

# *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies*

Vol. 6, No. 1 (2013)

---

## **The Prophetologion and the Book of Judges<sup>1</sup>**

Klaas Spronk, Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam

### **Introduction**

In 2009, a project was started at the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands on the production of a new catalogue of Byzantine biblical manuscripts, initiated by Stefan Royé as a follow up to his dissertation *The inner cohesion between the Bible and the Fathers in the Byzantine tradition: towards a codico-liturgical approach to the Byzantine biblical and patristic manuscripts* (2007). The relevance of this work is probably best illustrated by the remark of Detlef Fraenkel in his new edition of the *Verzeichnis der Griechischen Handschriften des Alten Testaments*, originally edited by Alfred Rahlfs. In his introduction he explains that the listed lectionaries containing parts of the text of the Septuagint (LXX) refer to the “fast unübersehbaren Bereich der liturgischen Literatur samt ihren Triodien, Pentekostarien, Menäen und dergleichen mehr, die Rahlfs zurecht ausgelassen hat. Hier sind die meisten Bestände nicht einmal hinreichend katalogisiert” (Fraenkel 2004: XII). In the project called the “Catalogue of Byzantine Manuscripts” (CBM), we take up this challenge, but do so from a different angle.

Rahlfs and his Septuaginta-Unternehmen are focused on the reconstruction of the Greek text of the OT and its history; thus they are interested only in the lectionaries as containers of parts of the biblical text. The rest is of no importance to them. As was also remarked by Miller (Miller 2010: 57f, n.3) this makes the list of lectionaria less useful. In the CBM project we take as our starting point the manuscripts themselves, that is, within their liturgical framework. The biblical texts are described as parts of an ongoing tradition of reading, celebration, and application. When it comes to the benefits for the study of the OT, one can refer in the first place to the text-critical issues regarding the LXX. Rahlfs rightly assumes that the Byzantine liturgical traditions, which have their roots in the very early history of the Christian church and in which great care was taken for the text of the holy liturgy, preserved interesting old variants of the Greek text of the OT.

In the second place, one can mention the benefits for the study of the history of biblical interpretation. Together with this may come the insight that we cannot simply remove the biblical text from the tradition that handed it down. Already at a very early stage the texts must have functioned in a liturgical context. A good illustration of this is the reading of the Torah by Ezra as recounted in Nehemiah 8 (Spronk 2013). According to that story, the holy text was not only read

---

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of the article was presented at the SBL conference in Chicago, November 19, 2012.

aloud to the community, but was also explained to the community by a number of Levites specially appointed to the task.

## The Manuscripts and Editions of the Prophetologion

Syssel Gudrun Engberg has conducted a significant amount of work on the Prophetologion. She wrote a number of articles (see works cited) and completed a monograph on the subject, which as of this writing awaits publication. The Prophetologion can be defined as a lectionary containing the OT texts arranged in the order in which they are read in one year in the Byzantine liturgy. According to Engberg, there are 174 copies of this book, relatively few compared to other Byzantine liturgical manuscripts dating from the ninth to the seventeenth century.

The name Prophetologion stems from the nineteenth century. It was probably first used by Antonin Kapustin, a librarian working in Jerusalem and Sinai. In the manuscripts themselves we usually find the term “readings” (*anagnoseis*, *anagnosmata*, or in the final printed edition of 1595/6: *anagnostikon*) and sometimes also *propheteiai* (Engberg 1988: 37). Not all of these texts are prophetic in a strict sense. Many of them are taken from the books of Genesis and Proverbs. The name must be seen, therefore, as pointing to their function within the liturgy: “They are read as prophetic or typologically significant of Christ, of events or persons associated with his life or of the Church” (Miller 2010: 60, n. 8).

