

## THE JOURNEY FROM EGYPT TO THE PROMISED LAND, FROM THE BAPTISM TO BECOMING THE SON OF GOD AND FROM THE EARTHLY TO THE HEAVENLY KINGDOM FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

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**Abstract.** The article discusses two historical events taken from texts from the Holy Scripture – the Old and the New Testaments, and a spiritual view on human soul, as found in the Holy tradition of the Orthodox church: they support the thesis that, according to the method of allegorical interpretation, the three evidences point to three inner stages through which human soul passes in its transition to a holistic spiritual development: from the act of the Holy Baptism to the entry into the Kingdom of God.

**Keywords:** Holy Scripture; Promised Land; Son of God; Kingdom of God; human; Soul; symbolism of number 40

In this research, we have ascertained that there exists an interconnection between the following: a) the Old Testament's narrative about the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, their 40-year trials in the desert and the consequent entry into the Promised Land, as this can be found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy; b) the New Testament's narratives about the life of Jesus Christ's (for example, in Matt 3,16 – 4,17) (The Holy Bible: New International Version 1983, 898 – 901) and especially His Baptism in the Jordan river, the 40-day temptations in the wilderness and His consequent public preaching, as the Son of God, about the Kingdom of God; and c) the Orthodox church's view on the trials of the soul (Rose 2009, 66 – 67), as found in this church's tradition, where the soul ascends from its earthly existence to the heavenly realms by being trialed for 40 days, and only after such trials the soul can enter the Paradise, or join God.

In connection with the two historical events, and by considering the above mentioned traditional view of the Orthodox church on human soul, a thesis has

been proposed to prove that by using the method of allegorical interpretation, the events cannot be viewed as solely historical – they illustrate the journey of the soul from the material to the spiritual life, from the earthly to the heavenly realms, and from the human to the Divine.

In this way, we aim to resolve the following research problem: how biblical interpretation can contribute to the understanding of human soul's elevation from lower to higher stages of its existence and life. To achieve this, we have posed a number of objectives and tasks to complete: to determine the literary meaning of chosen biblical texts taken from the Old and the New Testaments; to adjust this meaning to an allegorical understanding of the texts; to compare the two meanings with an Orthodox view on the human soul and its ability to ascend to God (the soul's spiritual journey); to come to a better understanding of the three stages or levels of spiritual life of the soul as compared with the chosen biblical texts. This approach of research inevitably requires consideration of such conceptual-categorical apparatus as human soul and human life, Kingdom of God and its relation to people, Promised Land, Son of God, Holy Scripture, and life experiences.

The study tried to fulfill its goals by employing appropriate methodology of research, hence the use of the comparative method, the biblical-critical method, the method of interpretation and allegorical interpretation of texts and meanings. In addition, the employed historic-linguistic method of research gives a specific literary understanding of biblical texts and so adding the method of interpretation, allegory and comparison makes it possible to grasp biblical texts in a wider context and connect some of them with the Orthodox church's view on the human soul as able to ascend to Heavenly realms and to God.

Through the Holy Scripture's symbolic language, an inner process and its stages have been described by which the soul passes from one stage to another in its spiritual development: a) the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and their miraculous passing through the waters of the Red Sea, the Baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan river and the Holy Spirit's descending on Him point to the soul being chosen by God (accepting the faith and the Baptism) and to its decision to undertake a spiritual journey; b) the Israelites' 40-year journey through the desert and the trials they experience, Jesus Christ's 40-day trials in the wilderness while tempted by the devil, and the soul's 40-day trials preventing its ascension to God, whereby it is being trialed at a number of "toll-houses", represent the analogy with the second spiritual period of the soul's journey – the period of temptations, trials, falling and rising, repentance (catharsis), cleansing and sanctification, and the soul's preparation in acquiring virtues and in expressing and practicing love. This stage of the soul's development has been described in the New Testament through such expressions as "to put off, with regard to your former way of life, your old

self” and “to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4, 22 – 24) (The Holy Bible 1091); c) the symbolic meaning of the Israelites’ entering the Promised Land, of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and his public preaching about the Kingdom of God, and of the soul’s ascendance to the highest spiritual realms after it has left the physical body represents the abiding union of the soul with God.

We can also ascertain that the symbolic meaning of the above mentioned two historical events and the Orthodox church’s holy traditional view on the trials of the soul correspond to the three stages of internal acquisitions through which the soul passes in its spiritual journey – the beginning is seen even here on earth, and if a person is able to achieve them, from the state of a “carnal man” (the exodus from Egypt) he or she becomes “soulish” (the passing through the desert) and then “spiritual” (the entry into the Promised Land). These three spiritual stages *σαρκίνοις, ψυχικοί* and *πνευματικοί*ς (Nestle-Aland 2012, 522, 733, 522) in the development of Christians are evidenced in the New Testament (for example, 1Cor 2,14 – 3,4; 15,44 – 46; Jude 1,19), as well as in some biblical commentaries to the verses pointing to this view (Teofilakt 2015, 199 – 200; Barton, Muddiman 2001, 1113 – 1114, 1132). The transition between “carnal” to “soulish” and “spiritual” is realized only when both body and soul have been submitted to the spirit – this is the spirit through which the Spirit of Christ is realized and through which body and soul are constantly guided by Him, while the will of man becomes one will in God (Luke 22,42; comp. Gal 2,20), and man “unites with the Lord” and becomes “one in Him in spirit” (compare 1Cor 6,17; Gal 2,20), thus man becomes the home of the Holy Trinity (John 14, 20.23).

