

Contra Toll-houses: The Orthodox Funeral Service

Over the past few decades, an insidious and distorted theology of what happens to the soul after death has been growing like a cancer in the Orthodox Christian Church. This teaching, known as the “aerial toll-houses,” claims that upon death, the soul must pass through a series of toll-houses (like spiritual weigh stations) as it ascends from the earth through the atmosphere. There are specific toll-houses for different sins (pride, covetousness, magic, sexual sins, etc.) and each toll-house is manned by demons. As the soul ascends, the demons accuse the soul of various sins, and if found guilty of any that were not absolved through confession, the soul is dragged to hell.¹ Supporters of the toll-houses rely on obscure passages from obscure patristic or monastic sources. They will also use as proof texts a few sentences from rarely heard ecclesiastical texts or gross misinterpretations of the Holy Scriptures. However, for every miniscule textual fragment that the “toll-housers” (that’s what I call them) can muster up, there is an even larger volume of source material in the Church and the Bible that refutes this teaching. One of those sources we can turn to is the Orthodox Christian funeral service. *If the toll-houses were truly a part of the dogmatic life of the Orthodox Church, then one would expect the funeral service to make mention of them.* After all, what better place is there to teach about the soul after death and the toll-houses than at a funeral?² This

¹ This entire concept is troublesome because 1) it obviates and mocks the fact that Christ died to save us from our sins, 2) the Eucharist is taken for the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting, and 3) the absolution prayers of confession include the sins we forgot to confess because of ignorance or forgetfulness or whatever. Perhaps there should be a toll-house for lack of common sense.

² Sadly, my parishioners have told me that some clergy actually do preach the toll-houses to the grieving family and friends at Orthodox funerals!

short paper takes a look at the prayers and hymns of the funeral service in order the 1) show the complete lack of toll-house “theology,” and 2) to show that certain parts of the funeral service actually serve as a refutation of the toll-houses.

The funeral service is derived from the Orthros service. After the invocation, “Blessed is our God...,” some funeral service texts include a series of three sets of hymnody, each called a “Stasis,” that are chanted before the psalm. They speak of a tired and broken soul that seeks the mercy of God. They do not contain any reference to the toll-houses.

After the stases (if they are included in the service text), Psalm 91/90_{LXX} is read. The psalm is described as a “...glowing testimony to the security of those who trust in God.”³ The **Orthodox Study Bible** (OSB) which uses the Septuagint (LXX) as the basis of its translation states that the psalm “...describes the intensity of the spiritual warfare the Church wages against the devil and his angels both in this life and in death.”⁴ The psalm tells of the hope a person has when they put their trust in the Lord. The psalmist is besieged by “hunters,” “troubling words,” “arrows,” “things moving in the darkness,” and even “demons.” Against these seemingly overwhelming enemies, verse 10 states that “evils shall not come to you.” The psalm continues by stating that the Lord shall command His angels to protect and guide the psalmist who, protected by angelic might, is then able to trample

³ NIV Study Bible, Kenneth L. Barker, Gen. Ed., (Grand Rapids, MI:Zondervan, 2002), pg. 1190.

⁴ Orthodox Study Bible, (Nashville:Thomas Nelson, 2008), pg. 742.

lions and dragons, asps, and basilisks⁵ (v. 13). The psalm ends with God promising to shelter him, deliver him, glorify him, and show him salvation.

Some might argue that this can be interpreted as the toll-houses since the OSB states that the psalm regards our spiritual battle at death. That is a flawed interpretation. Certainly, at the hour of our death we are vulnerable to temptation and demonic attacks, and we are wrought with spiritual struggles such a doubt, regret, etc. This does not equate to the toll-houses as these things happen *during the dying process, while a person is still alive*, not after the soul has departed the body. Thus, Psalm 90/91^{LXX} is read in the Orthodox funeral service because it tells us that no matter what our spiritual battles are in this life, or in physiologic process of dying, God promises deliverance and salvation, not toll-houses and torments, for those who put their hope in Him.

The next part of the funeral service is a hauntingly beautiful set of hymns known as the Evlogetaria. They start off by stating that the Saints have found the Fountain of Life and the Door of Paradise. The hymns tell us that God created us in his image but we sin, and the wages of sin is death.⁶ We hear how we return to the earth and it is through death that we are able to be reshaped into our original beauty. Continuing on, the Evlogetaria remembers the Martyrs and asks for their intercessions. Then, the hymns entreat the Lord to establish the departed in paradise and to disregard the charges against him/her. Lastly, the Lord Himself speaks to us and invites those that have taken up their Cross and followed Him to draw near for the

⁵ A basilisk is a mythical snake-like monster that could kill by its gaze or by its breath. Some believe it may be based on the venom-spitting cobra.

⁶ Re: Romans 6:23

rewards that He has prepared for the faithful. These hymns completely lack any mention of the toll-houses.

After the Evlogetaria, the Canon of the Dead is chanted. This was written by St. Theophanes the Hymnographer (+850 A.D.) In some service books, only part of the canon is sung, sometimes reduced to just a few of the troparia from odes 3, 6, and 9. The entire canon can be found online for anyone interested in reading it (<http://www.anastasis.org.uk/funeral.htm>). The canon contains beautiful words of what happens to the soul after death. Here are a few examples:

- In heavenly bridal chambers the noble Martyrs implore you, O Christ: Grant to your faithful servant[s] who has/have passed over from earth the enjoyment of eternal good things.
- Settle in joy in eternal dwellings, loving Lord, the one who has crossed over the unstable corruption of passing things to you, having justified him/her by faith and grace.
- Seize for yourself one who sing the praise your divine might, whom you have taken from earth, making him/her a child of light and purging away sin's gloom, O All-merciful.
- Place now in the land of the meek, O Saviour in your good pleasure, all those who have fallen asleep before us, having justified them by faith and by grace as they highly exalt you to all the ages.

