

Much study of Scripture by modern western scholars has adopted an analytical approach, breaking up each book into what are seen as its original sources. The connecting links are unraveled, and the Bible is reduced to a series of isolated units. Recently, there has been a reaction against this, with biblical critics in the west devoting much greater attention to the way in which these primary units have come to be joined together. This is something that we Orthodox may certainly welcome. We must see the unity of Scripture as well as the diversity, the all-embracing end as well as the scattered beginnings. Orthodox prefers for the most part a "synthetic" rather than an analytical style of hermeneutics, seeing the Bible as an integrated whole, with Christ everywhere as the bond of union.

Such, as we have just seen, is precisely the effect of reading Scripture within the context of the Church's worship. As the lessons for the Annunciation and Holy Saturday make clear, everywhere in the Old Testament we find signposts and waymarks pointing to the mystery of Christ and His Mother Mary. Interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New, and the New in the light of the Old – as the Church lectionary encourages us to do – we discover how the whole of Scripture finds its point of convergence in the Savior.

Orthodoxy makes extensive use of this "typological" method of interpretation, whereby "types" of Christ, signs and symbols of His work, are to be detected throughout the Old Testament. Melchizedek, for example, the priest-king of Salem, who offered bread and wine to Abraham (Gen. 14:18), is regarded as a "type" of Christ not only by the Fathers but equally in the New Testament itself (Heb. 5:6; 7:1-19). The rock that flowed with water in the wilderness of Sinai (Ex. 17:6; Num. 30:7-11) is likewise a symbol of Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). Typology explains the choice of lessons, not only on Holy Saturday, but throughout the 'second half of Lent. Why are the Genesis readings in, the sixth week dominated by the figure of Joseph? Why read from the Book of Job in Holy Week? Because Joseph and Job, who both suffered innocently, foreshadow the redemptive suffering of Christ on the Cross.

We can discover many other correspondences between the Old and New Testament by using a biblical concordance. Often the best commentary of all is simply a concordance, or an edition of the Bible with well-chosen marginal cross-references. Only connect. It all ties up. In the words of Father Alexander Schmemmann, "A Christian is the one who, wherever he looks, finds everywhere Christ, and rejoices in Him." This is true in particular of the biblical Christian. Wherever he looks, on every page, he finds everywhere Christ.

The Bible as Personal

According to Saint Mark the Monk ("Mark the Ascetic," fifth/sixth century), **"He who is humble in his thoughts and engaged in spiritual work, when he reads the Holy Scriptures, will apply everything to himself and not to his neighbor."** We are to look throughout Scripture for a personal application. Our question is not simply "What does it mean?" but "What does it mean for me?" As Saint Tikhon insists, "Christ Himself is speaking to you." Scripture is a direct, intimate dialogue between the Savior and myself-Christ addressing me and my heart responding. That is the fourth criterion in our Bible reading.

I am to see all the narratives in Scripture as part of my own personal story. The description of Adam's fall is equally an account of something in my own experience. Who is Adam? His name means simply "man," "human": it is I who am Adam. It is to me that God says, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). We often ask, "Where is God?" But the real question is the one that God puts to the Adam in each one of us: "Where are you?"

Who is Cain, the murderer of his brother? It is I. God's challenge, "Where is Abel your brother?" (Gen. 4:9), is addressed to the Cain in each of us. The way to God lies through love for other people, and there is no other way. Disowning my sister or brother, I replace the image of God with the mark of Cain, and deny my essential humanity.

The same personal application is evident in the Lenten services, and above all in the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete. "I am the man who fell among thieves," we say (see Luke 10:30); "I was Your younger son, and wasted the wealth that You gave me...and now I am starved and hungry" (see Luke 15:11-14). "Who are the sheep, and who are the goats?" the Desert Fathers of Egypt used to ask (see Matt. 25:31-46). "The sheep are known to God," they replied. "As for the goats – that means me."