The Prophetologion covers the entire liturgical year, although not every manuscript starts at the same moment of the year. Some begin with the lessons for Lent, other with Christmas. With regard to the OT reading, there is clearly an emphasis on the period of Lent. On every weekday there are readings from the OT constituting in large part continuous portions from the books of Genesis, Isaiah and Proverbs. After that the readings are from very different places in the OT. There are seventy-six readings, which cover less than fifteen percent of the complete OT (except the Psalms which is the most used OT book in the Byzantine tradition, but has its place in parts of the liturgy not covered by the Prophetologion). Some books are missing entirely: Ruth, Samuel, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Judith, Tobit, Maccabees, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Hosea, Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Haggai, and Lamentations.

A full critical text of the Prophetologion was published between 1931 and 1981, by Carsten Høeg, Günther Zuntz and Syssel Gudrun Engberg, in the series *Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae*. The musical element of this edition is that the so-called ekphonic notation giving the details of the musical recitation is rendered. Forty-two of the manuscripts are provided with this system of small signs above the letters of the Greek text. It turns out that the tradition of the texts in these lectionaries was very stable, already in the period of the oldest manuscripts of the Prophetologion. There is hardly any variation in the texts listed nor in the wording of the texts themselves. This indicates that we are dealing with a uniform, centralized tradition, which most probably had its roots in Constantinople.

According to Engberg (1987: 41) one of the reasons for the introduction of this lectionary was that the ecclesiastical center would have wanted to create more unity in the choice of OT texts and in the way they were recited in the churches of the Byzantine Empire. Another, more simple reason was of a more practical nature: it is much easier to have the text to be read directly at one's disposal than to look them up in the full text of the Bible. There are manuscripts of the Septuagint with marks indicating the pericopes to be read in the liturgy, pointing to this more cumbersome procedure. The production of the Prophetologion stopped in the beginning of the seventeenth century. From now on, all OT texts entered the textbooks of the Triodion, the Pentecostarion, and the Menaion. This may have to do with the better possibilities of the printing press. According to

Engberg (1987:44; 2005:17) it should be connected with a change in the performance of the OT readings. Whereas the NT became more prominent, the OT was degraded.

Some years ago, the commission of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece for the Access to Biblical Readings in Modern Greek asked for a new edition of the Prophetologion. It was promoted by archbishop Christodoulos († 2008), who wanted to have an edition that could be used in liturgical offices and on special occasions. It was published in 2008, by Ελληνική Βιβλική Εταιρία (Athens): *Προφητολόγιον: Τά Λειτουργικά Αναγνώσματα από την Παλαια Διαθήκη*, with a second printing in 2009. The edition has had wide circulation, but is not used yet in liturgy, as a long debate is still going on about the use of modern Greek in the offices. The text is based upon the edition of P. Bratsiotis (*Η Αγία Γραφή*), who received the blessing of the Holy Synod for his first edition, but not for his second edition, in which he said that he also compared his text with that of Ralphps. On the website with the English translation of the Prophetologion, Archimandrite Ephrem remarks: “The Orthodox Church has always used the Greek Bible of Alexandria as its text of the Old Testament and therefore the text on which the translation is based is that of the Greek Septuagint (LXX), as it is found in the Greek Menaion. This qualification is important, since the lectionary text often differs sharply from the critical editions of the LXX” (<http://www.anastasis.org.uk/prophetologion.htm>; last updated on 3 November 2008).

