

THE CROSS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (A LOOK THROUGH THE PAROIMIAS FOR ELEVATION OF THE VENERABLE AND LIFE-GIVING CROSS OF THE LORD)

Abstract

The paper examines the profound connection between the Old Testament prefigurations and the Feast of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross, underscoring the profound theological and liturgical significance of the Cross in the Christian tradition. Through the typologies of the tree at Marah, the uplifted hands of Moses, the crossed hands of Jacob, and the Tree of Life, the Church underscores the continuity of salvation history, showing the Cross as both a fulfillment of Old Testament imagery and a symbol of redemption. Liturgical texts and hymnography enrich this understanding, presenting the Cross not only as an instrument of Christ's Passion but also as a source of life, grace, and eternal salvation. The references to cypress, pine, and cedar further root the veneration of the Cross in Scripture and tradition, drawing connections between the material creation and its sanctification through Christ. Ultimately, the Feast serves as a call to worship and contemplation, urging the faithful to recognize the Cross as the ultimate expression of God's love and a beacon of hope for humanity, uniting past revelations with the present life of the Church and the promise of eternal life.



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Introduction

The Feast of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord “urges all of creation to praise the immaculate Passion of the One Who was lifted up

thereon” (*stichera at “Lord, I Call”, tone 2*). At the beginning of each church year, the Church brings out the Cross of Christ for veneration, mirroring the worship of the Holy Cross that took place in the 4th century following its discovery by St. Helena, Equal-to-the-Apostles (see more about the establishment of the feast and the formation of the service can be found in: Мирковић 1961, 61-68; Архимандрит Авксентий 2012, 315). Since ancient times, the Cross of Christ has been proclaimed and presented through images and prefigurations. As St. Gregory Palamas explains, if it were not for the power of the Cross, humanity would never have had the opportunity to be reconciled with God (Свт. Григорий Палама 1993, 105).

At the vespers of the feast, three paroimias are read, and the entire service for the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord is rich in Old Testament examples. “Christ’s Cross was among our forefathers before it came into being, because its mystery was working in them,” says St. Gregory Palamas in his homily (Свт. Григорий Палама 1993, 105).

Moses – water at Marah and the battle with Amalek

The first reading^[1] is from Ex 15:22–27; 16:1. It recounts the Israelites’ journey through the desert on their way from Egypt to Sinai. Under Moses’ leadership, the people arrive at Marah, where they find the water to be bitter. Following God’s command, Moses throws a tree into the water, making it sweet and drinkable. The people then continue their journey and reach the abundant springs of water at the oasis of Elim.

Suppose we focus on the Old Testament imagery used in the worship for the feast. In that case, we find the tree as a foreshadowing of the Cross, the crossed hands of Moses during the battle with Amalek, the crossed hands of Jacob in the blessing of his sons, and the antithesis of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree (the Cross). Within this typological framework, the first paroimia is also placed, recounting a miracle involving a tree and the transformation of evil (bitter water) into good (sweet water):

Not suffering the deadly bitterness of the tree to continue, O Lord, You have utterly blotted it out through the Cross. Wherefore, wood also once destroyed the bitterness of the waters of Marah, prefiguring the working of the Cross, which all the powers of Heaven magnify (*Ode Nine, Canon of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

The turning of the bitter waters at Marah is also interpreted as a foreshadowing of the conversion of the pagans to the piety of the Cross^[2].

In Chapter 86 of *The Dialogue with Trypho*, St. Justin Martyr interprets the staff of Moses, with which he parted the sea, the tree thrown into the waters at Marah, the staff of Jacob, and the tree that the prophet Elisha cast into the Jordan River as prefigurations of Christ and His Cross (Св. Иустин Философ и мученик 1995, 274-276.)^[3]. In St. Justin Martyr's exegesis, these prefigurations can be found, which later appear repeatedly in the writings of the Church Fathers, as well as in hymnography. One such image is the uplifted hands of Moses during the battle with Amalek (Св. Иустин Философ и мученик 1995, 282; see also Свт. Григорій Палама 1993, 105-120), which is also the most frequently referenced image of the Cross in the worship for the Feast of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord.

The battle with the Amalekites takes place after the miracle of the water at Marah and the stay at the oasis of Elim, in Rephidim, on the way to Sinai. Before the battle, Moses and Aaron climbed a nearby mountain:

And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun (Ex 17:11-12, NKJV).