There are three steps to be taken when reading Scripture. First, we reflect that what we have in Scripture is sacred history: the history of the world from the Creation, the history of God's chosen people, the history of God Himself incarnate in Palestine, the history of the "wonderful works" (Acts 2:11) after Pentecost. We are never to forget that what we find in the Bible is not an ideology, not a philosophical theory, but a historical faith.

Next, we observe the particularity, the specificity, of this sacred history. In the Bible we find God intervening at specific times and in particular places, entering into dialogue with individual humans. We see before us the distinctive calls issued by God to each different person, to Abraham, Moses, and David, to Rebekah and Ruth, to Isaiah and the prophets. We see God becoming incarnate once only, in a particular corner of the earth, at a particular moment and from a particular Mother. This particularity we are to regard not as a scandal but as a blessing. Divine love is universal in its scope, but always personal in its expression.

This sense of the specificity of the Bible is a vital element in the Orthodox "scriptural mind." If we really love the Bible, we will love genealogies and details of dating and geography. One of the best ways to enliven the study of Scripture is to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Walk where Christ walked. Go down near the Dead Sea, climb the mountain of the Temptation, scan the desolation, feel how Christ must have felt during His forty days alone in the wilderness. Drink from the well where Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman. Take a boat out on the Sea of Galilee, have the sailors stop the engine, and gaze in silence across the water. Go at night to the Garden of Gethsemane, sit in the dark under the ancient olives, and look across the valley to the lights of the city. Taste to the utmost the characteristic "isness" of the historical setting, and take that experience back to the daily Scripture reading.

Then we are to take a third step. After reliving Bible history in all its particularity, we are to apply it directly to ourselves. We are to say to ourselves, "These are not just distant places, events in the remote past. They belong to my own encounter with the Lord. The stories include me."

Betrayal, for instance, is part of the personal story of everyone. Have we not all betrayed others at some time in our life, and have we not all known what it is to be betrayed? And does not the memory of these moments leave deep, continuing scars on our psyche? Reading, then, the account of Saint Peter's betrayal of Jesus and of his restoration after the resurrection, we can see ourselves as each an actor in the story. Imagining what both Peter and Christ experienced at the moment immediately after the betrayal, we make their feelings our own. I am Peter; in the situation of betrayal, can I also be Christ? Reflecting likewise on the moment of reconciliation – seeing how the risen Savior with a love utterly devoid of sentimentality restored the fallen Peter to fellowship, seeing how Peter on his side had the humility and courage to accept this restoration-we ask ourselves: How Christlike am I to those who have betrayed me? And – after my own acts of betrayal, am I able to accept the forgiveness of others – am I able to forgive myself?

Take, as another example, the "woman who was a sinner," who emptied the flask of ointment over Christ's feet (Luke 7:36-50), and whom some identify with Saint Mary Magdalene, although that is not the usual Orthodox interpretation. Can I see her mirrored in myself? Do I share in her generosity, in her spontaneity and loving impulsiveness? "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much." Or am I calculating; mean, timid, holding myself back, never willing to commit myself fully to anything, either good or bad? As the Desert Fathers say, "Better someone who has sinned, if he knows he has sinned and repents, than a person who has not sinned and thinks of himself as righteous."

A personal approach of this kind means that in reading the Bible we are not simply detached and objective observers, absorbing information, taking note of facts. The Bible is not merely: a work of literature or a collection of historical documents, although certainly it can be approached on that level. It is, much more fundamentally, a sacred book, addressed to believers, to be read with faith and love. We shall not profit fully from reading the Gospels unless we are in love with Christ. "Heart speaks to heart" I enter into the living truth of Scripture only when my heart responds with love to the heart of God.

