

# The gospel as an image of the kingdom: A eucharistic reading of the Bible in the Orthodox tradition

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## Introduction

It is sometimes said that the Bible in the Orthodox Church is not so much read and studied, as it is venerated. And indeed, as is often the case with stereotypes, a first glance at the Orthodox tradition shows a relative lack of a sustained and deep engagement with the biblical material, at least at the research level. It is hard to find any substantial contribution to modern biblical scholarship from Orthodox researchers. Nevertheless, before we pass such a harsh judgment, it will be necessary to take a closer look at the way the gospel is read, received and used in the Orthodox tradition. For this however, we need to consider the wider use and the context of the reception of the Bible in the Orthodox world, both at the pastoral and at the scholarly level.

Perhaps it is useful to say here that I have been struggling with Scripture at both of these two levels of reference, pastoral work and scholarly research and teaching, as a priest and also as a university lecturer. The two directions are certainly distinct. They employ different methodologies, they have different aims, and they are addressed to different groups of people – the community of the faithful and the academic community. Nevertheless, I never felt that these two directions were pulling me towards contrary or incompatible directions, although it may certainly be the case for other pastors or scholars. The priest in me started with the presupposition that the gospel is a means of divine revelation that intends to lead the community of the people who are

gathered in the name of the Lord, but this same impetus made it necessary for me to study and unlock the message of the Word, as much as possible. By the same token, the scholar in me made use of the several ways ancient, medieval and modern research has employed to study the content and the context of Scripture, but this also meant that the Bible could not be understood properly if it was simply seen as a text, separated from the community that wrote it and the context of faith that gave sense to it.

Likewise, as a writer, whether I was trying to concentrate on hard research in Patristic thought or in an explanation of a Christological doctrine aimed at a wider audience, I felt that the Bible had to be recognized as a foundation of Christian thought and to be used accordingly. One reason for this is that in the modern context of several Christian groups with their own traditions, doctrines and theological sensitivities, the Bible is perhaps the only common level of reference. An attempt towards an honest and sustained theological dialogue among them needs to start from the common basis they all share. If this dialogue shows that they do not all read the same material in the same way, perhaps the reasons for this divergence can be addressed, thus encouraging a truly ecumenical dialogue – one that that would try to face and investigate differences rather than to gloss over them.

Furthermore, the continuous deference to the Bible is not useful only as part of the ecumenical dialogue, but also for the way each community understands its own teachings and ways. To say this within a specifically Orthodox context (although it is also the case with every Christian denomination) many of the doctrines and the practices that are essential to Orthodox theology, such as the sign of the cross, the significance of Mary, the completely human and completely divine natures of Jesus Christ, the prayer of the heart, or the significance of corporate worship, do not always have obvious biblical roots. Sometimes the reason for this is that they are based on practices that are as ancient as the Gospel itself, they belonged to the wider context that spawned the sacred books, and it was not necessary to include them as part of the narrative of the life, Passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With others, while it is possible to find a biblical connection, they did not develop as practices or doctrines until several centuries later. In such

cases, Scripture can serve as a mirror of truth. Perhaps it is too narrow-minded to limit our understanding of Christianity to a reading of the biblical text as a text only, without

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its historical, cultural and spiritual context, but then it becomes necessary to understand and demonstrate why such extra-biblical practices and teachings are serving the message of the gospel and lead us – the faithful and the scholar alike – towards a deeper understanding of the gospel as salvation, rather than distracting us from it.

### Liturgical use

First, let us take a look at the way Scripture is used in the liturgical services of the Orthodox Church. The services repeat and amplify the content of the Gospels. The reading of the entire New Testament (except for the book of Revelation) is completed within one year, starting with Jn 1.1-18 at the Easter service. The Gospel book itself is an object of veneration, and the Little Entrance of the Divine Liturgy (which corresponds roughly to the entrance of the clergy in Western services) is the ceremonious entrance of the Gospel book, carried by priests and deacons into the altar. Much of the text of the Divine Liturgy, as well as of other services, is derived from biblical sources, especially the Psalter, although the services reflect a painstaking effort to articulate biblical expressions in every turn. Psalms are read in various places of the services, especially in the service of Vespers and Matins, where the whole Psalter is normally read during the course of one week.

