

Bible Study Hebrews 6-9

“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ...”

Three verses before, Hebrews mentioned “first principles of Christ”:

“... you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God...”

The writer is “teaching again” his readers the first principles of Christ so that they may “move on” to more truths understandable to mature minds.

“let us go on to perfection...”

This verse is poorly translated and therefore commonly misunderstood by English speakers. In English, to be “perfect” is to be morally pure, sinless, and without any defects. The Greek root word translated here as “perfection” is τέλος *télos*, which means “(to set out for a definite point or goal); properly, the point aimed at as a limit, i.e. (by implication) the conclusion of an act or state (termination (literally, figuratively or indefinitely), result (immediate, ultimate or prophetic), purpose); specially, an impost or levy (as paid):—+ continual, custom, end(-ing), finally, uttermost.”

A better translation of this verse would be “let us go on to completion.”

The mistranslation of *télos* into the English “perfection” can be found elsewhere in Scriptures: “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). This mistranslated verse has led to tremendous misunderstanding and frustration to countless Christians, who tried in vain to be as “perfect” as God by our own efforts. God does not want us “perfect” but “completed,” and He is the One who completes us. We merely cooperate with His completion of us.



“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

This entire passage is an excellent metaphor for “deification” – the lifelong movement from infant’s milk to solid food, from the basics to the more advanced, from immaturity to maturity, from incompleteness to completion.

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Earlier, Hebrews calls us to understand and practice the “elementary” and “first principles” of Christ. Now it identifies some of those “elementary” and “first principles:”

“...not laying again the foundation...”

What is the foundation not to be laid again? Hebrews mentions six components of the foundation:

“... of repentance from dead works”

Old Testament Judaism was entirely focused on keeping the Torah. The rabbis identified 613 commandments, and righteous Jews were commanded to keep all of them. Some of the commandments were more important than others – laws against murder were more important than laws about keeping the dietary laws and resting on the sabbath. Christ was constantly preaching against obsessing about trivial laws and ignoring the vital laws.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone” (Matthew 23:23).

Christ came to teach the Israelites that keeping the 613 laws was not enough. Salvation was not about keeping laws, but in knowing and obeying Him. The word repentance in Greek means “change of mind.” So *“... of repentance from dead works”* here means changing their mind from on blind obedience to religious laws as the way of salvation, and instead seek salvation through relationship with and obedience to Christ.

“...and of faith toward God...” This principle is a constant in both Old and New Testaments. *“Without faith it is impossible to please God.”* Later, the entire 8th chapter of Hebrews describes this great detail, as we will see.

“...of the doctrine of baptisms...” Baptism, along with repentance and faith, are the beginning point for salvation. *“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16).*

“... of laying on of hands...” This refers to the receiving of the Holy Spirit: *“And Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given...” (Acts 8:18).* This also refers to ordination, as Paul reminds Timothy of his ordination: *“Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership” (1 Timothy 4:14) and “Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Timothy 1:6).*

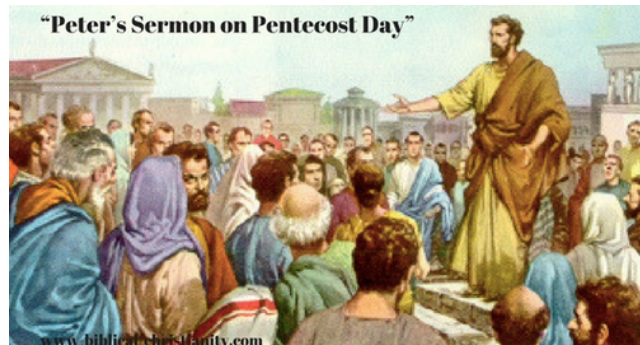
“...of resurrection of the dead...” The Resurrection of the dead – first of Christ, then all humanity in the last day – is another absolute essential of Christianity. As Paul wrote:

“For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have

perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable (1 Corinthians 15-19).

“...and of eternal judgment.” Christ stated, “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25:30-32).

These elements of the “first principles of Christ” are very similar to Peter’s sermon at Pentecost.



On that day, when the Holy Spirit had just been poured out on the earth, and the Church was now born, Peter gave the same “first principles of Christ” as outlined in Hebrews.

Acts 2	Hebrews 6
<i>“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”</i>	<i>“...and of faith toward God...”</i>
<i>“He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.”</i>	<i>“...of resurrection of the dead...”</i>
<i>“Then Peter said to them, “Repent...”</i>	<i>“... of repentance from dead works”</i>
<i>“... and let every one of you be baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...”</i>	<i>“...of the doctrine of baptisms...”</i>
<i>“...and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”</i>	<i>“... of laying on of hands...”</i>
<i>[Quoting the Prophet Joel:] “The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD.”</i>	<i>“and of eternal judgment.”</i>

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“And this we will do if God permits.” God has permitted His Church to proclaim these first principles of Christ for the past 2,000 years. He will continue to permit His Church to do so until the end of time. Christ said, *“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).*

Previously, we read that we begin our life in Christ understanding “elementary principles” and progress towards “completion.” That transformation is what Orthodoxy calls “deification” and is how we attain salvation.

