

# The Interpretation of the Old Testament Texts in Eastern Orthodox Tradition

## – Abstract –

The interpretation of the Holy Scripture in the Eastern Orthodox area entails a continuous dialogue with the Word of God. This mysterious work can only be achieved through the Holy Spirit, following the creed of the Church. According to Father Ioan Chirilă, only such a context can generate and characterise an Orthodox interpretation/exegesis. In other words, the Orthodox interpreter validates his exegetic act only by faithfully relating to these intertwining reference points. The interpretation of the Holy Scripture aims to an encounter with the Logos. The One Who guides man towards Him is the Spirit, to Whom the interpreter must entrust/give himself. Only under these conditions can he embody the scriptural word and, implicitly, truly live within an ecclesiastical community, without which he/she cannot correctly interpret “*the event* of Christ or His scriptural heritage”. Consequently, in the Christian East, the interpretation of the Holy Scripture is made to shape Christ’s mystical body and not for the sake of interpretation or of knowledge. Likewise, Orthodoxy does not accept absolutized personal interpretations, which are not part of and do not follow the confessions of the Fathers to whom the Tradition of the Church has adhered. This does not discourage creative interpretation, which is welcome and necessary, but the act of breaking the connection with the ecclesiastical Body and with the Tradition of the Church. Therefore, Father John Breck underlines the fact that “Orthodox exegetes support the absolute necessity of subscribing their reflections to the thinking of the Church. This means aligning the exegetic interpretation to the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Holy Tradition, accepting the exegetic work as *diakonia*, namely the serving of the Church and the fulfilment of this work in the interest of the Church and its mission in the world.” [our translation].

Patristic tradition is normative for Holy Scripture hermeneutics and exegesis. In the Eastern area, the interpretation of the holy text is made in the spirit of the Fathers, following their paradigm, model, and manner of relating to the Scripture. Thus, the Fathers of the Church are granted the quality of mediators between the contemporary interpreter and the scriptural text. However, how the Orthodox interpreter relates to the Holy Scripture using patristic theologisation is not always clearly stated or unanimously accepted by biblical scholars. The excessive use of patristic texts, without adhering to and making them accessible in the contemporary context, entails an involution in the interpretive endeavour. What the

Fathers wrote must be interpreted in the historical context of those times, to be able to fathom the theological message of their scholia, commentaries or homilies. Predrag Dragutinovic and Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev underscore the necessity of adhering to patristic tradition by “their cultural, historical and spiritual dimension”. [our translation]. Therefore, what we assert must be part of and continue the confessions of the Fathers, for Tradition is a vital flow, which organically connects the past and the present.

Recently, a group of biblical scholars has tried to define the principles underpinning the adherence to patristic hermeneutics, but they have failed to reach a consensus. The specification of a personal hermeneia, which was undertaken by certain specialists, such as Savas Agourides, has not had a large-scale reach either. The fact is, however, that, in Eastern Orthodox tradition, the interpreter of the Holy Scripture is encouraged to go back to the Fathers, just like the 1936 Athens Congress stated. This return to the Tradition of the Church entails, first, acquiring “the mind” of the Fathers and not subserviently quoting them. Having “the mind” of the Fathers means knowing their spirituality and scientific background, which were deeply rooted in the life of the Church. By that means, there is every chance the interpreter will acquire the mind of the Fathers, which guide him towards the mind or the understanding of Christ, the ultimate authority on the Holy Scripture.

The habilitation thesis that I will develop follows these principles relating to the interpretation of the Holy Scripture in the Eastern Orthodox environment. To have a broader and, at the same time, more comprehensive perspective on how Eastern hermeneutics and exegesis are understood, I have resorted to the writings of biblical scholars and theologians from the most representative theological environments, namely the Romanian one (Mircea Basarab, Ioan Chirilă, Constantin Oancea), the Greek one (Theodore Stylianopoulos, Savas Agouridis, Ioannis Karavidopoulos, Ioannis Panagopoulos), the Russian one (George Florovsky, Hilarion Alfeyev), the Serbian one (Predrag Dragutinovic) and, last but not least, the Western one, in particular the American one (John Breck, Eugen Pentiu, K. M. George, John McGuckin).

In my studies, I have laid particular emphasis on the understanding of the Old Testament as it was regarded in the Tradition of the Church. I have been faithful to the Holy Scripture as the revealed word of God, to patristic tradition as a reference point in the understanding of the theological message of the holy text and to the truth of faith confessed in the decisions of Ecumenical Councils, knowing, without the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, I will not be able to engage in a living dialogue with the Word of God. My aim over the years has been that of developing a biblical theology in which the embodiment of the

scriptural text and personal adherence to the revealed text up to the state in which unity between the hagiographer, the interpreter and God is achieved should become a requirement present in all my studies.

The structure of this paper highlights the directions which I have undertaken first in my doctoral research and later in all the studies I have written throughout my academic research. The first section will be dedicated to the historical-critical method. Here, I will emphasise how the Orthodox interpreter can relate to the rigours of the critical school of interpretation, without conflicting with patristic tradition. The next section will tackle the relation between Christian and Jewish traditional interpretation. I will mostly highlight the resemblances and common elements, emphasizing the fact that, for the Orthodox exegete, the Jewish tradition of interpretation is much closer to the Eastern peculiar approach to the holy text than it might seem upon first interaction with it. Subsequently, in the following sections, I will underscore two directions that are specific to the Christian East and which show two types of interpretation present in the Tradition of the Church, namely the visual and the auditive. The artists/painters/icon painters for whom the object of their artistic act is an event, an episode or a person from the Holy Scripture are carrying out an act of interpretation, which can be fructified in the endeavour to understand the holy text. Likewise, hymnographers/melodists achieve an interpretive act, especially when tackling a scriptural text or subject. Both types of relating to the holy text, either through the icon or through the liturgical hymnography, can be regarded by the interpreter as being hermeneutic reference points.

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