The service of Matins includes the reading of Psalms 19, 20, 3, 37, 62, 87, 102, 142 and 50, in addition to a gospel reading.<sup>1</sup> The service of Sunday Matins normally has a resurrectional tone, and its lectionary is based on a rotation of eleven post-resurrection readings from the gospels. Some of the hymns that

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<sup>1</sup> For the text and the rubrics of the services, there are several publications in English, such as the collection of liturgical texts in the *Liturgikon* of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America.

are sung later in the service, follow the gospel reading of the day, and elaborate on its content. In addition, after the reading of the gospel passage, the gospel book is brought out to the middle of the nave, and it is venerated by all the faithful.

The Orthodox liturgical life is generally characterized by a continuous chanting worship, with most prayers chanted or intoned rather than spoken. It also includes collections of hymns that develop the meaning of the feast of  
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the day (such as the Canon, which generally consists of thirty two stanzas). The content of these hymns is almost always strongly theological, and rarely emotional. Although apocryphal gospels and lives of saints are used as sources, most of these cycles are based on the gospel narratives and on the Patristic reflections on them. One good example of this is the Akathist hymn dedicated to Mary, which draws material from Biblical and deuterocanonical sources, in order to highlight all the stages of the life of Mary, such as the annunciation and the nativity of Christ, and her wider contribution to the Christological drama.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it is no accident that the people who contributed to the development of liturgy and hymnography were also fundamental in the formulation of doctrine and teaching, such as Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom (the two of them are traditionally credited with the liturgies still in use by the Orthodox Church) and John of Damascus (who is known for his systematization of Christian thought at his time, but also for introducing the system of the eight tones, and was the author of numerous hymns).

## Language

A difficulty at the pastoral level is that for several Orthodox traditions the language of worship differs from the language most people understand and

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<sup>2</sup> C. A. Trypanis (ed.), *Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantica* (Vienna: In Kommission bei Hermann Böhlhaus Nachf, 1968), and G. Papagiannis, *Akathist Hymn* (Thessaloniki: Vantias, 2006).

speak in everyday life, although perhaps not quite in the way that Latin differs from modern vernacular languages. Among traditional Orthodox countries, this is not a problem in Romania or in Arab countries, where there is virtually no distance between the liturgical and the vernacular language, but it is a problem in Slavic countries, since Church Slavonic is widely understood only within a church context, and differs significantly from vernacular spoken languages such as Russian or Serbian. It has become a problem fairly recently in Greece, because of a breakdown in the education system. Ancient Greek is not included in a rigorous way in secondary education anymore, and therefore it is becoming increasingly difficult for young Greeks to understand ecclesiastical Greek, which despite its venerable age, is not very different from

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modern Greek. The distance between ecclesiastical Greek and modern Greek is approximately the same as the distance between Elizabethan English and modern English, and only a generation ago the language of the Bible was fairly well and widely understood, at least among secondary school graduates with no particular theological education. It is a pity therefore, that the gap of understanding is widening, for the first time in many centuries. As a priest in an English-speaking community which includes people who grew up in Eastern Europe, young people have often approached me to say that they understood the subtleties of the Gospel reading more clearly when they heard it in English – a foreign language to them, yet much more systematically taught. This is unfortunate in many ways, especially since the Orthodox Church had no qualms about encouraging the use of vernacular languages for church use in the past, and even went as far as to invent an alphabet and start the written version of the Slavic language of the Balkans, so that the populations who received Christianity from them could use it to read the gospel and the liturgical texts. Therefore, we have to admit that there is a problem of biblical comprehension in certain parts of the Orthodox world.

Having said this, although one can make a case for the occasional updating of liturgical language in several cultures, something that involves successive editions of the biblical text, this would not be the best possible way forward in

the case of the Greek Church. The first reason is that, as it was already mentioned, very little effort is required to bridge the gap between spoken and liturgical language. The second reason is that it is important that the language in which the New Testament was written, which has also given us the oldest extant transcription of the Old Testament, continues to be used today as a language of worship, in at least one part of the world. In some ways this is a responsibility that comes with the gift of the Greek language.