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”

This verse has often been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At first glance, it appears to say that it is possible for Christians to sin to the point where they cannot be saved, even if they repent. Such a belief is contrary to everything the Bible and Holy Tradition teaches us. To the Orthodox, salvation is always available through repentance as long as we are in this world. As we hear in the Liturgy, *“You give wisdom and understanding to the one who asks, and You do not overlook the sinner, but have set repentance as the way of salvation.”* Salvation through repentance is even possible in the next world, as we sing in the hymn of the Memorial Service, *“The choir of Saints has found the fountain of life and the door of Paradise. May I also find the way through repentance. I am the lost sheep. O Savior, call me back and save me.”*

The false idea that we can sin so much that we cannot repent unto salvation can be found in the 4th century. During Roman persecution, many Christians bravely endured torture and martyrdom rather than renounce Christ. But there were many who succumbed to torture and did renounce Christ, but later repented and wished to return to the Church. After the end of Roman persecutions, the Church had to decide what to do with those who succumbed, but later repented. There was a small sect, called the Novatians, that believed that anyone who had apostasized under torture could never return to the Church. They based that belief largely on the above Bible verse. The Church chose to allow repentant apostates to return to the Church after a period of repentance. The Novatianists broke away from the Church and eventually died out.

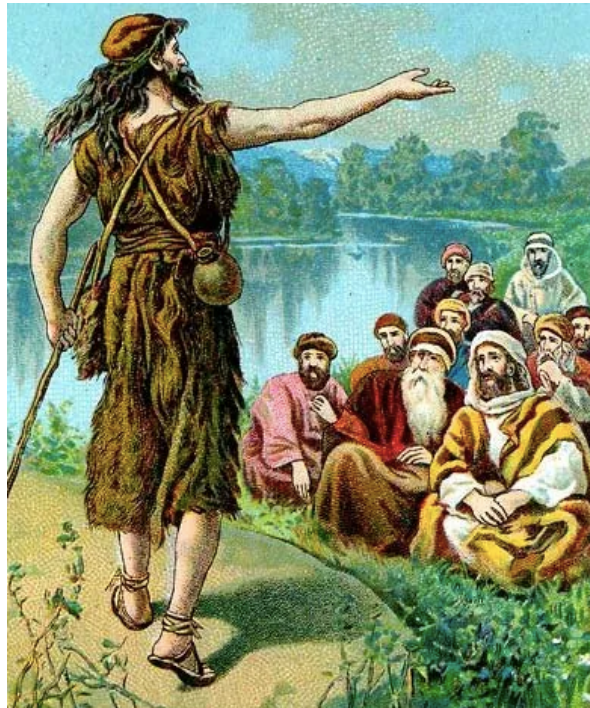
So how did the early Church Fathers interpret this verse from Hebrews which appears to support the idea that we can sin so much that we can never return to the Church, even if we repent? The early Church Fathers teach us that this verse refers to misuse of Christian baptism. Remember that the primary audience of the book of Hebrews is Jewish Christians. In the Judaism from which they had come, there was a form baptism similar to Christian baptism which came later. It was called a “mikveh bath,” and is still practiced among Orthodox Jews today. The Mikveh bath was developed in the first century BC – shortly before the time of Christ. It quickly became such an important practice that the

mikveh bath had to be constructed before the rest of a new synagogue. The Mikveh bath ritual required total immersion in water to restore ceremonial purity after sexual relations, menstruation, contact with a corpse, and before conversion to Judaism. When the first century Jews saw John's baptism of repentance in the River Jordan, they certainly saw it as a form of mikveh bath, which it probably was.

Jewish Mikveh Bath



John's Baptism of Repentance



There are similarities between the Mikveh bath of Judaism and John's baptism of repentance, but there are major differences between both of them and Christian baptism, which replaced both. As John said, *"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is greater ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"* (Matthew 3:11).

The two biggest differences between Christian baptism, and that of the Jews and of John, are:

- 1. The Mikveh bath and baptism of John are ceremonial and symbolic, but Christian baptism is sacramental. It conveys profound grace upon any person who receives it.**
- 2. The results of the Mikveh bath and baptism of John were limited and temporary, and had to be repeated throughout one's lifetime. Christian baptism could only be received once in a lifetime.**

The early Church Fathers say that the Jewish Christians were confusing Christian baptism with the Mikveh bath. Whenever they felt the need for spiritual cleansing, some of them

were being baptized again in much the same way that had received a mikveh bath. So when this verse from Hebrews says,

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”

...it is saying that the *“enlightenment”* and *“heavenly gift”* they had already experienced at their baptisms, and the *“partaking of the Holy Spirit”* they had already received in their chrismations, and the *“tasting of the good word of God”* that they had already received at their first communions, could not be repeated by repeated baptisms. To attempt to do so was just as impossible as *“crucifying the Son of God”* again. Worse, to repeat their baptisms was blasphemous, like *“putting Christ to open shame.”* The Fathers’ interpretation of this verse from Hebrews draws from an understanding of the differences between Jewish symbolic rituals and Christian sacraments. Their interpretation is far more trustworthy than the that of the Novatianists, who wished to overturn the entire Christian doctrine of salvation of repentance as the way of salvation based on an ignorant and simplistic interpretation of this one verse.

