

## UNIT 1A: ORTHODOX FAITH AND LIFE

### 5: Biblical Canon and Interpretation

#### Learning to Read the Bible: “Take up and read, take up and read”

In our early years, we must first learn to read before we can read to learn. The same process takes place when we are confronted -whatever our ages—with the more than 1,300 pages of the Old Testament and some 500 pages of the New Testament. How can we learn first to read the Bible and then read the Bible to learn about Orthodox faith and life? The process is challenging not only because of the length of the Bible, but also because the Old Testament is written largely in ancient Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek—the Koine dialect of Greek that was the common language of the Hellenistic world. The matter is complicated by the pre-eminence of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew (Masoretic) text in the usage of the Orthodox Church, if only because the Septuagint version (not merely a translation) is the one favoured in the New Testament itself. Ideally, we might learn the original languages or at least learn how to consult an Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament, a Greek-English Septuagint translation of the Old Testament or a Greek-English translation of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Either approach would help to understand the precise words that the many different authors of the Old and New Testament used, as well as the challenge of translation itself, especially in the context of whether to seek a literal or holistic meaning. One keen but uninformed Christian did actually walk into a British bookshop and ask a puzzled shop assistant for a copy of “the original Bible” but it transpired that this particular search was for a King James Bible, whose English is certainly beautiful but at times archaic.

A good place to start reading the Bible is the ten-page essay by Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), “How to Read the Bible.”<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Kallistos begins with the challenge from St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (1724-1783) that we have each “been sent a letter, not by any earthly emperor, but by the King of Heaven”—an invitation, in Metropolitan Kallistos’s words, “to enter into a personal conversation face to face with the living God.”<sup>3</sup> This invitation has been sent today to each of us,

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<sup>1</sup> There are a large number of Interlinear Bibles available; and the volume of choice depends in part upon which translation is chosen (i.e. Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, King James, New King James, Revised Standard, New American Standard, etc.). Whatever translation is preferred, it will be useful, if possible, to consult Strong’s Concordance with its numbering of every word in Greek and English, e.g. *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Published as a pamphlet by Ancient Faith Publishing (then Conciliar Press) or in *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 1757-1766.

<sup>3</sup> Ware, 1757.

but the ideal reply is the ancient one of the young boy, Samuel in 1Kg 3:10: “Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears.” As we grow older, we learn there is a further question that the Lord often addresses to many of us—the same question that He posed to the prophet Isaiah—“Whom shall I send and who will go to this people?” (Is 6:8). When we hear that call to enter into a particular community, a particular friendship, or a particular kind of work, we can choose whether or not to respond with Isaiah, “Behold, here I am, send me” (Is 6:8).<sup>4</sup> Building on St. Tikhon’s words and the Moscow Conference held in 1976 between the Orthodox and the Anglicans, Metropolitan Kallistos suggests that our reading of Scripture should be obedient, ecclesial—that is, in union with the Church—Christ-centred and personal, asking the question not only “What does this passage of Scripture mean?” but rather, “What does it mean for me?”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps initially such a personal perspective on reading the Scriptures (both Old and New Testaments) is rather frightening. Therefore, it is helpful to recall that some scholars believe that the word “obedience” originates from the Latin root *audire*, which means “to listen,” implying that “obedience requires the discerning ear, the ear that listens for the reality of the situation.”<sup>6</sup> Metropolitan Kallistos closes his helpful essay on how to read the Bible by reminding us of St. Augustine’s struggle with himself alone in the garden, when the future saint heard a child cry out to him, “Take up and read, take up and read.” The message is clear: St. Augustine “took up his bible and read; and what he read altered his entire life. Let us do the same: ‘Take up and read.’”<sup>7</sup>

### **Once We Begin to Read the Bible, How Should We Study It?**

Simply reading and praying with the Bible is a good beginning in our own personal searches to relate to God. However, in addition to reading the Bible, we also need to study it, with the attitude of St. Barnabas that study of the Bible is in itself “a joyful occupation.”<sup>8</sup> Our study is grounded in the awareness that the Bible is “the book of the Church, containing God’s word.”<sup>9</sup> As Orthodox Christians,

We do not read the Bible as isolated individuals, interpreting it solely by the light of our private understanding, or in terms of current theories about source, form or

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ware, 1757.