This is not simply a romantic reflection on an idealized, and perhaps reconstructed antiquity that is preserved in a quasi-museum context, but precisely its opposite. Despite the challenges and the dramatic changes within modern Greek education in the last decades, the continuous use of biblical Greek for twenty centuries has preserved a certain subtle understanding among its more devoted speakers (something that may be observed more emphatically in monastic communities) that cannot be acquired by learning it as a foreign language. The verb ὀρθοτομῶ from 2 Tim. 2.15 for instance, which is difficult

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to translate because it evokes a specific image without a precise counterpart in a word structure (and has been rendered in various ways in English, from ‘rightly divide’ in the KJB, to ‘rightly handle’ in the RSV or ‘rightly explain’ in the NRSV and in several similar variants), has a presence in the Greek language before and after the New Testament (cf. Prov. 3.6, but also many occurrences in the writings of the Fathers, and even an extensive reflection on its meaning in the fifteenth century memoirs of Sylvester Syropoulos<sup>3</sup> who follows Chrysostom’s commentary on 2 Timothy and extends it to the ecclesiastical arguments of his day), can be understood inherently, when placed next to words with similar root and structure, such as καινοτομῶ (to innovate), διχοτομῶ (to cut in half) or ρυμοτομῶ (to design roads): the specific image of cutting forward that the word evokes, has relatives and a

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<sup>3</sup> Vitalien Laurent (ed.) *Les Mémoires du grand ecclésiarque de l’Église de Constantinople Sylvestre Syropoulos sur le concile de Florence (1438–1439)* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), 1971), 562.

context in real life. The problem of translation becomes even more dramatic when we come across words with multiple meanings at different levels, such as λόγος, ἐπιούσιος, δόξα, or πονηροῦ, whose intended ambiguity or rarity invites us to consider all of their meanings at the same time, rather than to choose *the* one correct meaning among them, to the exclusion of the other levels. The sense one has from the experience of the language as a living language, certainly helps.

Of course, it is not necessary to argue the importance of Greek in biblical studies. Nevertheless, there is another level in the subtle command of a language, which goes beyond scholarly familiarity. It is not enough to simply have a command of the apparatus within a classical – or liturgical – body of work. The ways of a language reflect also the landscape, the climate, the harshness of the light, and the ways that the speakers of this language have engaged with their environment, with the earth and the sea. A nation that has traditionally consisted of farmers and sailors receives a text such as the Song of Songs in a different way than a nation of accountants or warriors. This is not just about the cultural or symbolic significance of the words and the metaphors of the Bible. It is about the subtext, the subtleties that resonate from image to image, from metaphor to metaphor and from text to text, that urges the faithful to read John through Solomon, or Matthew through Isaiah,

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in some reference to the images that generated the words and the metaphors used by Scripture. While it may be possible to trace some of these paths linguistically, very often it is the more unexpected, and more subtle features of a language that point us towards some of the more difficult aspects of understanding. When Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman about the living water, he uses the word ἀλλόμενον (Jn 4.14). This is a rare word, which also appears in the variant διαλλόμενος in the Song of Songs (2.8). Although it is possible to translate both words as ‘leaping’, the linguistic connection between the two passages guides us to discern the desire of the beloved (who leaps over the hills to meet his bride), in what Jesus Christ offers to the Samaritan woman using the image of the living, leaping, loving water. This is one of the several

examples where the gospel should be read in the echo of specific images from the Old Testament, specifically the Septuagint.

It is, therefore, important to be able to experience Greek in its living continuity throughout the centuries – the entire range of Greek, from Homeric to modern Greek. When we try to understand a passage or a biblical image, it is often useful to let the words resonate within their own family, among their ancestors, their descendants and the various images that they expressed over the centuries, both inside and outside church culture.

This heritage extends, at least to some extent, to the entire Orthodox world. While the Slavonic and the Georgian language have nothing in common with Greek, the exegetical tradition in the entire East has been based on the Fathers who worked primarily within the Greek language. It is, after all, easy to point to cultural and linguistic differences as historical causes of ecclesiastical schisms.