“For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.”

This verse is a paraphrase of what Christ said:

“And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9).

This metaphor is depicted in the icon of Christ’s Baptism. Note the axe laid at the roots:



We Orthodox Christians must take care that that we bear Christ-like fruit in our lives.

“But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner.

The term *“things that accompany salvation”* is significant. The Greek word translated here as *“things that accompany”* is ἐχόμενα (echomena) which means “to have in possession.” The next verse tells us what things we must have in our possession in the processes of our salvation:

“For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”

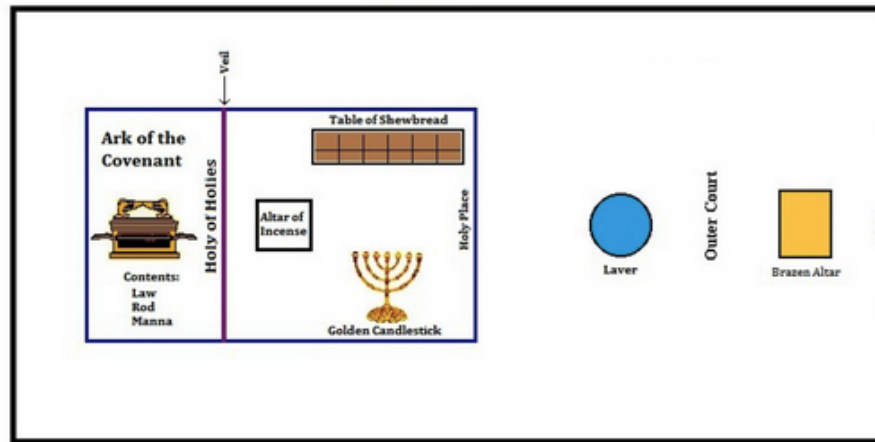
The book of Hebrews says that some of things that must be “in our possession” in the process of our salvation include *“work and labor of love”* and *“ministry to the saints”* and *“diligence.”* These are all actions, not just mental beliefs. They are like gear we pack and need to be *“in our possession”* on a journey, like maps, food and water, and without which our journey is in jeopardy. This is very different from those who say that *“work and labor of love”* and *“ministry to the saints”* and *“diligence”* are desirable, but not connected in any way with salvation.

“For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.”

God’s promises to Abraham were as sure as His own nature, and His promises were all fulfilled. His promise to us of eternal life are equally trustworthy, and will be fulfilled if we cooperate with His saving actions.

“This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil...”

“The veil” was the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place in the Temple. *“The Presence”* refers to God’s special presence in the Holy of Holies, mostly identified with the Ark of the Covenant. Also, just outside the Holy of Holies was the “Bread of the Presence” (often mistranslated in English as “Showbread”).

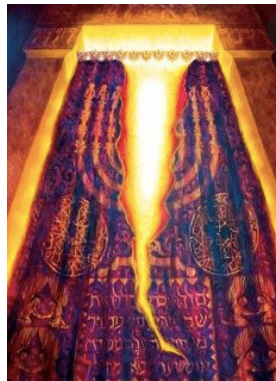


“... where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus...”

When Orthodox hear the term “*forerunner*,” we usually think of “John the Forerunner,” who came upon the scene to announce the coming of Christ, who soon to follow. But in this instance, Christ is called “the Forerunner,” not John. If Christ is a forerunner, who is he preceding and preparing the way for? The text gives us the answer: “*for us*.” And since Christ has preceded us into the Holy of Holies, we will follow Him into the Holy of Holies, the holiest place on earth.

This new access of Christ’s followers into the presence of the Father is symbolized in the Gospels:

“And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matthew 27:50-51).



Before this, only the High Priest could pass through the veil and enter God’s presence on one day per year. But now that that barrier has been eliminated by God. We can enter God’s presence anytime. As Paul writes, “*For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father*” (Ephesians 2:18).

The seventh chapter of Hebrews continues to identify Christ as the continuation of the Old Testament Priest Melchizedek, as well as all the High Priests of Israel since:

“For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated “king of righteousness,” and then also king of Salem, meaning “king of peace,” without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.”

We have seen this mysterious figure Melchizedek earlier in Hebrews. The Patriarch Abraham met him in Genesis 14. His name means “King of Righteousness.” He is also called “the king of Salem,” which in Hebrew means the “King of Peace.” This encounter takes place hundreds of years before the nation of Israel even existed. The Israelite priesthood, which came later, was hereditary, reserved by God for the descendants of Aaron, Moses brother. However, this verse points out that the priesthood of Melchizedek was not based on heredity. It says that Melchizedek was “...*without father, without mother, without genealogy...*” That sets him apart from all priests ever since, especially from a Jewish perspective.