## The Choice of Texts

What were the criteria for the choice of biblical texts? Is there a relation with earlier, possibly also Jewish traditions? A big problem when searching for answers to these questions is the lack of material, which leaves room for much speculation fed by certain presuppositions or wishful thinking, for instance, in hoping to find an ongoing tradition reaching back to biblical times. Rahlfs states on this matter: “Die Grundzüge des Systems stammen allerdings, wenn ich recht sehe, nicht aus Konstantinopel, sondern, wiederum wie der von Konstantinopel aus im ganzen Reiche verbreitete Luciantext des Psalters und des N.T., aus Antiochia” (Rahlfs 1915: 165). Høeg and Zunz remark that the creators of the Prophetologion must have been “bound to retain a certain number of lessons familiar to the faithful” (Høeg & Zunz 1937: 222). We know very little about precisely what was read in the churches in the first centuries. We do know something about the Jewish lectionaries: about the yearly cycle of continuous reading of the Torah, combined with readings from the prophets, the haftarah. These cannot simply be linked, however, to the early Christian readings. For instance, when we look at the text of Judges there appears to be only a very small agreement. In the Prophetologion, the book of Judges appears three times: two times with verses from ch. 6 (first the verses 36-30, later the verses 2, 6, 11-15, 17-22, 24), the third time with verses from ch. 13 (2-8, 13-14, 17-18, 21). In the haftaroth we find the readings 4:23-5:31; 11:1-40, and 13:2-24. It should be noted that there are different systems of haftaroth. The same holds true for the older Byzantine lectionaries. We have to reckon with divergent local systems. So the only thing one can say about this is the general observation that the Christian church has taken over the principle of combined readings.

This principle of combined readings applies in this first place to the readings in the Divine Liturgy. The common theory about the reading of OT lessons during the Eucharist is that the OT reading was normal in the ancient Roman and Byzantine church. It would have disappeared in the fifth century or later, perhaps in the seventh or eighth century. The Prophetologion would have been developed after that elimination and could be seen as a reaction to it. According to Engberg, however, there was probably no OT lection in the Eucharist at all (Engberg 2006); thus the Prophetologion would not signal a transition in liturgical practices. In her opinion it should be linked

to the continuous reading practice, as is witnessed, for example, in Chrysostom. Engberg's views in this matter are disputed (Taft 2011). Engberg may have been led too much by a wish to find a solid place for the Prophetologion within the Byzantine tradition.

### The Book of Judges in Patristic literature and in the Prophetologion

In light of my work on a commentary on the book of Judges for the series Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, I am interested in the book's history of interpretation. More specifically I want to find out the reasons behind the selection of passages mentioned above. Looking at the broader context of patristic literature, it can be noted that the choice of passages from chs 6 and 13 is not representative of the way the book of Judges is read in older patristic exegetical and homiletical texts. There it appears to have a more prominent place. Tertullian (160-225) writes in his books against Marcion: "about the Judges, what should I say about each of them? Together that would fill numerous books" (*Adversus Marcionem*, III, 93-96). He then gives a summary of what we can learn from Gideon, Deborah, Jephthah, and Samson.

In Origen (185-253), the search engine for the Index of Biblical Quotations and Allusions in Early Christian Literature (<http://www.bibindex.mom.fr/>) lists no less than 237 references to the book of Judges. In his homilies on the first part of the book of Judges, Origen points to the psychic and pneumatic messages to be found there. The recurring theological theme based on the psychic sense is the ongoing battle between good and bad for possession of the human soul. For instance, he remarks on the basis of Judges 2:7 ("the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and of the elders") that a person lives either in the days of Jesus Christ (who has the same name as Joshua) and the apostles (represented in the text as the elders), or in the wicked days of the devil. Next to this there are either just days or evil days in a person, depending on whether or not he follows Jesus (cf. Dively Lauro 2010: 227-28). In the pneumatic reading Origen stresses the necessity of the growing to spiritual maturity. This can only take place within the church. In the analysis of Judges 4 (in the fifth homily) Origen states that Jael represents the church. Because of its belief in Christ the church is able to slay the devil, represented here by Sisera. Jael's weapon, a stake, represents the power of the wood of the cross (cf. Dively Lauro 2010: 32-33).

From Ambrose (340-397) we find 287 citations of the book of Judges. With him we find, for instance, a discussion of difficult texts like the chapters 19-20 and of the remarkable phenomenon of the female judge Deborah. In his *De Viduis* (Concerning widows) 8.43-46 he writes that he thinks that "her judgement has been narrated and her deed described, that women should not be restrained from deeds of valor by the weakness of their sex. A widow, she governs the people; a widow, she leads armies; a widow, she chooses generals; a widow, she determines wars and orders triumphs. So, then, it is not nature that is answerable for the fault or that is liable to weakness. It is not sex, but valor which makes strong" (translation taken from Franke 2005: 115). Of Chrysostom (345-407), thirty-six quotations of the book of Judges are found.