## Biblical studies in the Orthodox world

If this is the case, why is biblical studies not particularly developed in the Greek or in the wider Orthodox world? Although it is possible to say that Orthodox theology has a considerable footprint in Western theological thought, in areas such as Patristics, Liturgy, Systematic theology or Ecclesiology, it is not easy to say that Orthodox theologians have much of a presence within modern international Biblical research, despite the recent contributions of scholars such as



John Breck,<sup>4</sup> Veselin Kesich,<sup>5</sup> Theodore Stylianopoulos,<sup>6</sup> John Karavidopoulos or Petros Vasileiadis.<sup>7</sup> This image might look even darker if we were to examine the previous generations of Orthodox theologians in the twentieth or late nineteenth century, when even among the greatest names of Orthodox theological thought (Florovsky, Lossky, Staniloae, Zizioulas, Yannaras), very few people from that generation had much of an interest in biblical studies, and it was just about possible for them to keep up with the critical historical methods that were developed in the West. In addition, even the ones among them who showed an interest in the biblical material, such as Panagiotis Trembelas in the past,<sup>8</sup> or John Behr in the present,<sup>9</sup> did not separate their approach from the Patristic or the liturgical legacy, and in this way it is hard to consider them ‘purebred’ Biblical scholars such as Jeremias and Bultmann.

The question at this point is whether this situation reflects a lack of interest in the textual roots of Christianity, or whether it suggests that the approach of traditional Orthodox theology cannot be separated from its Patristic or liturgical context, and thus it is not completely compatible with modern Western biblical scholarship, which is a distinct area of theological interest and research. I believe the answer is a combination of the two.

Considering sacred texts, liturgical traditions and practices, and their exegetical tradition, the way to monitor the way they are formulated, is to

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<sup>4</sup> John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001) and *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Veselin Kesich, *The Gospel Image of Christ* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2nd edn, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Stylianopoulos, *The Making of the New Testament: Church, Gospel, and Canon* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2014); *Encouraged by the Scriptures: Essays on Scripture, Interpretation, and Life* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011); *Sacred Text and Interpretation: Perspectives in Orthodox Biblical Studies* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007); *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Karavidopoulos and Vasileiadis have a long list of various contributions to biblical studies and research in Greece, which is difficult to be duplicated here.

<sup>8</sup> Trembelas was a quite influential scholar in Greece in the middle of the twentieth century, who, despite the controversy that followed regarding some of his views on Patristics, offered the most widely read modern commentary of the New Testament in Greek.

<sup>9</sup> Cf John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006).

remember that their point is the pursuit of the spiritual life. We can see therefore, how well their academic and their pastoral approach helps us understand the way they serve their purpose. In the Orthodox Church the Bible is considered a necessary entrance to the way towards salvation, but

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this does not mean that it is the sole foundation of the spiritual life. Even if we start with the argument that it contains everything that is necessary for our salvation, it is not considered a text that can be read without some preparation. In the few examples of exegesis that we find in the New Testament, we see that it is a text that needs to be ‘unlocked’ (Lk. 24.27), for which ‘someone needs to guide us’ (Acts 8.31). The Bible is read in the context of the wider life of the church, which brings within it the reference level that is necessary to unlock the text. The practice and the experience of the church are necessary to unlock and guide us through the text. Therefore, the Bible is read through the prism of the experience of the church rather than the other way round. This gives a relative pre-eminence to the church over the Bible. In some ways of course, it is possible to point to the mutual interdependence of the church and the Bible, arguing that while it is not possible to speak of a Christian church without a scriptural foundation, it is also not possible to consider that the Bible appeared fully formed, with no reference to the community that wrote it.

This is not a question of authority as it is often expressed in the opposition of magisterium vs. Scripture. If the first direction points to the determination of the way towards salvation through a vertical hierarchical structure and if the second points to a textual fundamentalism that ignores the ancient as well as the continuous context of the words, Orthodox theology cannot be identified with either one, nor with any intermediate position. Instead, we would start with the understanding of salvation as union with the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, and how this is expressed in the Church as the body of Christ in the Pauline sense. What has traditionally defined the Church as such is the presence of the body of Christ in it, in a historical or in a sacramental way – although another case could be made for

the space that is defined by the operation of the Holy Spirit. The Bible, as a text that both describes (and thus follows) and formulates (and thus precedes) the Eucharistic community, cannot be understood outside its immediate context. The hermeneutic approach that we find in the tradition of the Orthodox Church is based on this premise.