The passage continues to highlight the uniqueness of Melchizedek:

“Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils.” Abraham had never met Melchizedek before, yet Abraham was so awestruck that he gave a tithe of his considerable worth to him as an offering.

“And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham...”

As we have seen before, when God distributed the Promised Land to the 12 Tribes of Israel, he did not give any land to the tribe of Levi. He appointed that tribe to be the priestly tribe. Instead of land, the privilege of direct service to God was their inheritance instead of land:

“The priests, the Levites—all the tribe of Levi—shall have no part nor inheritance with Israel; they shall eat the offerings of the LORD made by fire, and His portion. Therefore, they shall have no inheritance among their brethren; the LORD is their inheritance, as He said to them” (Deuteronomy 18:1-2).

As we have seen before, God required the other eleven tribes with land to pay tithes to the tribe of Levi:

“Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting” (Numbers 18:21).

“... but he [Melchizedek] whose genealogy is not derived from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better. Here mortal men receive tithes, but there he receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives.

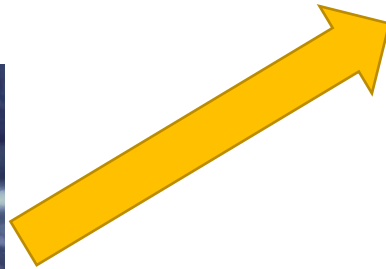
In other words, Melchizedek received tithes from Abraham long before the tribe of Levi received tithes from the other tribes. The significance is explained:

“Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.”

Hebrews is describing a broader picture of the whole system of paying of tithes. The Jews knew from the book of Genesis of Abraham giving tithes to Melchizedek:



Abraham

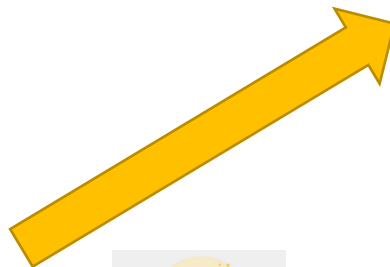


Melchizedek

And the Jews knew from the book of Numbers of the tithe paid to the tribe of Levi:



11 Tribes



The Tribe of Levi

The Old Testament Chain of Paying Honor: *“Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him...”*



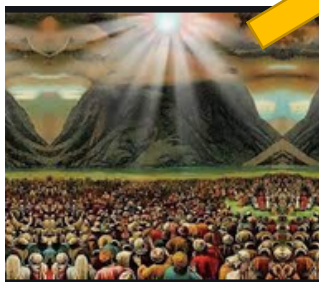
Melchizedek



**Abraham
The Patriarch**



The Levites



11 Tribes of Israel

The New Testament Chain of Paying Honor

"You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek."



Christ, the new Melchizedek

"This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint presbyters in every town as I directed you..." (Titus 1:5)



The Bishops and Patriarchs



"Let the presbyters who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine" (1 Tim. 5:17)

The Priests



"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account" (Hebrews 13:17).

The People

The text continues the theme of Christ as Melchizedek:

“Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron?”

In the wise plan of God, the Hebrew priesthood, which descended from Aaron, was flawed and needed to be replaced with a new priesthood descended from another. This new priesthood is descended from Melchizedek, not Aaron. This new priesthood is spiritual and not hereditary because Melchizedek had no physical descendants.

“For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. For He of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar.”

Hebrews states that Christ as the new Melchizedek, the new High Priest of new priesthood:

“For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah...”

Christ was born to the tribe of Judah, according to the genealogies in both Matthew and Luke. Christ is called *“the Lion of the tribe of Judah”* in Revelation 5:5. Once again, Hebrews identifies Christ as the new Melchizedek.

“... of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood. And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. For He testifies:

*“You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek.”*

The coming of Christ was a dramatic change in the way God interacts with mankind. God had become human. God was no longer distant, and largely accessible to the Jews, but was now easily approachable to anyone. Death no longer ruled over all humanity, but had been conquered. The terms of the Old Covenant between God and humanity was replaced by the New Covenant. Old Israel was rapidly fading away, and was being replaced by the Church. This cosmic paradigm is noted in Hebrews:

“For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.”

The text now returns to the recurring theme of Christ as the new High Priest of the Church and the new Melchizedek:

And inasmuch as He was not made priest without an oath (for they have become priests without an oath, but He with an oath by Him who said to Him:

*“The LORD has sworn
And will not relent,
‘You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek,’*

Here the that recurring theme reveals a new twist:

“... by so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant.”

