

SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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† Benedict Bistrițeanul, *Năvalnicii Împărăției: Personalități ale Vechiului Testament în căutarea lui Dumnezeu* (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2022), 172 p.

What is the relevance of the Old Testament today? What other useful insights can we find within it? Many of the laws it prescribes are considered outdated, and its moral teachings are often viewed as inferior to those found in the New Testament. The prophecies in the Old Testament have been fulfilled with the coming of Christ. Additionally, the interpretations provided by the Church Fathers have clarified much of its content. In the context of the Church of Christ, it seems that everything has either been fulfilled, abolished, or explained. So, what remains in the Old Testament that can be seen as more than just an introduction to the Gospel?

Unfortunately, this superficial perspective reflects the views of many believers, but not His Grace Benedict, whose book aims to “recalibrate” certain misconceptions, which is a welcome addition. Small, concise, and visually appealing in both form and content, the work of the new Bishop of Sălaj has the potential to become a cherished book that circulates from hand to hand, gradually opening the eyes of many readers. Several characteristics support this belief. First and foremost, its pleasant appearance is noteworthy. The cover, the subtle illustrations at the beginning of each chapter, and the thoughtful arrangement of the text are key elements that can capture a reader’s interest. Additionally, the book’s literary presentation is worth highlighting. As can be seen in other books^[1], His Grace Benedict possesses the ability to infuse his message with musicality, naturally blending both traditional and contemporary terms into his speech^[2], letter games^[3], and a special attention to various details^[4] are just some of the evidence of this. It is essential to highlight the most important aspect of his work: it provides a straightforward yet profoundly insightful way to appreciate the true beauty of certain characters, events, or texts. This is particularly relevant for the writings of the Old Testament, which often feel distant from us.

The true value of the book lies not in its surface features, but in its content. This can be summarized using three key terms from the author's speech: "God," "medallion," and "itinerary." Each of these terms holds particular significance for this work, and we will illustrate their meanings in the following discussion. It is natural for religious literature to center around God, but His Grace Benedict's speech does so in a distinctive manner. This is evident from the content at the beginning of the book, which aims to illuminate various characters from the Old Testament. Each character is designated a separate chapter, with titles that encapsulate their main attributes. Overall, the content presents an extremely "theophoric" theme, as each character is described through the lens of their relationship with God. For example, Abraham is referred to as the "Receiver of God," Jacob as the "Combatant of God," Moses as the "Seer of God," and Joshua as the "Inquirer of God." The fifteen characters featured in the book are identified with titles typically used in church language, such as "patriarch," "prophet," or "king," along with a name that follows the model. This approach deepens the understanding of each character in relation to the divine, often offering a dual perspective on their experiences^[5]. It is important to highlight that throughout the content—and indeed in the book itself—God is at the center. Each character refers to Him in one way or another. This theme is emphasized by the book's subtitle, "Old Testament Personalities in Search of God," as well as its introduction, which is titled "Around God."

In the language of His Grace Benedict, each portrait of biblical personalities is referred to as a "medallion." This term has been carefully chosen to reflect essential characteristics of these portraits. A medallion is a small object that possesses an appealing appearance and inherent value. Similarly, His Grace captures the essence of each biblical figure in a way that embodies these three qualities. In approximately nine pages, he offers a theological, spiritual, and liturgical perspective that highlights what the Church regards as most valuable in each Old Testament character. Therefore, we believe that by using the concept of the "medallion," the author has effectively synthesized part of the treasure of Holy Tradition.

The concept of the "itinerary" provides an opportunity to engage with and embrace the richness of the Old Testament that this book explores. For each biblical figure, the book outlines their spiritual journey in relation to God. His Grace Benedict does not offer traditional biographies; instead, he describes these spiritual journeys as paradigms that readers can reflect upon for their own paths. The term "itinerary" suggests that these journeys lead somewhere meaningful, comprising various stages

with a clear destination: spending time with God. While this itinerary is well-defined, it can be challenging for both the biblical personalities and for us. That is why the righteous individuals highlighted in the book are referred to as “rushers,” meaning those who confront the “waves” of life’s challenges. However, they are not just any type of “assailants”; they are “assailants of the kingdom.” Their goal is the Kingdom of God, which allows us to draw closer to Him.

His Grace Benedict’s work is neither a study of biblical theology nor a treatise on Orthodox spirituality. Instead, it serves as a personal diary from someone who has wrestled with the biblical text and uncovered the profound insights hidden beneath its challenges. Thus, it can be seen as a journey for those who seek their own experience with God, following in the footsteps of those who have weathered similar storms.

Notes

[1] As well as *Brațele părintești* (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2021) or the three-volume series *Personalități duhovnicești contemporane* (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2016-2020).

[2] E.g.: “Job, the ‘adorned’ of God” – p. 119 / “he is asked to come out of his own [...] and set off for nowhere” – p. 22-3.

[3] E.g.: “God was *close* to him and *his Neighbor*” – p. 9.

[4] E.g.: “a vocabulary of military nuance, consisting of a few key terms, *nouns* or *verbs*” – p. 57.

[5] Only two characters are in this situation, namely Jacob, “God’s combatant”, and Joshua, “God’s spy”. Jacob was the one who fought *against* God, and *together* with him, Joshua was the one who sought God.