Now what would have been the reason for the selection of only these four passages from the book of Judges in the Prophetologion? It may be assumed that it has to do with the focus on the typology of Jesus Christ. Judges 6:2-6, 11-15, 17-22, 24, which is read on the November 8 (Michael's day) tells the story of Israel doing evil in the eyes of the Lord and God punishing them by giving them into the hands of the Midianites. In the Prophetologion, vv. 7-10 are omitted. This concerns a passage about a prophet sent by the Lord to remember them of the salvation out of Egypt. Leaving it out gives extra emphasis on the calling of Gideon by the messenger of the Lord. Apparently Gideon is seen here as the prefiguration of Jesus Christ, as is demonstrated by the commentary of Ambrose on verses 11-12: "Nor is it a matter of wonder if he was chosen for grace, seeing that even

then, being appointed under the shadow of the holy cross and of the adorable Wisdom in the predestined mystery of the future incarnation, he was bringing forth the visible grains of the fruitful corn from their hiding places and was [mystically] separating the elect of the saints from the refuse of the empty chaff? (*De Spiritu Sancto* I.1; cf. Franke 2005: 120).

Judges 6:36-40, which is read on Epiphany, tells the story of the sign of the woolen fleece on the threshing floor. Among the church fathers many explanations of this miracle are given. According to Ambrose the fleece was placed on a threshing floor to symbolize a plentiful harvest of virtues from among the gentiles. The dew wrung out of the fleece prefigures Jesus' washing of his disciples feet. Augustine states that the absence of dew on the fleece illustrates how in former times God's justice was manifested in the law. The appearance of dew would symbolize Jesus' ministry, first to the Jews and then to the gentiles. Origen sees in the dew the divine word. Jerome explains that God's truth like dew ceased to fall upon Israel and began to water the rest of the world (cf. Franke 2005: 123).

Judges 13: 2-8, 13-14, 17-18, 21 is read on June 24, the feast of the birth of John the Baptist. It tells the story of the annunciation of the birth of Samson by a messenger of the Lord. The verses that are left out recount the second coming of the messenger after the prayer of Manoah (vv. 9-12) and the discussion between Manoah and the messenger about getting the latter something to eat (vv. 15-16). There is an obvious parallel with the annunciation of the birth of Jesus Christ, which is also related in the first chapters of the gospel of Lucas to the miraculous birth of John the Baptist.

## Some Conclusions

- (1) The history of the Prophetologion marks two steps in the diminishing role of the Old Testament in Byzantine liturgy. It was introduced shortly after the OT readings disappeared from the Eucharist. It ended at the moment of another change in the liturgy in which the reading of the gospel became even more prominent. Because of the great importance and central place of the OT lections in the period of Lent before Easter one would expect to find readings of the OT in other periods of fasting as well. Rahlfs remarks that there were no OT lections in the periods of fasting: before Christmas, Peter and Paul (June 29), and the feast of Mary (August 15). In his view this has to do with the fact that these are of a later date. They show that the OT gradually lost importance (Rahlfs 1915: 220).
- (2) A plausible reason for the development and introduction of the liturgical book we now call Prophetologion, somewhere in the eighth century, seems to be a renewal of the way in which the OT text was sung in the liturgy. There is no reason to assume that this also involved a change in the selection of the readings. With regard to the latter, the Prophetologion simply records the results of the tendency to downplay the role of the OT.
- (3) It would be a misunderstanding to see the Prophetologion as *the* Old Testament of Byzantine Christianity. That would indicate that, next to the Psalms, only less than 15 % of the text would be read anymore. It should be taken into account that the OT is also represented in other ways. Next to the texts of the *patres* like Ambrose and Origen, who kept their authority, one can think here also of the way many OT stories still functioned in iconography and other visual arts (cf. Miller 2010: 75).
- (4) Finally, what is in it for a modern OT scholar? Next to the (admittedly marginal) impact on the study of the text of the Septuagint, I would point to a better understanding of sacred texts within their liturgical context. This is more than just a part of the study of the history of interpretation. It makes us also more aware of the fact that these texts are more at home on the desk of the cantor in the Byzantine church and in the hands of the reader in the