The belief in a covenant between God and Abraham was central to Judaism. As far back as the book of Genesis, God entered into a covenant, or an agreement between Abraham and his descendants:

“Now the LORD had said to Abram:

*‘Get out of your country,
From your family
And from your father’s house,
To a land that I will show you.
I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you
And make your name great;
And you shall be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
And I will curse him who curses you;
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed...” (Genesis 12:1-3)*



“Then [God] brought [Abraham] outside and said, ‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.’ And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be” (Genesis 15:5).

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In short, God promised Abraham a land, a seed, and a blessing.

But in Christ, God has fulfilled and replaced His covenant with Abraham. This was prophesied by the Prophet Jeremiah:

“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

This promise of a New Covenant was fulfilled by Christ in the Last Supper:



“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:26-28).

We will see much more on the New Covenant, inaugurated in the Body and Blood of Christ, in the next chapter of Hebrews.

Chapter seven returns to the theme of Christ as the High Priest of the Church. Old Testament priests served during their lifetimes. At a priest’s death, the prayers and offering of sacrifices were continued by other priests. This verse emphasizing that Christ’s High Priesthood is not bound by time like the Hebrew priests:

“Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore, He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”

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Just as Christ's High Priesthood is not bound to time, so is His sacrifice of Himself:

“For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.”

Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the Cross was once and for all. However, the saving benefits from that one sacrifice flows to all and for all time. At the Holy Mysteries, Christ's one sacrifice on the Cross is made present.

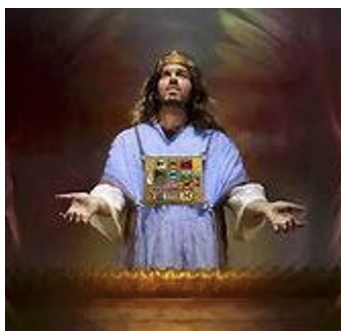


“Your own of Your own we offer to You, on behalf of all, and for all” (the Divine Liturgy)

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“Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens...”

Thrones are normally associated with kings and other rulers. Priests are not normally associated with sitting on thrones, but are associated with standing before the altar of God, offering sacrifices. Kings exercise power while priests do not. Priests offer sacrifices while kings do not. In this verse, Hebrews is teaching us that Christ is both High Priest and King.



This vision of Christ sitting on the throne of heaven is seen elsewhere in Scripture:



“...knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne...” (Acts 2:30)

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25:31-32).

“Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne...” (Revelation 4:2).

Christ sitting on His throne in heaven is woven into the Nicene Creed:

“He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father...”

The book of revelation gives us an astounding detail of Christ sitting on His heavenly throne. Christ says:

“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Revelation 3:21).

In the eternal state, the faithful will not only stand before Christ’s throne, we will join Him sitting with Him on His throne!

The close presence of God on His throne is both frightening and awe-inspiring. Even the Cherubim and Seraphim – angels who are appointed to serve near God’s throne – are deeply intimidated at the majesty of divine Presence. The Prophet Isaiah was given a vision of heaven:

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory!” (Isaiah 6:1-2)*

Even though the highest orders of angels can barely stand proximity to God’s holy presence, the faithful in heaven are invited to sit right next to him on His throne.



Christ’s throne can be our throne. Such is the audacious intimacy we shall have that even the angels do not.

Hebrews gives us a glimpse of the throne room of heaven, where Christ is sitting on His throne. It is not always widely taught or understood, but God designed the Old Testament Tabernacle/Temple to be an earthly replica of that throne room. The Tabernacle Temple was architectural prophecy.

“...a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.”

“... since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, “See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.”

The resemblances of the features of the Tabernacle/Temple and God’s throne room in heaven are striking. First there is the feature of the sacred space itself. God created the natural world, and has pronounced it “good.” We can learn and appreciate nature, and recognize God as its designer.



“O Lord, how manifest are Your works; in wisdom You have made them all” (Psalm 104:24).

Orthodox monasteries are usually placed in natural settings because nature provides an excellent place to experience God’s majestic presence. Mt. Athos:



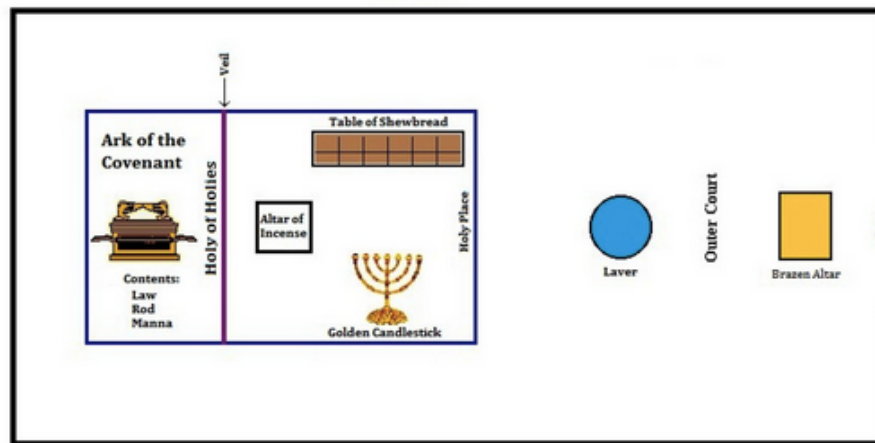
But even as beautiful as Mt. Athos is, the monks do not worship together in the mountains or by the sea. Their prime place for worship is in the churches. These houses of worship are holy spaces, even more holy than the splendid nature that surrounds them. God desired to be worshiped sanctified spaces above all else.