Nowhere in the canon is there a mention of demons tormenting the departed soul at the toll-houses. Rather, it speaks of Christ saving those who are justified by faith and grace. In the Orthodox Church, our teaching is that grace is received through the sacramental life of the Church – communion,

repentance, baptism, chrismation, etc. Particularly comforting is the notion (quoted above) that the Lord comes and “seizes” us at death (see my earlier work *“Contra Toll-houses: The Dormition of the Theotokos”* for an elaborate discussion). He literally grabs our departing souls so that He can save those who praise Him. Where in all this beautiful salvific theology is there room for demonic toll-houses?

The singing of the canon is interrupted after the 6th Ode of the canon by a short hymn known as the kontakion. In the Greek/Antiochian tradition, it is a beautiful tone 8 melody that states, “Among the Saints, give rest, O Christ, to the soul of thy servant, where there is neither sickness, nor sorrow, nor sighing, but life everlasting.”⁷ Christ gives rest, not torment, to the souls of the departed. The canon and the kontakion tell us of our hope that we have in Christ, that through Him, in the next life, we will find eternal life and peace. The canon does not speak of life everlasting and salvation bestowed only to those who make it through the toll-houses.

The next part of the funeral service is the chanting (or reading) of the idiomela by St. John of Damascus which are usually sung in all of the eight tones (a challenging task for a chanter or priest). These short hymns speak of the shortness of life, the end of all of our vanities and wealth, the fallen nature of man, and the mystery of death. The tone 2 hymn in this section does speak of the departure of the soul from the body. It tells us that the soul endures an ordeal as it leaves the body. If the soul turns to man, if finds no help. If the souls turns to the angels, there is no help there either. This is

⁷ Service Book of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church, 12th Ed., (Englewood, NJ:Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of New York and all North America, 2006), pg. 191.

not speaking about toll-houses, but rather the ultimate dehumanization of a person that occurs when the soul is separated from the body leaving behind a corpse. The soul's only hope is neither worldly goods nor angels (bringing bags of gold to pay off the toll-house demons as some teach). Instead, the hymn reminds us to seek Christ for our rest and mercy at the time of death.

After the *idiomela*, there is yet another beautiful set of hymnography, the Beatitudes. Placed between the verses of the Beatitudes, there are hymns that tell us about the salvation granted to the thief on the cross because of his repentance, and we hear the supplications for the repose of the departed asking God to make him/her a citizen of paradise. They even speak of the horror of death where bodies stink and become food for worms. However, there is still no mention of toll-houses or demonic terrors for the departed soul after death. Rather, we hear more of the promise of salvation and citizenship in heaven.

The last part of the funeral service is the scripture readings. While the scripture readings themselves are unremarkable, it is the *prokeimenon* before the epistle that is of particular importance. The *prokeimenon* is usually a series of psalm verses (sometimes they are New Testament verses). In the funeral service, the *prokeimenon* is neither a psalm verse nor a New Testament verse. Here the *prokeimenon* states, "Blessed is the way in which thou shalt walk today; for a place of rest is prepared for thee" and in the Greek/Antiochian tradition it is sung in a joyful sounding tone 3 melody. The verse for the *prokeimenon* is, "Unto thee will I cry, O Lord my God" which is from Psalm 28:1. The rest of the *prokeimenon*, "Blessed is the way..." is not a direct quote from a psalm or from any other biblical text. It may be part of

an ecclesiastical text derived from Psalm 118:1 (“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, Who walk in the law of the LORD!”) and John 14:3 (“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also”). Speculations aside, the key point is that the prokeimenon tells us of a ***blessed path*** that the soul walks on its journey to the heavenly mansions. There is no horrific journey through demonic toll-houses! The funeral service teaches us that the Christian soul undergoes a journey along a blessed path to be with Christ.

If the aerial toll-houses were real, the Orthodox funeral service would be a great place for the elaboration of that theology. In that case, the hymnography should be full of ominous references to the trials and tribulations that the departed soul must undergo. *The silence on this subject is deafeningly clear.* It is also worth noting, even if it is beyond the scope of this paper, the absence of other bizarre toll-house related teachings such as 1) the soul remains near the body for three days and 2) then wanders the earth for 40 days before ascending through the aerial toll-houses. This is how some have tried to explain the reason for the 40-day memorial service. Like the toll-houses, this has no basis in Scripture or the salvific dogma of the Church. Instead of such deviant teachings, the Orthodox funeral service offers the genuine Orthodox Christian teaching on the soul after death. If the notion of *lex orandi est lex credendi* (Latin for “the law of prayer is the law of faith”) is true in Orthodoxy, and *we really do pray what we believe*, then **the funeral service is clearly a refutation of the toll-house heresy.** We lament for the fallen human condition of death yet at the same time we rejoice in the hope of salvation through the life-giving death and resurrection

of Jesus Christ. Jesus was sent to save us, not to condemn us via toll-houses. The entire message of the Orthodox funeral service is, in my opinion, an elaboration of verses from chapter 5 of the Gospel of John: “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son,” and “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:22, 24). To Christ our True God Who has dominion over death and has opened the gates of paradise to the thief and to us be all glory, honor, and worship, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Fr. Steven C. Salaris, M.Div., Ph.D.

Protopresbyter

All Saints of North America Antiochian Orthodox Church

Maryland Heights, MO