<sup>5</sup> Ware, 1757, 1764.

<sup>6</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: Harper One/Harper Collins, 1993), 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ware, 1766.

<sup>8</sup> *The Letter of St. Barnabas*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Robert A. Kraft, ed. Jack N. Sparks (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1978), 10.11b; p. 286.

<sup>9</sup> Bishop [now Metropolitan] Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Revised Edition (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 110.

redaction criticism [i.e. revised critiques of earlier ideas]. We read it as members of the Church, in communion with all the other members throughout the ages.<sup>10</sup>

In brief, what we are seeking is the mind of the Church; and this search requires us to investigate how the Bible has been “understood by the Fathers and the saints, and how [the Bible has been] used in liturgical worship” over the centuries.<sup>11</sup>

This reaching out for unity with Christ through Biblical study which is both Patristic and liturgical is a task for a lifetime. At times, the goal itself appears overwhelming. Therefore, it can often be helpful to use “the salami approach” to problem solving in which you do not “try to eat the entire salami,” but instead “cut off one slice and tackle one problem at a time.”<sup>12</sup> For example, in the context of studying the Bible, a good place to invest time is in reflecting on the writings of Johanna Manley, especially her *magnum opus*, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox*, which moves through the daily Scripture readings and festivals of the Orthodox Church, in the form of an introductory Patristic commentary.<sup>13</sup> Although not definitive (as she would be the first to acknowledge), this study of the Orthodox Church’s liturgical year has become a welcome gift to many Christians. Further studies by Johanna Manley include Patristic commentaries on the Psalms, Isaiah, Job and Genesis 1 to 5, as well as 30 stories of saints presented as dramatic skits for children ages 7 to 14.<sup>14</sup>

Quite independently of the extensive efforts of Johanna Manley to link Patristic and liturgical insights to Biblical study, there is another highly significant attempt to study both the Old and the New Testaments within a Patristic framework, although not in a liturgical context—the now complete 29 volumes of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, edited by Thomas C. Oden and published by InterVarsity Press.<sup>15</sup> This massive commentary covers seven centuries of Biblical exegesis, presenting Patristic commentaries on every chapter of the Bible. Entirely in English, this work is of immense help in understanding how individual Church Fathers

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<sup>10</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 110.

<sup>11</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 110.

<sup>12</sup> David Hass, *Is Your Life Out of Whack? Methods to Restore Balance* (Lincoln, NE: Writer’s Showcase/ iJNiverse, 2002). Available at: Then go to p. 8.

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<sup>13</sup> Joanna Manley (Compiler and Editor), *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox: Daily Scripture Readings and Commentary for Orthodox Christians* (Menlo Park, CA: Monastery Books, 1995). Manley uses the New King James translation but suggests that readers should use the Biblical translation with which they are “most familiar or comfortable.” 1.

<sup>14</sup> The relevant commentaries are entitled *Grace for Grace: The Psalter and the Holy Fathers* (1999), *Isaiah through the Ages* (1995), *Wisdom Let Us Attend: Job, the Fathers and the Old Testament Holy Fathers* (1999) and *The Lament of Eve* (1999), all published by Monastery Books. The children’s skits are from *Stories of Saints from the Prologue (based on the Prologue from Orchid by Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich)* (Libertyville, IL: Bishop Nicolai Resource Center, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Each of these 29 volumes covering all 64 books of the Bible (including the Apocrypha) can be purchased individually in hardback or in a single CD-ROM Complete Set, all published by Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. All volumes use the Revised Standard Version of both the Old and New Testaments.