If we are to observe more details in the symbolic meaning of the above discussed events in the Holy Scripture, we can see that they suggest something more: Moses leads the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt, and the figurative allegoric meaning of this is seen as an exodus from the material and fleshly life onto a spiritual path, but we can also note that his name, מֹשֶׁה, Mosheh, means “pulled out of water” (saved from water) (Michael 1994, 11 – 16; Gertz 2008), “drawn out” of the river Nile (Exod 2,10), “born from” – this meaning represents the moment of “baptizing with water” and “being born by the Spirit” of every believing Christian when he or she has been called by God to abandon the “old” and “sinful” life while deciding to take the path to spiritual elevation, rebirth and renewal. The allegorical meaning of the event of Moses’ drawing out of the waters of the river Nile can be supplemented with the Israelites’ passing through the Red Sea as its waters draw back and let people pass, after which everyone enters the desert on their journey to the Promised Land. In his observations on Ps 37, Num 18,20, Josh 13,14.33 and Ps 16,15ff, Cornelis de Vos maintains that the Promised Land can be seen as a metaphor for “the

meeting of Yahweh with His people” and that Yahweh Himself represents this “Land” as given inheritance to human beings (de Vos 2010). A direct parallel to this event can be found in the New Testament, as well: the instance when Jesus Christ was baptized in the waters of the river Jordan before His going into the desert for 40 days to be tempted by the devil: “When He had been baptized, Jesus *came up immediately from the water*; and behold, *the heavens were opened to Him*, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him” (Matt 3, 16). Matthew the Evangelist narrates further that after His Baptism, Jesus has been led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, and there He “fasted forty days and forty nights” (Matt 4, 1 – 2) (The Holy Bible 899). The Gospel narrates further that after Jesus had overcome all temptations and seduction, the devil left Him, and angels came and ministered to Him (compare Matt 4, 11). This event is immediately followed by Jesus Christ’s public preaching, as the Son of God, and the first message He delivers to the people is *about the Kingdom of God* – that it has approached: “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’”; a few lines further it is said that Jesus was “proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom” (Matt 4, 23) (The Holy Bible 900). In support of the proposed thesis, more evidences can be brought from E. Traychev’s monograph “Interpretation of Old Testament texts within the New Testament”. The author ascertains that in addition to the literal understanding, there is also another type of interpretation that has increasingly become typological: “That is, the rabbis recognize the time of Moses as an ideal and as an example of the eschatological messianic era. All events of that time will take place once again in the era of the Messiah. According to the rabbinic understanding, the pre-images are communal, and they relate to the people of Israel. The (Old Testament) patriarchs’ life events foreshadow the conditions (of life) in the history of the Israelites in later times” (Traychev 2012, 43). Traychev provides more data while claiming that in addition to the strict literal interpretation, rabbis also know of the four-type meaning of the Old Testament, and they (equally) use both the symbolic and the allegorical method of interpretation; an example could be Rabbi Akiva and his interpretation of the Biblical book “Song of Songs” to point to the relation between the Lord and Israel (Traychev 2012, 44; Smalley 1952, 1 – 36).

The teaching about the trials of the soul, that is preserved in the Orthodox church’s Holy tradition and that can be found, for example, in St Cyril of Alexandria’s “Homily on the departure of the soul”, as printed in the Augmented Psalter (Psalter, 16th century: 211; Lampe 1961, 77, 981, 1387), clearly suggests that they occur in the transitional period of the soul’s life after its departure from the earthly physical life (in body) and its ascension to the heavenly Kingdom. Through the trials, the soul is detained in its desire to ascend to the

Kingdom and is prevented from freely going there: “When the soul departs from the body, as asserted here, we will face the presence of the heavenly hosts, on one side, and the powers of darkness and the airy chiefs of torturers, on the other side: they will be exposing our deeds. At the sight of these powers, the soul will tremble and in confusion and terror will be seeking protection in the face of the angels of God. Although the soul may be admitted by the angelic hosts, and under their protection it may proceed to higher levels of ascension, it will anyway face various trials that will put barriers to its journey to the heavenly Kingdom and will prevent it from rising further. At each of the trials, the soul will need to report the sins it has committed...” (Psalter, 16th century: 211).

