



## *Symbols of Saint Mary In the Old Testament*

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### ***Why use symbols?***

The Old Testament is filled with the stories of people and events that made up the history of God's chosen people, Israel. But we may often wonder, "What do all these stories mean?" We are also told that in Christ, the whole Bible holds together. How can we see our Lord Jesus Christ in the people, events, and prophecies of the Old Testament?

While the stories of the Old Testament are real, historical events, the Church often points to the significance of these events and interprets them as symbols or *types* of something revealed in the New Testament. Typology is a method of biblical interpretation whereby certain persons or events are seen as signs or a foreshadowing of either heavenly realities or future events.<sup>1</sup> Our Lord used this method of interpretation when He spoke of Jonah in the belly of the whale as a sign of His own three-day burial (Matthew 12:39-40).

Although the actual text of the Bible was written by many men, we must not forget that they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the true author of the *whole* Bible is God Himself. Throughout Israel's entire history, God was preparing the world for the coming of His Son, Who would bring salvation. When the Son finally appeared in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4), the eternal significance of the history of Israel came to light. The Church interprets *all* of the Holy Scripture in the light of Christ and typology is the primary method used.<sup>2</sup>

In studying the Old Testament, we can find many types of the Holy Mother of God, Saint Mary.<sup>3</sup> These types are also mentioned in the *Theotokias*<sup>4</sup> of the Coptic Midnight Praise, as well as other hymns

chanted in the Divine Liturgy. Let us now study some of these types.

### ***The Ark of Noah (Genesis 6-9)***

In his first epistle, Saint Peter writes that by Noah, "...eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism" (1 Peter 3:20-21). Saint Peter makes the connection between the event of Noah's Ark, and the salvation in Christ through baptism. Noah, then, is a type of Christ, while the ark itself symbolizes Saint Mary. Just as the ark received Noah and became a means of saving the world, Saint Mary received God the Word and gave Him the human body by which He died for our salvation.

### ***The Ladder of Jacob (Genesis 28:10-17)***

When Jacob fled from his brother Esau, he saw a vision of a ladder that was set upon the earth with its top reaching to heaven. The Lord stood above this ladder and the angels of God ascended and descended on it. The Lord stood above this ladder expressing His intent to descend on it. It is through His incarnation that the Lord descended from heaven and manifested Himself to us.

The ascending and descending of angels point to their ministering to Saint Mary. Archangel Gabriel announced the birth of our Savior to Saint Mary (Luke 1:26-39). An angel also appeared to Saint Joseph telling him not to be afraid, but to keep Saint Mary at his house (Matthew 1:18-25). The angels also led the Holy Family as they fled from Herod (Matthew 2).

Jacob's ladder, therefore, is a type of Saint Mary, who tied heaven and earth together through the body of the Lord which was taken from her. She also intercedes on

our behalf, carrying our prayers to our Lord in heaven.

### ***The Burning Bush (Exodus 3)***

While tending to the flock of his father in law, Moses saw a burning bush. Although it was burning with fire, the bush was not consumed. The burning bush represents Saint Mary who carried the fire of the Lord's divinity without her womb being consumed. After she gave birth to the Lord, Saint Mary's virginity also remained sealed; that is, it was not consumed.

### ***The Tabernacle***

In the Book of Exodus, we read of the building of the Tabernacle. God spoke to Moses saying, "*I will consecrate the tabernacle of meeting and the altar...I will dwell among the children of Israel and be their God*" (Exodus 29:44-45). The Tabernacle is likened to Saint Mary, for the Lord dwelt in her.

### ***The Pot of Manna (Exodus 16)***

After their escape from Egypt, the children of Israel ate manna in the wilderness for forty years. God spoke to Moses saying, "*Behold I will rain bread from heaven for you...Take a pot and put an omer of manna in it, and lay it up before the LORD, to be kept for your generations*" (Exodus 16:4,33). This pot was then kept in the Ark of the Covenant along with the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written, as well as the rod of Aaron.

Our Lord Jesus Christ also spoke to the Jews saying, "*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*" (John 6:48-51). If the manna is a type of Christ, Who is the bread of life coming down from even, then the pot made of pure gold, which carried the manna, is a type of the pure Saint Mary, who carried the Lord in her womb.

### ***The Rod of Aaron (Numbers 17:1-8)***

In Numbers 16, we read of Korah who rebelled against God, Moses, and Aaron and claimed for themselves the priesthood. The Lord wished to reveal to the people of Israel to which tribe the priesthood rightly belonged. Each tribe presented a rod and placed it in the tabernacle of meeting. Aaron's name was placed on the rod of the tribe of Levi. The rod of Aaron sprouted and put forth buds, producing blossoms and yielding ripe almonds, as a sign that God had chosen the tribe of Levi.

The barren rod which blossomed without planting or watering is a symbol of Saint Mary, who, being a virgin, brought forth the Fruit of Life. It is also a symbol of the human soul; although weak in itself, through God's grace can bring forth the fruit of the Spirit.

### ***The Golden Censer***

The golden censer, used in Church worship, is also a type of Saint Mary. The live coal in the censer, according to Saint Cyril the Great, points to the unity of the divinity and humanity of Christ. Just as the censer carries the fiery coal, so also the Lord dwelt in the womb of the Virgin. The aroma of incense coming from the censer is likened

to the sweet-smelling sacrifice of our Savior. As the church chants in the Hymn of the Censer, "The golden censer is the Virgin. Her aroma is our Savior."

### ***The Gate of Ezekiel***

Ezekiel the prophet said, "*Then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary which faces toward the east, but it was shut. And the Lord said to me, 'This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the Lord God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut*" (Ezekiel 44:1-2). This gate, which Ezekiel saw, is a type of Saint Mary. She is the gate through which the Lord entered. After she gave birth to Him, the gate remained shut; that is, she remained a virgin and no other man entered into her womb.

### ***Prayer:***

*We ask You, O Lord, to open our eyes and our hearts to the types found in the Holy Bible. We know that You hold all in all. As You prepared the world to receive You, now also purify our hearts to receive You always. We ask this through the intercessions of Your holy and pure mother, Saint Mary. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Carlton, Clark. *The Faith: Understanding Orthodox Christianity*. Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 1997 (99-101).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See also *Symbols of St. Mary in the Old Testament* edited by Fr. Matthias F. Wahba (1996).

<sup>4</sup> A *theotokia* is a glorification chant for Saint Mary, the *Theotokos* (Birth-giver of God).