

The Sign of the Cross in the Old Testament (Theodore Rokas)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



In his first epistle to the Corinthians Saint Paul mentions that the “Jews seek a sign” (I Cor. 1, 22), that they wanted a supernatural sign, such as the resurrection of the dead, cure of the possessed, and so on that would allow them to believe in the teaching concerning the Cross. So they looked for some supernatural sign, ignoring and overlooking the signs and wonders that God had already shown them in the past, every time they were in danger. Of course, the sign they were seeking could hardly have been anything other than that of the Cross, which, on the one hand, was prefigured throughout the Old Testament and, on the other, was permanently present and saved the people of Christ from destruction and annihilation.



The Cross is prefigured many times in the Old Testament, but we shall quote here six cases which are particularly apposite.

Perhaps the most important example of the sign of the Cross in the history of the Jewish people is that made by Moses with his staff when he parted the waters of the Red Sea, at God's command, so that the Israelites, who were being pursued by the Egyptians, could cross and be saved, before Moses returned the waters to their original state. (*Ex. 14, 1-31*). Because of this event, at the feast of the Elevation of the Honourable Cross, the Orthodox Church declares: "With his rod, Moses inscribed the Cross directly on the Red Sea and parted it for Israel on foot (Irmos of the 1st ode of the canon at Mattins).

When the Israelites arrived at Refidim, Moses made the sign of the Cross twice. The first was when he smote the rock to allow water to flow from it and quench the thirst of the people, and the second when he raised his arms and his staff to the

heavens to strengthen the Israelites, who were making war against the Amalekites (*Ex. 17, 1-16*). According to Saint Gregory Palamas, (P. G. 133-6) it was the sign of the Cross that strengthened the Israelite warriors and encouraged them, while, according to Theodoritos Kyrou (P. G. 80, 260-1) it was not only the sign of the Cross which was prefigured, but also the crucified Lord.

Moses prefigured this holy sign one more time, when he led the people of Israel into the land of Edom. There they lost heart and their faith in God, with the result that God sent poisonous and deadly snakes to bite them, so that many of them died. When they had repented, the Lord ordered Moses to construct a snake of copper and raise it up on a pole so that all those who had been bitten and then looked upon it would immediately be healed *Num. 21, 4-9*). Even though the Biblical text does not give a detailed description of the manner in which the elevation of the copper snake was performed, Saint Gregory gives a very clear picture, relating that Moses raised the serpent in a horizontal position against a vertical pole, so that it formed the arms of a cross (P. G. 133-6). Besides, in the narrative in Saint John's Gospel, Christ Himself is presented as foretelling the manner of His death, which He equates with the elevation of the copper serpent in the desert: "As Moses raised the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be raised" (3, 14).

In the Old Testament, the sign of the Cross also saved the prophets Daniel and the three "children" [=young men] from extermination. Together with Daniel, the three young men, Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael [Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are simply the Chaldean names which were assigned to them, perhaps by the Chief Official, Ashpenaz] were active in Babylon at the time of the exile and captivity of the Jews there. When they were placed in the fiery furnace, they were saved, thanks to the miraculous intervention of God (*Dan. 3, 23*), just as Daniel himself was saved when he was thrown into the lion's den (*Dan. 16, 23*).

Of course, in these cases the Biblical text does not present an image of the survival of the three young men, but this is given by Saint Andrew of Crete, who states that they, and thereafter Daniel the prophet, were saved because they formed the shape of the cross with their arms, raising them to the heavens (P.G. 97, 1040-1). The hymnology of the Church preserves the same tradition: on the Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross we sing: "Having once been thrown into the lion's den the great prophet Daniel extended his arms in the form of a cross and was saved unharmed from being devoured by them" (Ode 8 of the canon at Mattins).

It is not only Christ's Cross which is prefigured in the Old Testament, but other events, too, such as the Nativity, the Passion and the Resurrection. But the Cross of

Christ is the means by which Christ vanquished the primeval enemy and was glorified. He defeated death and, through the Resurrection, brought people into a new condition of life, liberated from the bonds of death and decay.

Even though the cross was a symbol of death and damnation in the era before Christ, (because, according to the provisions of Deuteronomy, anyone dying upon the tree [pole] was considered to be cursed. 21, 23), once Christ had been crucified, it became the symbol of victory over death, of glory and majesty. The Cross lost the attributes of degradation, wretchedness, obloquy and humiliation, and became an expression of sanctity, benediction, honour, glory and magnificence.

But how did this radical change, this miracle, this transformation occur? Naturally, through the incarnation of the Son and Word of God, when “the Word became flesh” (*Jn.* 1, 14) and through His crucifixion by which He “died for us” (*Rom.* 5, 8), “and in the appearance of a man, humbled himself

by becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (*Phil.* 2, 8), ransoming “us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for our sakes” (*Gal.* 3, 13).

Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection opened the way to paradise and rescinded the fiery sword which barred the way to the tree of life (*Gen.* 3, 24). If we look at the hymnography of the feast of the Veneration of the Cross, we observe the praise lavished upon it. It is called: guardian of the gate of paradise, victory-sign of kings, boast of priests, support of the faithful, guardian of the world, glory and boast of the Church, the much-vaunted boast of Christians, particular teaching of the Apostles, diadem of the martyrs and priceless adornment of the prophets (*Vespers, Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross* [Third Sunday in Great Lent]).