approached specific Biblical texts. The aim of this series is to create “a Christian Talmud”—a collection of arguments and comments about specific Biblical texts.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, from an Orthodox perspective, the Patristic texts that have been selected are those “that would be most widely received by the whole Church, East and West,” thereby avoiding controversial passages (especially on Church government), so that the result is not a Jewish argumentative confrontation, but rather an excessive emphasis upon “the consensual tradition of early Christian exegesis.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the combined work of Johanna Manley and Thomas C. Oden and his colleagues over the past twenty years has created a situation in which an extensive number of Patristic texts are now readily available in modern English. For those searching for further Patristic texts linked to the New Testament within an Orthodox context, the two volumes published by Holy Apostles Convent offer helpful insights often not contained in the two major studies by Johanna Manley and *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*.<sup>18</sup>

In reflecting on how to study Scripture, it should be noted that our previous religious affiliations and beliefs are often relevant. For example, many Protestants might find helpful Christopher A. Hall’s *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, especially Chapter 2 on “The Modern Mind & Biblical Interpretation.”<sup>19</sup> Those Roman Catholics who have found helpful the systems of meditation such as those formulated in the Counter-Reformation by Ignatius of Loyola and François de Sales may wish to consider Metropolitan Kallistos’s reflection that the Orthodox “have usually felt no need for such methods” because of the “frequent repetitions of key texts and images” in the lengthy Orthodox liturgical services.<sup>20</sup> Whatever our previous (or present) Christian affiliations, as we learn more and more about reading the Bible, we can adopt the advice of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk: “Christ himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking with Him.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Forming the Biblical Canon: A Hebrew Perspective**

Having begun this E-Quip Lecture on Biblical Canon and Interpretation with a practical focus on contemporary study, it is now appropriate to adopt a more historically oriented approach to how the Biblical Canon was formed and then interpreted. For the authors of the New Testament

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas C. Oden, General Editor, “General Introduction,” *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, Vol. 2, Mark*, eds. Thomas C. Oden & Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), xii.

<sup>17</sup> Oden, *Vol. 2, Mark*, xxxi.

<sup>18</sup> Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista, CO, *The Orthodox New Testament, Vol. 1: The Holy Gospels* and *Vol. 2: Acts, Epistles, and Revelation*, 7th ed. from: [www.HolyApostlesConvent.org](http://www.HolyApostlesConvent.org). The King James translation is used, compared with the approved text of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, 1904.

<sup>19</sup> See 19-42 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 111.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Metropolitan Kallistos in *The Orthodox Way*, 111, as well as in “How to Read the Bible,” *The Orthodox Study Bible*, 1757.

and all the Apostolic Fathers, the term “Scripture” referred solely to the Old Testament.<sup>22</sup> When Christ walked with Cleopas and Simon Peter on the road to Emmaus after His crucifixion, “beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Many Christians, whatever their denominational affiliations, are unaware that, as Father John McGuckin explains:

... the New Testament itself is a holistic commentary on Scripture, what the Church regarded as the ‘fulfilment’ (*teleiosis*) of the scriptural confession of Israel’s faith in God. Origen of Alexandria in the early third century was to put this insight onto a systematic footing with his extensive exegetical writings, but it was a basic dynamic of Christian theology from the outset. It was the gnostic crisis of the second century that brought the issue of precisely defining the canon of recognized books into a sharp focus. Before that both the synagogue and the church had a looser idea of what were the definitive books of the Old Testament. For Christians this was not a critical matter since the texts concerned were not ‘primary law,’ but were celebrated for moral examples in the preaching tradition and were never referred to in doctrinal controversies by any side.<sup>23</sup>

This correct interpretation that “Israel’s faith in God” is “a basic dynamic of Christian theology from the outset” suggests the importance for Christians to study the Hebrew Bible. As the Orthodox theologian, Father Eugen J. Pentiu, documents in *Jesus the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible*, “Jesus the Messiah was pre-existent, and . . . he appeared in manifold forms throughout the Hebrew Bible prior to his human incarnation in the New Testament.”<sup>24</sup> Although the text of the Bible used by Jews today is the Masoretic Text to which symbols for vowel sounds were added to the consonants between AD 500 and 700, as Father Pentiu explains: “Today, evaluating all sources, and building on the Qumran discoveries, we are in a much better position to reconstruct the pre-Masoretic Hebrew text, owing to the larger palette of text witnesses.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See John Anthony McGuckin, “Canon of Scripture” in *Patristic Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 50-53.