Reading Scripture in this way – in obedience, as a member of the Church, finding Christ everywhere, and seeing everything as part of my own personal story – we shall sense something of the power and healing to be found in the Bible. Yet always in our biblical voyage of exploration we are only at the very beginning. We are like someone launching out in a tiny boat across a limitless ocean. But, however great the journey, we can embark on it today, at this very hour, in this very moment.

At the high point of his spiritual crisis, wrestling with himself alone in the garden, Saint Augustine heard a child's voice crying out, "Take up and read, take up and read." He took up his Bible and read, and what he read altered his entire life. Let us do the same: **Take up and read.**

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 118 [119]:105).

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<http://ChurchMotherOfGod.org>

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http://nynjoca.org/about_orthodoxy.html

How to Read the Bible

Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (2 Tim. 3:16)

"If an earthly king, our emperor," wrote Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk (1724-83), "wrote you a letter, would you not read it with joy? Certainly, with great rejoicing and careful attention." But what, he asks, is our attitude toward the letter that has been addressed to us by no one less than God Himself? "You have been sent a letter, not by any earthly emperor, but by the King of Heaven. And yet you almost despise such a gift, so priceless a treasure." To open and read this letter, Saint Tikhon adds, is to enter into a personal conversation face-to-face with the living God. "Whenever you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And while you read; you are praying and talking to Him."

Such exactly is our Orthodox attitude to the reading of Scripture. I am to see the Bible as God's personal letter sent specifically to myself. The words are not intended merely for others, far away and long ago, but they are written particularly and directly to me, here and now. Whenever we open our Bible, we are engaging in a creative dialogue with the Savior. In listening, we also respond. "Speak, for Your servant hears," we reply to God as we read (1 Sam. 3:10); "Here am I" (Is. 6:8).

Two centuries after Saint Tikhon, at the Moscow Conference held in 1976 between the Orthodox and the Anglicans, the true attitude toward Scripture was expressed in different but equally valid terms. This joint statement, signed by the delegates of both traditions, forms an excellent summary of the Orthodox view: "The Scriptures constitute a coherent whole. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative witness to God's revelation of Himself in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word, and in the whole history of salvation, and as such express the word of God in human language. We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church. Our approach to the Bible is one of obedience."

Combining Saint Tikhon's words and the Moscow statement, the four key characteristics which mark the Orthodox "Scriptural mind" may be distinguished. First, our reading of Scripture is obedient. Second, it is ecclesial, in union with the Church. Third, it is Christ-centered. Fourth, it is personal.

Reading the Bible with Obedience

First of all, we see Scripture as inspired by God, and we approach it in a spirit of obedience. The divine inspiration of the Bible is emphasized alike by Saint Tikhon and by the 1976 Moscow Conference: Scripture is "a letter" from "the King of Heaven," writes Saint Tikhon; "Christ Himself is speaking to you." The Bible, states the Conference, is God's "authoritative witness" of Himself, expressing "the word of God in human language." Our response to this divine word is rightly one of obedient receptivity. As we read, we wait on the Spirit.

Since it is divinely inspired, the Bible possesses a fundamental unity, a total coherence, because the same Spirit speaks on every page. We do not refer to it as "the books" in the plural, ta biblia. We call it "the Bible," "the Book," in the singular. It is one book, one Holy Scripture, with the same message throughout one composite and yet a single story from Genesis to Revelation.

At the same time, however, the Bible is also humanly expressed. It is an entire library of distinct writings, composed at varying times, by different persons in widely diverse situations. We find God speaking here “at various times and in various ways” (Heb. 1:1). Each work in the Bible reflects the outlook of the age in which it was written and the particular viewpoint of the author. For God does not abolish our created personhood but enhances it. Divine grace cooperates with human freedom: we are “fellow workers,” cooperators with God (1 Cor. 3:9). In the words of the second-century Letter to Diognetus, “God persuades, He does not compel; for violence is foreign to the divine nature.” So it is precisely in the writing of inspired Scripture. The author of each book was not just a passive instrument, a flute played by the Spirit, a dictation machine recording a message. Every writer of Scripture contributes his or her particular human gifts. Alongside the divine aspect, there is also a human element in Scripture, and we are to value both.