“Take your shoes off Moses, you are on holy ground” (Exodus 3:5).

Some people reject this idea. They say, “I can worship God at home or on a golf course.” God wants us to worship Him together and in His house. This is why He commanded the Israelites to worship in a geographical place set aside for the specific purpose – the Tabernacle and later the Temple. That principle has been passed down from ancient Israel to the Church. The Tabernacle, the Temple, and the Church are all *“the copy and shadow”* God’s throne room in heaven.

Moreover, God commanded that the sacred space of the Tabernacle/Temple were to be divided into three compartments: the Outer Court, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies:



The Outer Court was accessible by any Jew. Even though it was easily accessed, it was still a holy space for the common person. Its holiness required reverent behavior by all within it. Christ was outraged when this outer court was being used as a place of business and not for worship:

“Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a ‘den of thieves’ ” (Matthew 21:12-13).

Orthodox churches also have an outer court, which we call the Narthex. All are welcome here, although reverent conduct is expected. At times in the history of the Church, people who were undergoing penance could advance no further than the Narthex.



The Outer Court contained two required items. The first of these was the altar. On it was burned all the animal and grain sacrifices as required by the Law. It was a very busy place because animal sacrifices were being burned there every day.



“The fire on the altar shall be kept burning; it must not be extinguished. Every morning the priest is to add wood to the fire, arrange the burnt offering on it, and burn the fat portions of the peace offerings on it” (Leviticus 6:12).

Because the altar was in the Outer Court, and was accessible to the people, individuals could bring their own offerings and give them to the priests to offer. Christ mentioned this:

“Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

All Orthodox churches have an altar in continuance of this ancient practice. Remember that an altar is a place of sacrifice. Some other churches also have altars, but in those churches the altar usually refers to the table on which communion is prepared. But in Orthodox churches the term “altar” refers to the entire area where the Body and Blood of

Christ are consecrated and offered. The table in an Orthodox altar is called the “Holy Table,” but it is not the altar.

Catholic/Anglican altar



Orthodox Altar



The Altar in the Temple and in the churches are *“the copy and shadow”* of the Altar in heaven. *“Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God” (Revelation 5:13).*



Like the Altar in the Old Testament, the Altar in the Orthodox Church is also a place where the Holy Gifts are offered - *“a mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise.”*



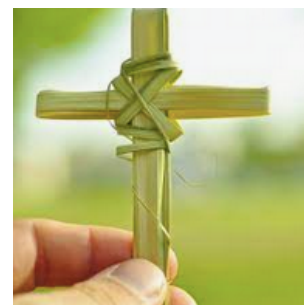
“And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and

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seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth... All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8).



Also, like the Altar in the Old Testament, the Altar in the Orthodox Church is approachable by the people. It is still a place where the faithful bring their gifts for the priests to bless and offer.



Another furnishing in the Outer Court was the Laver.



“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base also of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tabernacle of meeting and the altar. And you shall put water in it, for Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet in water from it” (Exodus 30:17-19).

The Laver from the Old Testament continues in the Orthodox Church in the form of the baptismal font:



“But do You, O Master of All, declare this water to be water of redemption, water of sanctification, a cleansing of flesh and spirit, a loosing of bonds, a forgiveness of sins, an illumination of soul, a laver of regeneration, a renewal of the spirit, a gift of sonship, a garment of incorruption, a fountain of life. For You have said, O Lord: “Wash, and be clean; put away evil from your souls” (The Baptismal Service)

Within the Outer Court was the Holy Place. Here only the priests could enter. The Holy Place of Orthodox churches is the Nave, also called the Sanctuary, which means “Holy Place” in Latin. It is in this holy space that Orthodox faithful exercise what is described in 1 Peter 2:9. *“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”*



Within the Holy Place were two holy adornments. One was the “golden lampstand” with seven candles, called the Menorah.



The Candles of the Menorah were kept lit at all times.

The Orthodox churches continue to light lamps and candles as an expression of devotion.



The lamps and candles in the Jewish temple and in Orthodox churches are “*the copy and shadow*” of the golden lamp stand in heaven:

“Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band” (Revelation 1:12-13).



Another adornment of the Holy Place of the Tabernacle/Temple was the Altar of Incense.



Orthodox churches continue to offer incense in most of our services.



The Altar of Incense, and censuring in the Orthodox Church, is “*the copy and shadow*” of both the Altar of Incense and censuring in heaven.



“Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne” (Revelation 8:3).

Another furnishing of the Holy Place in the ancient Tabernacle and Temple was the “Bread of the Presence” and the golden table where it was maintained.