<sup>23</sup> McGuckin, “Canon of Scripture,” 50-51.

<sup>24</sup> Eugen J. Pentiu, *Jesus the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), xiii. For further study, see the Orthodox theologian, George A. Barois, *The Face of Christ in the Old Testament* and *Jesus Christ and the Temple* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974 and 1980), as well as the study by the Antiochian Christian laymen, Benjamin D. Williams and Harold B. Anstall, *Orthodox Worship: A Living Continuity with the Synagogue, the Temple and the Early Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1990). Cf. Rev. Dr. Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (New York: James Pott, 1881). Available free for reading on the web at: [https://archive.org/stream/templeitsministr02eder/templeitsministr02eder\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/templeitsministr02eder/templeitsministr02eder_djvu.txt).

For relevant historical documents, see C. K. Barrett (ed.), Revised ed., *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (London: SPCK, 1987), especially Section 7, “Jewish History,” 135-176, Section 8, “Rabbinic Literature and Rabbinic Judaism,” 177-215, Section 9, “Qumran,” 218-251, and Section 11, “Josephus,” 269-287.

<sup>25</sup> Pentiu, xv.

Christians of many denominations will be aware of Christ's words: "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfil" (Matt 5:17). However, Father Pentiuć points out that "the 'fulfilment' to which Jesus refers should not be viewed as an end point, as is customary. Rather, it is a long, intricate process beginning with the Incarnation of the Logos and continuing throughout Christ's life and the various phases of the church's history."<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, this "*vertical paradigm* long in vogue, in which the Hebrew Scripture exists at the bottom and the New Testament triumphs at the top of history, overlooks the Jewishness of the Old Testament and ignores the reality of a living vibrant Jewish community of faith."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, Father Pentiuć proposes an astounding restructuring of Biblical study by Christians of all traditions, so that we "conceive of the messianic 'fulfilment' as a *process* inaugurated by Christ, and not simply an end point, [so that] then the vertical scheme must be replaced by a *horizontal paradigm*."<sup>28</sup> Within this horizontal model there are "two concentric circles: one circle that circumscribes the entire history of salvation as recorded and hinted at by the Hebrew Bible; and another circle, situated in the center of the first, that represents the activities of the Messiah in all his scriptural incarnations."<sup>29</sup>

Such a restructuring of Biblical study would indeed herald a belated response to the call in 1942 by the Orthodox priest, Father Lev Gillet, to study "the common elements between Jewish and Christian Messianism" in the hope of discovering "a real 'Messianic communion' . . . between Jews and Christians [in which] both were inspired by a common Messianic hope and expectation."<sup>30</sup> As Father Lev was aware—and as both Jews and Christians today will be aware—"Such an authentic Messianic attitude requires a deep change of life in Jews and Christians alike" in which Christians would have to "disentangle themselves more and more" from "material interests" in order "to concentrate on the approaching Kingdom," while Jews would have "to take more seriously than they ever did the Second Coming of their personal Messiah."<sup>31</sup> Even if, as Father Lev comments, "the person of Jesus would not be viewed in the same way by Christians and Jews," joint Biblical study of the unity of the Old and New Testaments could pave the way for practical co-operation between "Christians and Jews messianically-minded and acting together."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Pentiuć, xvii.

<sup>27</sup> Pentiuć, xvii. [Emphasis in original].

<sup>28</sup> Pentiuć, xvii. [Emphasis in original].

<sup>29</sup> Pentiuć, xvii.

<sup>30</sup> Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah: Studies in the Relationship between Judaism and Christianity*, Chapter 4, "The Messianic Hope," 100-126 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1942). The quotation is taken from p. 106.

<sup>31</sup> Gillet, 106-107.

<sup>32</sup> Gillet, 107.

