

An Orthodox Approach to Reading the Scriptures



St. Elias Catechism 101 Class
October 9, 2024

“How to Read the Bible” by Metropolitan KALLISTOS Ware of blessed memory

“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*.’

“We may distinguish the four key characteristics which mark the Orthodox ‘Scriptural mind’ as follows: 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*.”

The Purpose of Scripture

“You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings...Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with *the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” - 2 Timothy 3:10-17

The Christological Hermeneutic

Luke 24:1-49

“Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” v. 27

“Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.” vv. 44-45

The Christological Hermeneutic cont'd

“It is the Church that produces the canonical Scriptures. This means in the first place the writings of the New Testament. Yet the Hebrew Scriptures are also to be understood and interpreted in relation to Jesus Christ, who is both their source and their fulfillment. He is their *source* because he is the Logos, the eternal Word of God, who serves both as the agent of creation and as the ultimate content or referent of the prophetic oracles. And he is the *fulfillment* of the Hebrew Scriptures because at the deepest level of meaning they point forward to him and his saving work. Christ, therefore, provides the true key to the inner meaning of the Law and the Prophets. Accordingly, Christ himself is our ‘hermeneutical principle’ or principle of interpretation. It is from this perspective that Orthodox Christianity holds both the Old and New Testaments to be ‘books of the Church.’”

Fr. John Breck

The Apostolic Application of the Christological Hermeneutic

Acts 2:14-41 - The Sermon at Pentecost

Acts 3:1-26 - The Lame Beggar Healed

Acts 7:1-53 - The Stoning of Stephen

Acts 9:19-22 - The Preaching of Saul (Paul)

I Corinthians 10:1-11 - The Rock was Christ

The Two Senses of Scripture

Literal

Spiritual

“The literal sense in itself is incomplete. A further step in the hermeneutic process has to be taken, to translate the results of exegesis into a living and life-giving witness for people of today. Our study of the Bible...should lead us from the literal sense to the spiritual sense: from the original meaning of a passage to its significance as the Word of God for the salvation of those who receive it with faith.”

Fr. John Breck

The Four Layers of Scripture

Historical/Literal - What happened?

Christological/Allegorical - What does this passage teach us about Christ?

Moral/Tropological - What does this passage teach us about how we should live?

Eschatological/Anagogical - What does this passage say about things to come?

Examples from Scripture

Creation - Reciprocal role between Scripture and worship and how the two inform one another.

Genesis 6-9 - The story of the Flood and what it says about what lies ahead.

Genesis 22 - The testing of Abraham and the foreshadowing of the Cross.

Exodus 1 - Shiprah and Puah and our struggle with the passions.

Exodus 15 - The waters of Marah and the preaching of the Apostles.

Exodus 17 - Israel's battle with the Amalekites and our struggle with the passions.

“Scripture in Tradition”

“Scripture took shape within the matrix of ancient Church tradition. Rather than seeing the two as either complementary or mutually exclusive, we need to consider them from the perspective of their historical development. Tradition has been aptly described as the life of the Holy Spirit within the Church, the presence of the divine, sanctifying Life within the Body of believers. It may be likened to a great river, whose main current is Scripture. Scripture is the normative or ‘canonical’ witness that serves as the touchstone by which all traditions are measured and all authentic Tradition is discerned. Orthodoxy sees the relationship between the two in a way that can be described not as Scripture *or* Tradition, or Scripture *and* Tradition, but Scripture *in* Tradition. This is because Scripture *is* Tradition, in the sense that the New Testament writings are a part of Tradition and constitute its normative element. Those writings came forth from the Church’s life and proclamation, and they have continued through the ages to be the measure, rule or ‘canon’ of Christian faith.”

Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church Fr. John Breck

St. Irenaeus and the Valentinian Heretics

“Such, then, is their system, which neither *the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered*...they strive to weave ropes of sand while they endeavor to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles...In doing so, however, they disregard *the order and the connection of the Scriptures*, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth.”

Against Heresies 1.8.1

St. Irenaeus and the Valentinian Heretics, cont'd

“Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that *this* was the beautiful image of the king which the skilful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of a king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king’s form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king.”

AH 1.8.1