Each of the four Evangelists, for example, has his own particular stand point. Matthew is the most “ecclesiastical” and the most Jewish of the four, with his special interest in the relationship of the gospel to the Jewish Law, and his understanding of Christianity as the “New Law.” Mark writes in less polished Greek, closer to the language of daily life, and includes vivid narrative details not found in the other gospels. Luke emphasizes the universality of Christ’s love and His all-embracing compassion that extends equally to Jew and Gentile. The Fourth Gospel expresses a more inward and mystical approach, and was aptly styled by Saint Clement of Alexandria “a spiritual Gospel.” Let us explore and enjoy to the fullest this life-giving variety within the Bible.

Because Scripture is in this way the word of God expressed in human language, there is a place for honest and exacting critical inquiry when studying the Bible. Our reasoning brain is a gift from God, and we need not be afraid to use it to the utmost when reading Scripture. Orthodox Christians neglect at our peril the results of independent scholarly research into the origin, dates, and authorship of the books of the Bible, although we shall always want to test these results in the light of Holy Tradition.

Alongside this human element, however, we are always to see the divine aspect. These texts are not simply the work of the individual authors. What we hear in Scripture is not just human words, marked by a greater or lesser skill and perceptiveness, but the uncreated Word of God Himself – the Father’s Word “coming forth from silence,” to use the phrase of Saint Ignatius of Antioch – the eternal Word of salvation; Approaching the Bible, then, we come not merely out of curiosity or to gain historical information; We come with a specific question: “How can I be saved?”

Obedient receptivity to God’s word means above all two things: a sense of wonder and an attitude of listening. (1) Wonder is easily quenched. Do we not feel all too often, as we read the Bible, that it has become overly familiar, even boring? Have we not lost our alertness, our sense of expectation? How far are we changed by what we read? Continually, we need to cleanse the doors of our perception and to look with new eyes, in awe and amazement, at the miracle that is set before us-the ever-present miracle of God’s divine word of salvation expressed in human language. As Plato remarked, “The beginning of truth is to wonder at things.”

Some years ago I had a dream that I still remember vividly. I was back in the house where, for three years as a child, I lived in boarding school. A friend took me first through the rooms already familiar to me from the waking life of my childhood. Then, in my dream we entered other rooms that I had never seen before – spacious, elegant, filled with light. Finally, we came to a small, dark chapel, with golden mosaics gleaming in the candlelight. “How strange,” I said to my companion, “that I have lived here for so long, and yet I never knew about the existence of all these rooms.” And he replied, “But it is always so.” I awoke, and behold, it was a dream.

Should we not react in the presence of the Bible with exactly the same surprise, the same feeling of joy and discovery, that I experienced in my dream? There are so many rooms in Scripture that we have never as yet entered. There is so much for us still to explore.

(2) If obedience means wonder, it also means listening. Such indeed is the literal meaning of the word for “obey” in both Greek and Latin – to hear. The trouble is that most of us are better at talking than at listening. An incident on the Goon Show, which I used to follow eagerly on the radio in my student days, sums

up our predicament all too well. The telephone rings, and one of the characters picks it up. “Hello,” he exclaims, “hello, hello.” His volume rises. “Who is speaking? I can’t hear you. Hello, who is speaking?” A voice at the other end says, “You are speaking.” “Ah,” he replies, “I thought the voice sounded familiar.” And he puts the receiver down.

One of the primary requirements, if we are to acquire a “scriptural mind,” is to stop talking and to start listening. When we enter an Orthodox Church decorated in the traditional way, and look up towards the sanctuary, we see there in the apse the figure of the Mother of God with her hands raised to heaven – the ancient scriptural manner of praying that many still use today. Such is also to be our attitude to Scripture – an attitude of openness and attentive receptivity, our hands invisibly outstretched to heaven.