## Forming the Biblical Canon: A Greek Perspective

Although the original Hebrew translation of the Old Testament was influential for many in the Early Church, far more influential was a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek made by Jewish scholars between the 3rd and 1st centuries B.C. Known as “the Septuagint”—the Greek word for “seventy”—this influential translation is linked to a tradition that King Ptolemy II (285-246 BCE), with the advice of the Jewish High Priest Eleazaros, called together seventy-two Jerusalem elders on the secluded island of Pharos in front of Alexandria “to make a full version of the laws given by the voice of God,” in such a manner that in making a translation from Hebrew into the vernacular Greek of third century Alexandrian Jews they would “not add or take away or transfer anything, but must keep the original form and shape.”<sup>33</sup> In reality, the different books of what we now know as the Old Testament were translated at different times, but it appears that by 132 BCE the translation of the Hebrew OT into Greek was complete.<sup>34</sup> Whether the original motivation for the translation was to provide a text for the famous library in Alexandria or to enable those Alexandrian Jews who did not know Hebrew to understand the Bible is debated. In any event, this is the primary Old Testament text quoted in the New Testament.

This important translation is still regarded as the canonical text of the Old Testament by the Orthodox Church. However, it is only recently that an outstanding translation of The Septuagint into English has become readily available, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright.<sup>35</sup> For many centuries, numerous scholars echoed the cry of St John Chrysostom that: “Some do not even know there are any Scriptures. Yet the Holy Spirit ... arranged that they should be translated by the Seventy ... and if we would give heed to these Scriptures, we would not be so entangled ourselves, and would set others free who are deceived.”<sup>36</sup> However, there is now increasing interest in the study of the Septuagint, as evidenced by R. Timothy McLay’s *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Philo, *de Vita Mosis* ii, 35-40 and *Epistle of Aristeeas*, 301-316, both translated into English in *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, edited by C. K. Barrett, Section 12, “Septuagint and Targum,” Revised Ed. (London: SPCK, 1987), 292-298.

<sup>34</sup> See the entry “Septuagint (‘LXX’)” in *Dictionary of the Christian Church* edited by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 1483-1484.

<sup>35</sup> (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). This text prepared by different scholars for different books has been organized by the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies. Although the original translation contains no notes, full commentaries are now being prepared; and further resources are readily available on the web, including the full text in a free electronic edition at: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/>.

Prior to this new translation the primary translation available in English was by Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1851/1995).

<sup>36</sup> *Homily on Hebrews*, 8:9. Quoted by Dale E. Heath, *The Orthodox Septuagint*, published by the author, 1997, 156.

<sup>37</sup> (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003). This helpful resource includes chapters on “Identifying a Source as Greek or Hebrew,” 37-76, “A Model for Translation Technique,” 77-98, “The Origins of the Septuagint and Its History,” 100- 136, and “The Impact of the LXX on the NT,” 137- 170. The opening “Introduction,” 1-16, provides helpful information to draw an inexperienced reader into understanding substantive LXX research, as well as a listing of relevant Jewish sources on p. 1 in note

## Forming the Biblical Canon: An Aramaic Perspective

In considering the formation of the Biblical canon, brief mention should also be made of the role of the Aramaic language. A translation of the Old Testament into Aramaic is known as a Targum. C. K. Barrett has pointed out that “in many synagogues the reading of the Torah, and of the accompanying Haftarah, or prophetic lection, was followed by a translation into Aramaic;” and while these translations from the Hebrew were made extemporaneously, “there is no doubt” that “in due course written targums appeared.”<sup>38</sup> Christians today have little awareness of Aramaic influences on either the Old or New Testament with the exception of Christ’s call from the cross in a mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew: “‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani’ that is, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34), drawn from the opening line of Psalm 22. However, the Galilean dialect of Aramaic was the primary spoken language of Jesus and his disciples. Furthermore, significant sections of the Biblical books of Ezra and Daniel were written in Aramaic; and it has been argued, probably correctly, that the sayings of Jesus were first recorded by His disciples in ancient Aramaic, before being translated into Koine Greek, which was heavily influenced by Aramaic.<sup>39</sup>