The thesis of this research piece, confirming that on its spiritual journey – that of becoming “carnal”, then “soulish” and finally “spiritual” – the soul experiences three stages of spiritual development (as this was evidenced by texts from the New Testament and as the three stages were found analogous to the above mentioned biblical events), can also be confirmed by the Russian spiritual elder Sophrony (1896 – 1993) who grew spiritually at the Holy Mount Athos, Greece.

Based on personal observations, he distinguished between three different stages or levels of spiritual life which he compared with one of the above mentioned biblical events: the first level, in his view, occurs when the Spirit of God enlightens a person – at this stage, the person establishes a covenant with God; the second level starts at the moment when God withdraws His grace from the person – this lengthy and difficult level is marked by enduring fight between carnal and spiritual inclinations whereby the person would fall and rise again; it is only when the believer conquers pride through humbleness and incessant prayers and when he or she ultimately accepts the will of God and submits to it that he or she enters the third level of spiritual life – at this stage the believer acquires God’s grace as a constant and inalienable characteristic of his or her soul (Zakharias 2009, 66).

Elder Sophrony maintains that “in the life of God’s people, the Israel, we can see a pre-image of these consecutive stages of spiritual life. The first time God turns to the Israelites – this is His grace by the help of which they were able to pass through the Red Sea. Then for 40 years Israel is trialed in the desert – this is when God has withdrawn His grace from them. And the third stage is marked by God’s grace poured again onto the people of Israel – this is when they finally inherit the riches of the Promised Land” (Zakharias 2009, 66 – 67). The elder named this model “the three periods of spiritual life”, and he pointed out that “spiritual”, “complete” or “perfect” is the one who has managed to go through all three stages. In the last level, the believer acquires the grace of salvation and it is only at this level that he or she is able to help others in their journey on the

path of spiritual perfection through the three stage. Such a believer has already acquired spiritual vision and, as apostle Paul wrote, he or she is led by the Spirit of God and so no one can judge such a person (1Cor 2,10–16). Such a believer is inspired by the Spirit of God Himself, and so he or she is able to judge all that is spiritual. Becoming a spiritual and perfect person starts with the first stage, and Christians always hope that they will reach the last level of spiritual life – the period of peace and spiritual steadfastness and constant abiding in the grace of God (Zakharias 2009, 67).

Elder Sophrony speaks of the third stage as the state of theosis, or deification: “It is at that stage that the Lord’s commandments become the only law of our existence. In other words, if we naturally live in accordance with Christ’s commandments, we have acquired a ‘new birth from above’” (Zakharias 2009, 82). The lawful fight at the second level of spiritual life is crowned by the enduring grace received at the third level – believers get to this level when they manage to assure God that they truly belong to Him, and they are to hear His voice telling them, “You are my son; today I have begotten you” (Ps 2, 7; Hebr 1, 5) (The Holy Bible: 508; 1117). Elder Sophrony confirms that these words, initially spoken to Jesus Christ in a literal and unique way, apply to every God’s child who has been revived by the grace of Christ. It is at this stage that a believer receives the grace of sonship and is recognized as His true child. Such a person is characterized by love, inner steadfastness and complete peace – all of these being the result of freedom from passions. It is about this third stage of spiritual life of the soul that apostle Paul says: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8, 35 – 39) (The Holy Bible: 1054) (Zakharias 2009, 81 – 82).

In addition to the above mentioned historical events and the view on spiritual journeys of the soul after it has left the body, we can note that in the Holy Scripture and in the life of the Church we can see other similar events and opinions in connection with the symbolic meaning of number 40, as presented in this research, which once again confirms the validity of the thesis we have developed: for example, the instance when Moses departs from the people of Israel and gets onto Mount Sinai where he stays for 40 days before he has “met” God Who gave him His revelation – God’s commandments and prescriptions; Great Lent’s fasting period, that lasts for 40 days, starts with the ritual of accepting and offering forgiveness and finishes with the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, which is another instance of a mystical union of the believers with the Lord. These two examples indicate that the symbolic meaning of number 40 points to the period of a transition from the earthly to the heavenly realms and from what is human to what is Divine.



## **Conclusion**

Facts and events of the Holy Scripture of the Old and the New Testament are usually dealt with by the use of the historic-linguistic method of research, which means that they are understood mostly as events that actually happened in history in a specific period of time and at a specific place and that tell us about the life and deeds of different people – Jesus Christ, the apostles and their disciples. The allegorical method of interpretation can be used when discussing facts and events in the Old and the New Testament, but through this method it is mostly experiences that are dealt with, such as spiritual journey, life experiences, processes and occurrences through which the soul proceeds in its ascent to God, in its walk on the path to God and its desire to enter His Kingdom and become “one with God” – these have been confirmed in this research through the various connections, analogies and comparisons between two historical events in the Old and the New Testament and one spiritual view, that exists in the Holy tradition of the Orthodox church, and the spiritual stages through which the soul needs to pass in the process of acquiring and developing a holistic spiritual life.

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