synagogue than on the desk of the study of a modern scholar. A good way to take this observation serious is to pay more attention than is usually done in Western scholarly exegesis to the rich tradition of the *patres*.

### Works Cited

- Engberg, Sysse Gudrun  
 1981 *Prophetologium. Pars altera: Lectiones anni immobilis*. (Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae, Lectionaria vol. I, Prophetologium, Pars Altera), Haunia: Munksgaard.
- 1987 “The Greek Old Testament lectionary as a Liturgical Book.” *Cahiers de l’Institut du Moyen Âge Grec et Latin* 54: 39-48.
- 1988 “Greek Literacy and Liturgical Books: Manolis Glynzounis’ Edition of the ‘Profetie’ Venice 1595/96.” *Epsilon* 2: 31-41.
- 2005 “Les lectionnaires grecs,” in: O. Legendre, J.-B. Lebique (eds), *Les manuscrits liturgiques, cycle thématique 2003-2004 de l’IRHT*, Paris  
 ([http://aedilis.irht.cnrs.fr/liturgie/05\\_1.htm](http://aedilis.irht.cnrs.fr/liturgie/05_1.htm))
- 2006 “The Prophetologion and the Triple-lection Theory: The Genesis of a Liturgical Book.” *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata*, terza serie 3, 67-91.
- Fraenkel, Detlef  
 2004 “Einleitung,” Pp. I-XXV in Alfred Rahlfs, *Verzeichnis der griechischen Handschriften des Alten Testaments Göttingen*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen
- Franke, John R.  
 2005 *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament IV), Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove.
- Høeg, Carsten and Günther Zuntz  
 1937 “Remarks on the Prophetologion,” Pp. 189-226 in R. P. Casey, et al. (eds), *Quantulacumque: Studies Presented to Kirsopp Lake by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends*, Christophers: London.
- 1970 *Prophetologium. Pars prima: Lectiones anni mobilis*. Adiuvantibus G. Engberg, J. Raasted aliisque (Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae, Lectionaria vol. I, Prophetologium, Pars Prima, Haunia: Munksgaard.
- Miller, James  
 2010 “The Prophetologion: The Old Testament of Byzantine Christianity?” Pp. 55-76 in P. Magdaline, R. Nelson (eds), *The Old Testament in Byzantium*, Harvard University Press: Dumbarton Oaks.

- Origen  
2010 *Homilies on Judges*. E. A. Dively Lauro (trans.), The Catholic University of America Press: Washington.
- Rahlfs, Alfred  
1915 *Die alttestamentliche Lektionen der griechischen Kirche*. Mitteilungen der Septuaginta-Unternehmens 5, Berlin.
- Royé, Stefan  
2007 *The Inner Cohesion Between the Bible and the Fathers in the Byzantine Tradition: Towards a Codico-Liturgical Approach to the Byzantine Biblical and Patristic Manuscripts*. Orthodox Logos: Tilburg.
- Spronk, Klaas  
2013 “The Study of the Historical-Liturgical Context of the Bible: A Bridge between ‘East’ and ‘West?’” Pp. 15-22 in K. Spronk et al. (eds), *Challenges and Perspectives* (Catalogue of Byzantine Manuscripts in the Liturgical Context. Subsidia 1), Brepols: Turnhout.
- Taft, Robert F.  
2011 “Were There Once Old Testament Readings in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy? Apropos of an Article by Sysse Gudrun Engberg.” *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata*, terza serie, vol. 8: 271-311.