## From Oral Tradition to Canonical Writings: The New Testament

It is clearly understood now that the apostles did not leave within their own lifetime a definitive corpus of writings as an integrated whole. As the apostles died their remembrances of Christ’s words and deeds together with the teachings and the records of their missionary activities were assembled by their successors into a growing collection of writings as yet incompletely edited. What we now call the New Testament is that authoritative canon or collection of writings established by the Church as apostolic over the next three centuries. Initially these writings circulated amongst the earliest Christian communities in different collections in different places but by the early second century St. Justin (Martyr and Apologist) referred to what he called the “memoirs of the apostles,” or “gospels” which were quickly given the same authority as the Old Testament itself. St. Irenaeus claimed a four gospel canon in about 160 AD; and by the middle of the second century the main books of what became known as the New Testament were largely

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2, especially J. Trebelle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible: An Introduction to the History of the Bible* (New York: Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Barrett, 291. For specific examples from Genesis 1, Genesis 22 and Isaiah 52-53, see 309-315. For further information, see John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> See the website of Victor N. Alexander, with the translations from Aramaic into English of numerous books of the Old and New Testaments at: [www.v-a.com/bible](http://www.v-a.com/bible) or from a Google search for “Aramaic Translation Project.” For an introduction to versions of the Bible in Syriac, see Ken Parry, David J. Melling, Dimitri Brady, Sidney H. Griffith and John F. Healey (eds.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 85-86.



agreed by the Church and indeed confirmed in 170 AD by the list in the Muratorian fragment.<sup>40</sup> However, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Revelation were disputed by some churches, and their status was only resolved later. A firm indication that by 367 AD the canon of the New Testament had been established was the Paschal letter of St. Athanasius of Alexandria of that date which listed exactly the same books as found in the final authorised canon. This was confirmed in 393 A.D. by the Synod of Hippo in North Africa, whose decision was ratified by the Councils of Carthage in 397 and 419 AD. Further confirmation of the canon came from St. Ambrose, St. Augustine of Hippo and the Council of Rome in 382, with only St. Jerome (c. 345-420) firmly translating most of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew into Latin in the Vulgate Bible, while excluding those books which later came to be called the Apocrypha.<sup>41</sup> Parts of the Christian East only later accepted Revelation, but by the 5th century the canon of both the Old and New Testaments was undisputed. What this process of canon formation shows is that the spoken tradition goes before the written record and that the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit defines the limits of the Bible and indeed interprets the Scriptures as its own writings. These are indisputable historical facts, and they strongly contrast and challenge the assumptions of the Protestant Reformation that the Scriptures precede the Church and therefore constitute the only authority (*sola Scriptura*) for Christians. Quite the reverse is the case. Oral tradition was the Church's initial stream of revelation and the written text and canon codified that. The Church's role in the formation and indeed the interpretation of Scripture is not only guided by dogmatic concern but also by empirically verifiable truths.

### **Orthodox Biblical Interpretation**

Orthodox methods of interpretation of Holy Scripture are markedly different from both individualistic Protestant “*sola Scriptura*” models and Roman Catholic understandings of an infallible magisterium supported by the authority of the papacy. Inherently collegiate and ecclesial in character, Orthodox Biblical study remains faithful to the original character of exegesis—that is, the critical explanation of the text—in both the Bible itself and the Patristic era, the latter remaining the “gold standard” for subsequent Biblical work.

In trying to decide upon how to interpret both the Old and New Testaments from an Orthodox perspective, it is helpful to consider the questions posed by a Greek Orthodox theologian and Biblical scholar, Father Theodore G. Stylianopoulos. He asks: “What is the essential content and purpose of the Bible viewed theologically? If the Bible is God’s word, what does God wish to

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<sup>40</sup> For the relevant documents, see the website of Christian Classics Ethereal Library at: [www.ccel.org/](http://www.ccel.org/).