As we read our Bible, then, we are to model ourselves in this way on the Blessed Virgin Mary, for she is supremely the one who listens. At the Annunciation, listening to the angel, she responds obediently, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Had she not first listened to God’s word and received it spiritually in her heart, she would never have borne the Word of God bodily in her womb. Receptive listening continues to be her attitude throughout the Gospel story. At Christ’s nativity, after the adoration of the shepherds, “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). After the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years old, “His Mother kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). The vital importance of listening is also indicated in the last words attributed to the Theotokos in Holy Scripture, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. “Whatever He says to you, do it” (John 2:5), she says to the servants – and to each one of us.

In all this the Virgin serves as a mirror and living icon of the biblical Christian. Hearing God’s word, we are to be like her: pondering, keeping all these things in our hearts, doing whatever He tells us. We are to listen in obedience while God speaks.

Understanding the Bible through the Church

As the Moscow Conference affirms, “**We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church.**” Our approach to the Bible is not only obedient but ecclesial. The words of Scripture, while addressed to us personally, are at the same time addressed to us as members of a community. Book and Church are not to be separated.

The interdependence of Church and Bible is evident in at least two ways. First, we receive Scripture through and in the Church. The Church tells us what is Scripture. In the first three centuries of Christian history, a lengthy process of sifting and testing was needed in order to distinguish between that which is authentically “canonical” Scripture, bearing authoritative witness to Christ’s person and message, and that which is “apocryphal,” useful perhaps for teaching, but not a normative source of doctrine. Thus, the Church has decided which books form the Canon of the New Testament. A book is not part of Holy Scripture because of any particular theory about its date and authorship, but because the Church treats it as canonical. Suppose, for example, that it could be proved that the Fourth Gospel was not actually written by Saint John the beloved disciple of Christ – in my view, there are in fact strong reasons for continuing to accept John’s authorship – yet, even so, this would not alter the fact that we regard the Fourth Gospel as Scripture. Why? Because the Fourth Gospel, whoever the author may be, is accepted by the Church and in the Church.

Secondly, we interpret Scripture through and in the Church. If it is the Church that tells us what is Scripture, equally it is the Church that tells us how Scripture is to be understood. Coming upon the Ethiopian as he read the Old Testament in his chariot, Philip the Deacon asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

“How can I,” answered the Ethiopian, “unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:30, 31).

His difficulty is also ours. The words of Scripture are not always self-explanatory. The Bible has a marvelous underlying simplicity, but when studied in detail it can prove a difficult book. God does indeed speak directly to the heart of each one of us during our Scripture reading – as Saint Tikhon says, our reading is a personal dialogue between each one and Christ Himself – but we also need guidance. And our guide is the Church. We make full use of our private understanding; illuminated by the Spirit. We make full use of biblical commentaries and of the findings of modern research. But we submit individual opinions, whether our own or those of the scholars, to the judgment of the Church.

We read the Bible personally, but not as isolated individuals. We say not “I” but “we.” We read as the members of a family, the family of the Orthodox Catholic Church. We read in communion with all the other members of the Body of Christ in all parts of the world and in all generations of time. This communal or catholic approach to the Bible is underlined in one of the

questions asked of a convert at the reception service used in the Russian Church: “Do you acknowledge that the Holy Scripture must be accepted and interpreted in accordance with the belief which has been handed down by the Holy Fathers, and which the Holy Orthodox Church, our Mother, has always held and still does hold?” The decisive criterion of our understanding of what Scripture means is the mind of the Church.

To discover this “mind of the Church,” where do we begin? A first step is to see how Scripture is used in worship. How in particular are biblical lessons chosen for reading at the different feasts? A second step is to consult the writings of the Church Fathers, especially St. John Chrysostom. How do they analyze and apply the text of Scripture? An ecclesial manner of reading the Bible is in this way both liturgical and patristic.