The prefiguration is clearly explained several times in the hymnography:

Moses once prefigured you, stretching his hands out toward Heaven, and prevailing mightily over tyrant Amalek... (*stichera at "Lord, I Call"*);

Prefiguring the power of Your precious Cross, O Christ, Moses turned back the adversary Amalek in the wilderness of Sinai; for when he stretched out his hands, forming the figure of the Cross, the people prevailed... (*Glory, Fourth Tone, by Anatolius*);

Your precious Cross, which Moses prefigured in himself of old, defeated Amalek and put him to flight (*Glory, Tone Four, by John the Monk*);

Of old did Moses foreshow in himself a type of the spotless Passion, when he stood between two sacred men of God; for he figured forth the Cross with his hands outstretched, and raised up trophies in the fight, destroying the dominion of the pestilent Amalek. Hence, let us praise in song Christ our God; for He truly is glorified (*Ode One, Canon of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

Jacob and Joseph's sons

A similar image used in the hymnography for the feast is Jacob's hands placed crosswise on the heads of Joseph's sons. During the famine in Canaan, Jacob and his sons migrated to Egypt, where, on his deathbed, Jacob gathered his twelve sons, who would become the progenitors of the twelve tribes. He foretold their future (Gn 49:1-33). In *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, St. John of Damascus writes: "Jacob, when he worshipped the top of Joseph's staff (Gn 47:31, LXX), was the first to image the Cross, and when he blessed his sons with crossed hands, he made most clearly the sign of the Cross." (Св. Йоан Дамаскин 2015, 135)

The prefiguration of Jacob's crossed hands is referenced several times during the feast:

Prefiguring Your Cross, O Christ, the Patriarch Jacob, when he gave the blessing to his descendants, laid his hands crosswise upon their heads... (verse of the litia),

The crossing of the Patriarch Jacob's hands, at the blessing of his children, revealed beforehand the mighty symbol of Your Cross... (*verse of the litia by Cyprian Studite*),

Bowed down with age and spent with sickness, Jacob rose upright when he crossed his hands, showing the power of the life-bearing Cross. For God, Who was nailed upon it in the flesh, has written anew the oldness of the letter of the shadowy Law, and has driven away the soul-destroying disease of error

is sung in the sixth ode of the canon of the feast.

Other Old Testament Prefiguration

St. John of Damascus also identifies other Old Testament prefigurations of the Cross:

The tree of life which was planted by God in Paradise pre-figured this precious Cross. For since death was by a tree, it was fitting that a tree should bestow life and resurrection. Jacob, when He worshipped the top of Joseph's staff, was the first to image the Cross, and when he blessed his sons with crossed hands he made most clearly the sign of the cross. Likewise also did Moses' rod, when it smote the sea in the figure of the cross and saved Israel, while it overwhelmed Pharaoh (cf. Ex 14:16) in the depths; likewise also the hands stretched out crosswise and routing Amalek (cf. Ex 17:11); and the bitter water made sweet by a tree (cf. Ex 15:25), and the rock rent and pouring forth streams of water

(cf. Ex 17:6), and the rod that meant for Aaron the dignity of the high priesthood (cf. Nm 17:8-9): and the serpent lifted in triumph on a tree as though it were dead (cf. Nm 21:9), the tree bringing salvation to those who in faith saw their enemy dead, just as Christ was nailed to the tree in the flesh of sin which yet knew no sin. The mighty Moses cried, You will see your life hanging on the tree before your eyes, and Isaiah likewise, I have spread out my hands all the day unto a faithless and rebellious people (Is 65:2). (Св. Йоан Дамаскин 2015, 135)

Many of these prefigurations are incorporated into the hymnography for the feast. The Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 14:16) and the miracles accompanying the Israelites' journey through the desert are frequently mentioned:

A Cross did Moses inscribe, when with an upright stroke of his rod he divided the Red Sea for Israel, who went on foot; then he turned and smote the sea, once again uniting it o'er Pharaoh's chariots, with transverse stroke portraying the invincible weapon (*first ode, canon of the Elevation of the Venerable and Live-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

Another prominent prefiguration is the rod with the bronze serpent erected by Moses. After the Israelites repented from their grumbling, Moses made a bronze serpent and placed it on a pole: "and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived" (Nm 21:9). The Lord Jesus Christ Himself related this prefiguration to His Crucifixion: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should [a]not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:14-15). The Church collects these Old Testament lessons in its worship:

