated Person of the Angel of God, Angel of the Great Council, the Lord of Glory, the Lord Sabaoth, is He who revealed God in Himself to the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament,” and “...the Old Testament is Christo-centric since Christ is the pre-incarnate Angel of the Lord and of the Great Council, the Lord of Glory, and the Lord Sabaoth in Whom the patriarchs and prophets see and hear God and through Whom they receive grace, succor, and forgiveness” (Father John Romanides, “Jesus Christ—The Life of the World,” *Xenia Oecumenica*, Vol. 39 [1983], pp. 233–234).

SERMON TEN

Holy Prophet-King David (Dauid)

To those who commit grave sin, who are “hurled into the very gulf of sin”¹ as Saint John Chrysostomos writes, it often appears that one so befouled with the filth of sin must remain in that state and that there cannot possibly exist a path back to spiritual wholesomeness and cleanliness. That mode of thought is an example of spiritual despondency, which is induced by the Evil One, who whispers such thoughts into the ears of those whom he has captured to assure their resignation to his bondage. The Church, of course, teaches the very opposite to spiritual despondency, assuring even the worst of sinners that the road to spiritual freedom and cleanliness is always open through repentance. That the Holy Church honors and commemorates Saint Mary of Egypt, a notorious sinner who repented and became a great Saint, by naming a Sunday during the Great Fast after her, is proof that the road to salvation is always open. Her story is one of the most salient among similar stories from the lives of the Saints. If further evidence is needed, it is offered by the Saint whom we discuss today, the Holy Prophet-King David.

As was mentioned in the sermon on the Holy Prophet Samuel, God chose Saint David to be the second King of Israel, the successor to King Saul. He was anointed king by Saint Samuel long before he actually ascended the throne, and for some time he served King Saul by playing the harp, which soothed the king’s mind, troubled as it was by an evil spirit. So pleased was the king by this beautiful music that he appointed the young man his armor-bearer.

It was not long after that time that the Holy Prophet David met the seemingly invincible Philistine giant, Goliath of Gath, in single combat and killed him with a stone, thrown with a sling, causing

¹ “The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. Matthew,” p. 181.

SERMON TWENTY

Holy Prophet Isaiah (Esaías)

The Holy Prophet Isaiah is considered one of the four major Prophets, because of the length of his prophetical book, one of the longest in the Holy Bible. The Holy Prophet was born to a family of the aristocracy. In fact, he was the nephew of Amaziah, the King of Judah. He was also highly educated, as is evident from the beauty and refined nature of his writing style. Saint Isaiah was born in 760 B.C. in Jerusalem, the capital of the southern Kingdom of Judah. He married a pious woman, whom he calls “the prophetess,”¹ who bore him two sons.

The prophetic ministry of Saint Isaiah lasted for more than a half century, a period which saw the prophecies of earlier prophets, who had foretold the destruction of Israel, come to pass. The period in which the Holy Prophet lived is one of tremendous political complexities and upheavals, with the rise of a powerful and bellicose Assyrian Empire along with quarrels and actual military conflict between the two Hebrew kingdoms.

The Assyrians attacked and sought to absorb Syria and Israel. The Kingdom of Judah was then invited to join in an alliance with Syria and Israel against their enemy, the Assyrians, but refused the offer. Hoping to replace Judah’s uncooperative monarch, Syria and Israel then attacked Judah, causing much destruction. Judah entered into an alliance with Assyria, to defeat Syria and Israel, which was done against the advice of the Holy Prophet Isaiah. As a result, the capital of the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and victory by Judah’s Assyrian ally achieved.

However, as Saint Isaiah foresaw, the victory came at a high cost. Thenceforth, Judah became a vassal state, a protectorate of the Assyrian Empire, without genuine independence and compelled to pay a monetary tribute to the Assyrian overlords. Worse yet, Judah

¹ Isaiah 8:3

SERMON THIRTY

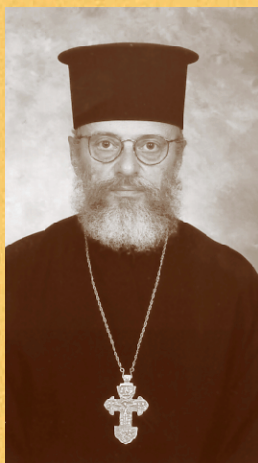
Holy Prophet Haggai (Angaios)

This morning, we investigate the writings of a minor Prophet, one of the more obscure of the Holy Prophets, Saint Haggai. The Holy Prophet Haggai lived in the sixth century B.C. and was among the first group, totaling approximately forty-five thousand souls, which returned to its homeland. That was permitted by Cyrus II, King of Persia, who decreed that all the exiled in Babylon were free to go. While some of the exiles had made a comfortable life for themselves living in Babylon and chose to remain where they were, avoiding the rigors that awaited the returnees, the others returned to their old home in stages, over a period of many decades.

Apart from reestablishing the rudiments of day-to-day living—food and shelter—the first task at hand for the returned exiles was the rebuilding of the Holy Temple, which the Babylonians had burned and leveled to the ground. Cyrus, in addition to allowing the exiles to go home, had also returned the sacred vessels that had been looted from the Holy Temple at Jerusalem, thereby assuring at least a symbolic continuity with the past. The people set to work at once, first building a temporary sacrificial altar, and then beginning work on the great building itself. However, almost immediately obstacles to the construction arose.

When the Judæans were taken away into captivity, certain numbers of them remained behind in the debris of the ruined cities and country, the flotsam, one could say, of Judah, that is, people of little importance whom the Babylonians ignored. These people, who came to be known as Samaritans, had intermarried with foreigners and gradually adopted a religion that blended the old Hebrew religion with alien elements from the religions of the foreigners. Therefore, in the eyes of the returned exiles, the Samaritans were twice cursed: once for marrying foreigners and again for adulterating the Hebrew religion. They were regarded as unclean, and as worse than pagans, since they were apostates.

“...[I]t seemed to this author that it would be of benefit to the faithful to learn something of the holy men of the Old Testament and through their stories and experiences to gain some appreciation of the vast expanse of the four-thousand-year-long history of the struggle for sanctity, what specialists often call the *Heilsgeschichte*, the ‘holy history,’ the history of God’s interaction with mankind. The need for the further presentation and elucidation of the Old Testament stories in an Orthodox Christian context was to me especially urgent since Orthodox Christians, at least those in America, are inadequately instructed in this subject and are often, therefore, the easy prey of sectarians of various stripes, who are always ready to exploit such circumstances to their own profit. That is unfortunate, even shameful, since Orthodox Christians are as much the true heirs to the legacy of the heroes of the Old Testament as they are to the legacy of the heroes of the New, and of all subsequent Christian history.”



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