To illustrate what it means to interpret Scripture in a liturgical way, consider the Old Testament lessons at Vespers for the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25) and at Vespers on Holy Saturday, the first part of the ancient Paschal Vigil. At the Annunciation there are five readings:

(1) Genesis 28:10-17: Jacob’s dream of a ladder set up from earth to heaven.

(2) Ezekiel 43:27-44: the prophet’s vision of the Jerusalem temple, with the closed gate through which none but the Prince may pass.

(3) Proverbs 9:1-11: one of the great Sophianic passages in the Old Testament, beginning “Wisdom has built her house.”

(4) Exodus 3:1-8: Moses at the Burning Bush.

(5) Proverbs 8:22-30: another Sophianic text, describing Wisdom’s place in God’s eternal providence: “I have been established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth.”

In these passages from the Old Testament, we have a series of powerful images to indicate the role of the Theotokos in God’s unfolding plan of salvation. She is Jacob’s ladder, for by means of her, God comes down and enters our world, assuming the flesh that she supplies. She is both Mother and Ever-Virgin; Christ is born from her, yet she remains still inviolate, the gate of her virginity sealed. She provides the humanity or house which Christ the Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24) takes as His dwelling; alternatively, she is herself to be regarded as God’s Wisdom. She is the Burning Bush, who contains within her womb the uncreated fire of the Godhead and yet is not consumed. From all eternity, “before there was ever an earth,” she was forechosen by God to be His Mother.

Reading these passages in their original context within the Old Testament, we might not at once appreciate that they foreshadow the Savior’s Incarnation from the Virgin. But, by exploring the use made of the Old Testament in the Church lectionary, we can discover layer upon layer of meanings that are far from obvious at first sight.

The same thing happens when we consider how Scripture is used on Holy Saturday. Here there are no less than fifteen Old Testament lessons. Regrettably, in many of our parishes the majority of these are omitted, so God’s people are starved of their proper biblical nourishment. This long sequence of readings sets before us the deeper significance of Christ’s “passing over” through death to resurrection. First among the lessons is the account of the creation (Gen. 1:1-13): Christ’s Resurrection is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Rev. 21:5), the inauguration of a new age, the age to come. The third lesson describes the Jewish ritual of the Passover meal: Christ crucified and risen is the new Passover, the Paschal Lamb who alone can take away the sin of the world (1 Cor. 5:7; John 1:29). The fourth lesson is the book of Jonah in its entirety: the prophet’s three days in the belly of the fish foreshadow Christ’s resurrection after three days in the tomb (Matt. 12:40). The sixth lesson recounts the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites (Ex. 13:20-15:19): Christ leads us from the bondage of Egypt (sin), through the Red Sea (baptism), into the promised land (the Church). The final lesson is the story of the three Holy Children in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3), once more a “type” or foreshowing of Christ’s rising from the tomb.

How can we develop this ecclesial and liturgical way of reading Scripture in the Bible study circles within our parishes? One person can be given the task of noting whenever a particular passage is used for a festival or saint’s day, and the group can then discuss together the reasons why it has been so chosen. Others in the group may be assigned to do homework among the Fathers, relying above all upon the biblical homilies of St. John Chrysostom, which are available in English translation in the series Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, reissued by Eerdmans. Initially we may be disappointed: the Fathers’ manner of thinking and speaking is often strikingly different from our own today. But there is gold in the patristic texts, if only we have the persistence and imagination to discover it.

Christ, the Heart of the Bible

The third requirement in our reading of Scripture is that it should be Christ-centered. If we agree with the 1976 Moscow Conference that the “Scriptures constitute a coherent whole,” where are we to locate their wholeness and coherence? In the person of Christ. He is the unifying thread, that runs through the entirety of the Bible from the first sentence to the last. Jesus meets us on every page. It all ties up because of Him. “In Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17NRSV).