Once Moses placed on a pole that which cured the plague of the serpents' deadly poisoned bite and rescued from the death it brought; and on wood that formed a cross, crosswise did he bind the serpent creeping on the earth, by this sign overcoming the affliction and suffering (*second ode, canon of Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

St. Andrew of Crete, in his sermons on the Elevation of the Cross, echoes St. John of Damascus, revealing further prefigurations. Among those that we repeatedly meet in other patristic writings and in the liturgy for the feast, he also indicates Isaac,

who carries the wood for the burnt offering (Gn 22), the staff of Moses, which turns into a snake (Ex 4:2-5; 7:10-12), the pillar of fire that led the Israelites during the Exodus (Ex 13:21-22) (Свт. Андрей, архієп. Критскій 1897, 1297-1301). In another of his writings, dedicated to the feast, St. Andrew of Crete again lists numerous examples of the Cross, among which he indicates the battle of Joshua at Gibeon and “thus showing the elevation of the Cross and foreshadowing its ascension to the Sun of Glory” (Свт. Андрей, архієп. Критскій 1897, 1297-1301). At the battle in the Gibeon Valley, at the prayer of Joshua, the sun stood still until Israel defeated its enemies:

So the sun stood still, And the moon stopped, Till the people had revenge Upon their enemies. Is this not written in the Book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day. And there has been no day like that, before it or after it, that the Lord heeded the voice of a man; for the Lord fought for Israel (Jos 10:13-14, NKJV).

The prefigure (type) is clearly found in the hymnography:

Jesus the son unfair sketched out beforetime the type and pattern of Your Cross in mystic figure, when his hands were extended like a cross, my Saviour. The sun stood still in the heaven, till he destroyed the enemies that withstood You, the Mighty God...(*glory, tone 8*).

The second paroimia is from Prov. 3:11-18. The reading equates Wisdom with the tree of life, which is the Cross (Archimandrite Ephrem 2008, 44). Saint Justin the Martyr refers to the tree of life planted in paradise, stating:

Hear, then, how this Man, of whom the Scriptures declare that He will come again in glory after His crucifixion, was symbolized both by the tree of life, which was said to have been planted in paradise, and by those events which should happen to all the just. (Св. Иустин Философ и мученик 1995, 274-276).

Saint John of Damascus calls the Cross of Christ “the tree of eternal life” and “a precious and august tree,” (Св. Йоан Дамаскин 2015, 134) beginning his extensive exposition of the types of the Cross with the tree of life: “The tree of life which was planted by God in Paradise prefigured this precious Cross. For since death came by a

tree, it was fitting that life and resurrection should be bestowed by a tree.” (Св. Йоан Дамаскин 2015, 135)

In the worship of the Church, the connection to the first chapters of Genesis is clearly emphasized - particularly the commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gn 2:17) and the expulsion of Adam from Paradise: “And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Gn 3:22). Adam was cast out to prevent him from tasting the tree and living forever, but now, through the Tree of the Cross, he tastes eternal life. The tree once planted by God in Paradise (Gn 2:9) now becomes the tree of salvation. Through the tree of the Cross, the Lord cleanses the world from sin, raises up the outcasts, and redeems humanity “for the theft of the forbidden fruit” (*stichera at “Lord, I Call”*).

The typological interpretation of the tree of life as a type of the Cross of Christ is further strengthened by the testimony of the St. Apostle and Evangelist John: “ow in the place where He was crucified there was a garden” (Jn 19:41). The tree of life is in Eden, and the Tree (i.e., the Cross), which opens heaven, is also in a garden. This is echoed in Revelation: “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Rev 2:7). Because of a tree the first parents were expelled from paradise, now through the Tree the Savior opens paradise to the thief who is chained with Him.

This antithetical typology of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” and the Tree of the Cross continues in the Church’s hymnography^[4]. The Church calls us to worship the “blessed Tree” through which eternal righteousness comes: “For he that by a tree beguiled our forefather Adam is himself ensnared by the Cross,” and “because of the tree, redemption should come through the Passion of Him Who is passionless” (“*Lord, I Call, Glory, tone 2*”). At Matins, it is sung:

Once in Paradise, the tree stripped me of divine grace; by tasting it, the enemy killed me. But the Tree of the Cross, bearing for men the Garment of Life, rose above the earth, and the whole world was filled with all joy (*sessional hymn after the Polyeleos, Tone 8*).