“You shall also make a table of acacia wood; two cubits shall be its length, a cubit its width, and a cubit and a half its height... And you shall set the showbread on the table before Me always” (Exodus 25: 23, 30).

The Old Testament Bread of the Presence is “*the copy and shadow*” of the New Testament Body and Blood of Christ. In Holy Communion, we partake of Christ whose presence is invisible. But Holy Communion is “*the copy and shadow*” of what is to come. The Real Presence of Christ that is now invisible will become visible in heaven. This End of Times event is often called “The Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and was foretold by Christ in the Parable of the Wise Virgins.



“And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut... “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming” (Matthew 25:10, 13)

“Then he said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’ ” And he said to me, “These are the true sayings of God” (Revelation 19:9).



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Chapter 9 continues the themes of chapter 8. All the features of the Hebrew Tabernacle/Temple are described, and connected to the New Testament Church. Again, we see how each of these features are preserved in the Orthodox Church:

“For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, which had the golden censer...”

In last week’s class we saw the continuation of *“the lampstand”* in the Orthodox use of candles; the continuation of *“the table, and the showbread,”* (correctly translated Bread of

the Presence”) continued in the Orthodox practice of reserving the Holy Gifts; the worship space “...*which is called the sanctuary,*” which is still called “the sanctuary” in the Orthodox Church, where the faithful gather as part of “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” to offer “a mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise”; and continue the copious use of “*the golden censer*” in nearly all of our services.

Hebrews 9 adds the central feature of the Holy of Holies – the Ark of the Covenant:

“... and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.”

In the book of Exodus, God gave Moses specific instructions on the construction of the Ark of the Covenant:

“And they shall make an ark of acacia wood; two and a half cubits shall be its length, a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height. And you shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and out you shall overlay it, and shall make on it a molding of gold all around. You shall cast four rings of gold for it, and put them in its four corners; two rings shall be on one side, and two rings on the other side. And you shall make poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. You shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, that the ark may be carried by them. The poles shall be in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. And you shall put into the ark the Testimony which I will give you.

“You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two and a half cubits shall be its length and a cubit and a half its width. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim at the two ends of it of one piece with the mercy seat. And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel” (Exodus 25:10-22).

“...and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.”



The Ark of the Covenant (also called the Ark of the Testimony) had two uses. First, it was God’s earthly throne, from which He would speak to Moses and His successors.

“You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel.”

Second, the Ark was an earthly replica of God’s heavenly throne. This is especially clear in the inclusion of the Cherubim in its design. Cherubim. The Cherubim are among the highest orders of angels. Along with another order – the Seraphim – they form God’s angelic “honor guard” around God’s heavenly throne.

The Prophet Ezekiel was granted a vision of the heavenly Temple, and described the Cherubim there:

“Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the temple when the man went in, and the cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub, and paused over the threshold of the temple; and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the LORD’s glory. And the sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard even in the outer court, like the voice of Almighty God when He speaks... Each one had four faces: the first face was the face of a cherub, the second face the face of a man, the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle. And the cherubim were lifted up.” (Ezekiel 10:3-14, 15).



God commanded that images (icons!) of the Cherubim be placed on each end of the Ark facing the center, the mercy seat, where God sat. This design of the Ark is an exact replica of God's throne in heaven, which is also attended by the Cherubim. God's heavenly throne being surrounded by the Cherubim is mentioned elsewhere in Scripture.

"Then Hezekiah prayed to the LORD, saying: "O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, the One who dwells between the cherubim, You are God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth" (Isaiah 37:15-16)

"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth!" (Psalm 80:81)

"The Lord reigns; Let the peoples tremble! He dwells between the cherubim; Let the earth be moved!" (Psalm 99:1)

The vision of God sitting on His throne between the Cherubim is enshrined in the Divine Liturgy. During the Trisagion Hymn, after the Priest proclaims "Dynamis!" he approaches the High Place and prays the following prayer quietly:

"Blessed are You upon the throne of the glory of Your Kingdom, enthroned upon the Cherubim always, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen."

One of the essential hymns in the Liturgy is the Cherubic Hymn:

"Let us who mystically represent the Cherubim, and sing to the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity now lay aside every earthly care."

Note that this hymn states that we, mere mortal Christians, are called to be icons of this exalted rank of angels who attend the throne of God Himself.

Another function of the Ark of the Covenant is it was a depository of the most important relics of ancient Judaism. Hebrews 9 lists them:

"... in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant."

All three of these relics mentioned by Hebrews are recorded in Scripture. One was the jar of manna:



Manna was the supernatural food God provided to the Israelites while they were wandering in the desert.



“And the children of Israel said to them, ‘Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not. And it shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily.

And the house of Israel called its name Manna. And it was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.”

Jewish sources state that the Israelites ground up the manna and made bread from it. This was the beginning of matzo.