<sup>41</sup> See the entries in Cross & Livingstone, *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, on “Vulgate” and “Jerome, St”, 867-868 and 1710-1711. See also McGuckin, *Patristic Theology*, entry on “Canon of Scripture,” 50-53.

communicate through scripture?"<sup>42</sup> Father Theodore suggests a three-fold response to this question that could be helpful to every Christian who reads the Bible:

Three aspects define the substance of the bible. First is the narration of the great deeds or 'wonders' of God (*megaleia theou*, Acts 2:11), ranging from the act of creation to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. These great acts of God form the bedrock or revelation on which everything else depends. A second aspect is the disclosure of the will of God recorded in the form of commands, theological truths, moral teachings and spiritual wisdom concerning God and salvation. . . . The third and deepest aspect of the Bible is personal encounter and communion with God. . . . The overarching purpose of scripture is not the mere conveyance of religious knowledge but rather the personal self-disclosure of and intimate communion with the mystery of God. Scripture is never an end in itself but a sacred road map point to a spiritual world; what the Church Fathers called 'true realities' (*ta pragmata*), at the heart of which is the mystery of Christ and new life in him.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, when as we read the Bible, we become aware of the power of God's actions in history, the importance of His self-disclosure to each of us, and especially the possibility of each of us having a personal encounter with God.

In seeking to interpret the Bible, we must also be aware that the Bible has been written in human words—in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic—languages which few of us know well. Precisely because the Bible has been written in human words, we need to be aware of what Father Theodore has appropriately termed, "the contingency of human understanding. Not every verse of the Bible is to be taken literally."<sup>44</sup> For example, numerous verses in the Bible imply that women should be subservient to men. However, when St. Gregory the Great was consulted by Emperor Theodosius the Great (who reigned from 379 to 395) on the subject of marriage and divorce, the saint argued firmly that men and women should be given the same rights and treated equally.<sup>45</sup> Thus, as Father Theodore points out: "The 'mind' (*phronema*) of the major Fathers with respect to biblical interpretation held a flexible view of the Bible as a divine and human book."<sup>46</sup> It is entirely

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<sup>42</sup> Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, "Scripture and tradition in the Church," in *Orthodox Christian Theology*, edited by Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 22.

<sup>43</sup> Stylianopoulos, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Stylianopoulos, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Stylianopoulos, 23. This insight has been drawn from Father John A. McGuckin, "Patterns of biblical exegesis in the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and Gregory of Nyssa," *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice*, edited by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2005), 41-43.

<sup>46</sup> Stylianopoulos, 23.

appropriate that each of us should have that same flexible outlook, seeking to relate the theology and moral teachings of the Bible to our own culture and situations, just as did the Church Fathers.

In the midst of the differing interpretations of specific Biblical passages, it is important to establish “a tradition of constructive scholarly conversation towards a commonly defined Orthodox hermeneutic” that is—an appropriate approach to Biblical interpretation itself. In this context, as Father Theodore reflects in closing his chapter on “Scripture and tradition in the Church” in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, “Orthodox scholars have much to learn as they also have much to teach.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Implementing Orthodox Biblical Interpretation Today**

Orthodox Christians are fully aware that the Bible does not unlock its meanings apart from the Church. The Bible must always be read and interpreted in the light of the Church’s own confession and Godly commentators. After all, the Bible is both the word of God and the work of the Church. Without the Church the Bible simply becomes vulnerable to thousands of false and inconsistent interpretations. The fact that the Protestant world has fractured into over 36,000 denominations based on such differences of interpretation testifies to the futility of individualistic Biblical interpretation. So, how does the Orthodox Church today interpret her own Scriptures in the light of her Godly commentators—the Fathers, both ancient and modern?

To answer this question, we need to understand how the inspired commentators and interpreters of the Orthodox Church have, throughout the ages, accomplished their task. The challenge is to retain a fidelity to Tradition, critical study and the Holy Spirit in such a manner that these three perspectives on Biblical commentary are mutually supportive, with no single approach being “allowed to swallow up any other.”<sup>48</sup> The ultimate goal is precisely that for which St Ignatius of Antioch praises the Ephesian community—“orderliness in God, because you all live in accordance with the truth.”<sup>49</sup> First, it must be insisted that Biblical interpretation does not reliably take place outside the context of prayer; and by “prayer” we mean the prayer of the Church, most notably in the worship offered by the community. In the same way that the Psalms constituted the liturgical hymns and theological poetry of the Church of the Old Testament and

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<sup>47</sup> Stylianopoulos, 33. For further Orthodox interpretations of Scripture, see Father Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective, Vol.1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), as well as his latest book, *Encouraged by the Scriptures: Essays on Scripture, Interpretation and Life* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011) and Father John Breck, *The Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986) and his later work, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

<sup>48</sup> Stylianopoulos, *Encouraged by the Scriptures*, 28-34.