The prefigurations of the Cross, interwoven in the tradition and liturgy of the Church for specific feasts, extend into worship and theology. For example, in his sermon on the Nativity of Christ, St. Clement of Ohrid relates both the tree and God’s Wisdom to Christ:

Having banished the voice that heralded death, the Archangel revealed to her that her Son was God, the eternal King, who wrought salvation in the midst of the earth, as it was in Paradise by the tree of life. ‘Through the tree,’ he said, ‘is life.’ God’s Wisdom is the Son of Mary, and there is sweet fruit for all who cling to Him, as in the Lord. (Св. КЛИМЕНТ Охридски 1970, 170)

The third paroimia (Is 60:11-16) is from the final part of the book of the Holy Prophet Isaiah and heralds the glorious messianic era, when Jerusalem will be exalted due to the events that occurred there. Nations will stream to the holy city, and its gates will remain perpetually open. This prophecy is also read on Great Saturday, prefiguring the gathering of peoples to the city of the Resurrection and the ever-open doors of Christ’s Church.

The specific reason for including this pericope from Isaiah as the paroimia for the Exaltation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord lies in its reference to cypress, pine, and cedar, which glorify the footstool of God’s feet. The cross is likewise viewed as the footstool of God’s feet, as echoed in texts that reference Ps 98:5 (or Ps 99:5 in the NKJV): “Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His footstool – He is holy.” This verse serves as the prokeimenon for the Elevation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord. Similarly, Solomon’s temple was adorned with cypress, pine, and cedar, as mentioned in 2 Chronicles 2:8: “Also send me cedar, cypress, and alnum logs from Lebanon, for I know that your servants have skill to cut timber in Lebanon.”

According to the tradition, the cross of Christ (Archimandrite Ephrem 2008, 44) was made from cypress, pine, and cedar. This is reflected in hymns of the Church, such as: “The Church sings to You, Christ God, in pine, cedar, and cypress, as we worship You...” (*sessional hymn, tone 7 on 19th September*). During the Great Lent, particularly in the fourth week following the Sunday of the Holy Cross, hymnography often refers to cypress, pine, and cedar in connection with the cross of Christ. Examples include: “You were crucified on pine, cedar, and cypress, O Son of God...” (*sessional hymn, tone 4, friday of the fourth week of Great Lent*), and “As a cypress of charity, as a cedar of fragrant faith, as a pine of true love, let us worship the Lord’s Cross...” (*Ode 7, Canon on Wednesday of the fourth week of Great Lent*). Similarly, in the Resurrection canon, Tone 2, and throughout the Octoechos^[5], Christ is praised as the One Who raised His flesh upon cypress, pine, and cedar. In the canon for the Elevation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord, all trees are called to rejoice, as their nature has been sanctified through the cross. Ode 9 proclaims:

“Let all the trees of the forest rejoice, for their nature has been sanctified by Him Who planted them in the beginning, even Christ, Who was stretched out upon the Tree.” (*ode nine, canon of Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord*).

Conclusion

The Feast of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord stands as a bridge between the past, present, and future, linking the Old Testament prefigurations with the fulfillment in Christ and the ongoing work of salvation in the Church. Through its liturgical richness, it invites the faithful to a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Cross and its central role in Christian faith. Ultimately, the feast serves as a call to worship and contemplation, urging the faithful to recognize the Cross as the ultimate expression of God’s love and a beacon of hope for humanity, uniting past revelations with the present life of the Church and the promise of eternal life.

Notes

[1] This pericope is also read on the Feast of Theophany and is connected to Baptism and the Cross: during Theophany, mass baptisms were performed. For those about to begin a new life in Christ, the Church reveals the power of the Cross (the “Tree”), which will transform their lives. During the sacrament of Baptism, the priest immerses the cross into the sanctified water, transforming it into the water of a new and personal exodus toward salvation.

[2] “In ancient times, Moses transformed the bitter springs in the desert through the wood, foretelling the conversion of the Gentiles to the piety of the Cross” (First troparion, fourth ode, Canon of the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord).

[3] The typological interpretation in the liturgy is presented in the seventh ode of the Canon for Wednesday of the fourth week of Great Lent.

[4] The topic is also referred to the seventh ode of the Canon for the Elevation of the Venerable and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord.

[5] See Canon, tone 2 on Wednesday; Canon, tone 3 on Wednesday; seventh ode of the Canon for Friday, tone 3; sessional hymn on Wednesday, tone 7; fourth ode of the Canon for Friday, tone 8.

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