Coriander seed



White Coriander Seed



Bread from Coriander

And Moses said to Aaron, “Take a pot and put an omer of manna in it, and lay it up before the LORD, to be kept for your generations.” As the LORD commanded Moses, so Aaron laid it up before the Testimony, to be kept” (Exodus 16:1-5, 31-34)

The jar of manna was placed in the Ark of the Covenant. Unlike the other manna, which spoiled within a day, this manna was preserved from decay. God had it placed there to forever remind the Hebrew people that this supernatural food sustained them through 40 years of hardship in the desert.

The connections between the Hebrew manna and Holy Communion is obvious. Both appeared ordinary; manna looked like coriander seed and tasted like wafers of honey. Holy Communion looks and tastes like ordinary leavened bread and wine. But both are supernatural; manna was sent down from God; Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of the incarnate God. Both were/are a constant source of regular sustenance for God’s people in a harsh environment, without which they would perish.

Christ made certain the connection between manna sent to Israel and His Body given to the Church.



In John chapter 6, Christ told His disciples and his Jewish opponents:

“Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ” Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”

Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. (John 6:31-34, 48-51, 54-55).

In the book of Revelation Christ said,

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat” (Revelation 2:17).

The Church has always recognized the manna-like supernatural nature and saving properties of the Holy Mysteries, just as Christ taught.

In the Liturgy of Preparation, before the Divine Liturgy, where the Priest prepares the bread and wine, he prays,

“O God, our God, You sent the heavenly Bread, to nourish the whole world, our Lord and God Jesus Christ, as Redeemer and Benefactor, blessing and sanctifying us. Will You now bless this oblation, and accept it at Your altar above the heavens.”

In addition to the jar of manna, God also commanded that the tablets of the Ten Commandments be placed in the Ark of the Covenant:

“Put in the ark the tablets of the covenant law, which I will give you” (Exodus 25:16)



God's purpose of requiring that the Ten Commandments is obvious. These were the written foundation of all that God required of His people. He expected the people to keep the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Old Testament law near to them at all times.

"So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, saying: "At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess" (Deuteronomy 31:9-13).

The New Testament reaffirms the importance of the Word of God. Christ said,

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

The Apostle Paul wrote,

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

"For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

"Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began, but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith — to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen" (Romans 16:25-27).

The Orthodox Church has always treasured the written Word of God. It was the Orthodox Church that compiled, examined, and canonized the Bible in the late 4th century. The Scriptures are read at all Orthodox services. The Church appoints psalms, epistles and Gospels to be read each day of the year. As the tablets of the Ten Commandments were held as treasures in the Ark of the Covenant, the Old and New Testaments are treasured by the Orthodox Church.

The third and final item God commanded to be placed into the Ark was the rod of Aaron.



To understand the significance of the rod of Aaron being placed in the Ark of the Covenant, it is important to understand the story behind it.

Numbers chapter 16 records a revolt by the Israelites against Moses, and especially Aaron, as the rightful authorities over Israel.

“Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men; and they rose up before Moses with some of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, representatives of the congregation, men of renown. They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, “You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?” (Numbers 16:1-3).

God had already appointed Aaron and Moses as the leaders of Israel. Korah and his allies rebelled against God’s appointed leaders, claiming that they all had just as much right to lead Israel as Moses and Aaron. They wanted to make Israel congregational. This could be described as the first Protestant Reformation in history.

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the children of Israel, and get from them a rod from each father’s house, all their leaders according to their fathers’ houses—twelve rods. Write each man’s name on his rod. And you shall write Aaron’s name on the rod of Levi. Then you shall place them in the tabernacle of meeting before the Testimony, where I meet with you. And it shall be that the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom; thus I will rid Myself of the complaints of the children of Israel, which they make against you.”

Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds” (Numbers 17:1-5, 8).

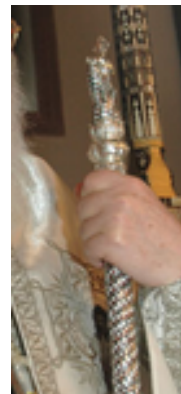
The rod with blossoms is a common feature in the Orthodox icon of Aaron.



And the LORD said to Moses, “Bring Aaron’s rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a sign against the rebels... (Numbers 17:8-9).

Aaron’s rod was a sign of God’s validation of the Levitical priesthood. This was especially important in a time of rebellion against Israel’s leaders.

The Orthodox Church continues the symbolism of Aaron’s rod as a symbol of divinely authorized leadership. All Bishops are given a staff at their consecration.



These staffs are reminders of their right to exercise authority over the Church just as Aaron’s rod was a reminder of his descendants authority over Israelite worship.

Summary:

The Ark of the Covenant contained:

- A jar of manna as a visible sign of God’s provision of heavenly food
- The tablets of the 10 Commandments for the Israelites to keep the Law
- Aaron’s rod as a symbol of legitimate leaders of Hebrew spiritual life



The Church maintains:

- The Body and Blood of Christ as God's heavenly food
- The Scriptures for Christians to keep the Law
- The apostolic succession of Bishops as the legitimate leaders of Church life