<sup>49</sup> *The Letter of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Ephesians*, in Jack N. Sparks (ed.), trans. Robert M. Grant, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1978), 6.2; 79.

then became a source of doctrine and on-going worship within the Biblical canon for the Church of the New Covenant, so Biblical usage and interpretation today must have worship as its context.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, in practical terms, in a parish, Christian teachers must be regular communicants to exercise their ministry. They must show that worship and the pedagogy of worship informs their interpretation of Scripture. Moreover, teachers should seek to live the truths that they have received and professed. Ask anyone *what* they remember of school, for example, and they will recount *who* they remember, that is, those notable teachers who have influenced their lives after leaving school. We must be what we teach, whether in school or at church.

Next, we need to establish the tools of interpretation used in the Church and how and when they are to be applied and to what effect. In the early centuries, there were two main schools of Biblical interpretation in the Church, one based in the Patriarchate of Antioch which emphasised the historical context and meaning of the Scriptures, the other in the Patriarchate of Alexandria which emphasised deeper levels of meaning behind the text itself. The Alexandrian method embraced the use of allegory and typology. Allegory makes meaningful connections between events and persons and a more generalised and universal teaching coded into the data. Typology (more generally used across all schools of interpretation) finds in Old Testament events and persons allusions to their fulfilments or expressions in the New Testament record. These interpretative emphases were neither exclusive of each other nor limited to any one school. It was widely recognised that both the historical and symbolic interpretations were necessary components in the Church's use of Scripture.<sup>51</sup> The same remains the case today. Either approach requires research into the context and the application of the Scriptures throughout time and in different cultural contexts.

There are no shortcuts to discovering the meaning of the Scriptures in any era. This does not mean that every Orthodox Christian must read several Patristic commentaries before being able to understand and interpret the Bible but it does mean that Biblical interpretation is a collaborative Church based task. At times in our lives, each of us may well find ourselves in the situation of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was reading the prophet Isaiah when he was asked by the apostle, St. Philip, "Do you understand what you are reading?" and his reply might well be our reply: "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me? (Acts 8.30-31). In the same way that St. Philip helped the Ethiopian eunuch to understand the Scriptures, so we can seek the help of the

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<sup>50</sup> For practical proposals, see Father John Breck, *The Power of the Word in the Worshipping Church*.

<sup>51</sup> See the entries on "Alexandria," "Antioch" and "Exegesis" in McGuckin, *Patristic Theology*, 4-6, 15-18, 134-137.

saintly interpreters of the Church's own Tradition whilst recognising that this is a long process in which preliminary and fallible judgements are inevitable.

In seeking to participate in Orthodox Biblical interpretation today, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the teaching ministry of the Church lies within the oversight and leadership of the bishops in communion and their representatives, the priests and deacons. The Church's interpretation of Scripture is an apostolic work and it must remain within the apostles' fellowship and prayers to be reliably Orthodox in character. Within this ecclesial framework, we can be confident as St. Barnabas was, paraphrasing Isaiah 42:6, that "I, the Lord your God, have called you in righteousness, and I will grasp your hand and empower you."<sup>52</sup> If each of us, like St. Barnabas, experience the study of the Bible as "a joyful occupation," we can be confident, and perhaps at times surprised, at how the Lord will grasp our hand and empower us to do His work, which then becomes our work.

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<sup>52</sup> *The Letter of St. Barnabas*, edited by Jack N. Sparks, trans. Robert A. Kraft, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1978), 14.7; p. 293.

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