This is understood in a several ways. The earliest extant testimonies about the narratives that became the core of the written gospels suggest that they were read in the gatherings of the Eucharistic community, within

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the context of the teaching, and the communion in bread and wine.<sup>10</sup> This is hardly surprising, since it was not possible until much later to publish a high number of copies of the gospel, for wide dissemination and study, but it means much for the way the text was received, and ultimately, for the way it was put together: the narratives of the life, the ministry, the passion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, were solidified within the context of communal ritual worship, and this affects the way we read them. To be more precise, the gospel was not written so much in order to be read and studied, is it was in order to be heard, and to be received after a certain spiritual preparation, by baptised members of the body of the church, and with a specific purpose, in their preparation towards the sacrament of the Eucharist.

This has a direct bearing on our hermeneutics: when we come across various references to bread or wine, from the identification of Jesus as the Bread of Life (Jn 6.35) to the *epiousios* bread of the Lord's Prayer (which echoes the word *epiousa* – the day of tomorrow – in Proverbs and Acts), it is necessary to consider the context that formulated these narratives, not only in reference to the historical life of Jesus Christ himself (an area with no dearth of research and interest), but also in the life of the early church. In other words, to miss the liturgical setting which gave rise to the gospels as we know them today, and to miss the connection between the bread of the gospel and the Eucharistic bread that was distributed and consumed right after the

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<sup>10</sup> Justin Martyr *1 Apol.* 67.

reading, implies a methodological error tantamount to reading the text of *Romeo and Juliet* and ignoring that it is not a novel but a play, which was meant to be acted in a theatre, in front of an audience.

Following this line, we can consider the gospel a text that was primarily written for liturgical use, whose purpose and meaning is unlocked within the rites of the church, to those who participate in them. We find this hermeneutical view already in Luke 24, when Jesus appears to the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. This narrative follows closely the liturgical structure that Justin Martyr describes (reading and reflection on the Scriptures, followed by the blessing and the distribution of the Eucharistic bread and wine), but the event hangs on Luke 24.30-32, when it is the breaking of the bread that brings about the recognition of Jesus, and also leads the disciples to wonder why they

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did not recognize him although their hearts were burning when he opened the Scriptures to them. The narrative implies that it is not possible to understand the meaning of the gospel without and outside the sacrament. In this case the sacrament was connected with the physical and historical presence of Jesus Christ, although after Pentecost the Body of Christ, both in the Pauline and in the sacramental sense, both in terms of the gathering of the people and their transformation into members of the Body of Christ, and in the sense of the change of the bread and the wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, is constituted by the Holy Spirit.

### A liturgical approach

With this in mind, and considering how the gospel as we know it today received its form within the liturgical setting of the early church, we can discern images of clear liturgical significance in it. Much of what we see in the Book of Revelation for instance, makes sense in the context of liturgy. Revelation 4, to take an obvious example, is a precise description of the

beginning of a divine liturgy: a door opening in heaven (Rev. 4.1) is a way to describe an entrance (the entrance of the clergy); the image of the one who sat at the throne, with the appearance of jasper and ruby (Rev 4.3) evokes the image of the high priest from Exodus 28.17-20, who corresponds to the president of the divine liturgy, later to be known as the bishop. The bishop sits at the throne, surrounded by twenty-four presbyters (Rev 4.4), dressed in white vestments, just as the bishop and his priests in the early church were seated at the synthronon behind the altar (a semi-circular structure that can still be seen in ancient churches). As in the liturgy, what follows after the clergy is seated, is the singing of the Thrice-holy hymn (Rev. 4.8), although the liturgical version takes its text from the Old Testament reference this image evokes, in Isaiah 6.3. And finally, just like in the liturgy, what follows after the singing of the Trisagion is the reading of the texts. The entire meaning of Revelation changes when we look at it through this perspective, and if we can trace its liturgical imagery. Rather than a text that foreshadows events that may take place in a millenarist future, its liturgical reading encourages an exegetical direction that is not historically specific (grounded in a strict

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historical reference or anticipating an indeterminate future), but, consistently with prophecy and its rich imagery as understood in the Old Testament,<sup>11</sup> it points to a revelation (hence the title of the book) of the meaning of the spiritual life in Christ, as it is viewed in the language of symbols, and therefore in deeply archetypal and psychological terms, connecting the ritual life of the church and the inner journey of the Christian in his way towards union with Christ – something which is understood more completely in liturgical ways rather than in terms of a linear analysis.

It is impossible to know to what extent early liturgical practices shaped the writing of the gospel as opposed to the other way round. Since it took several

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<sup>11</sup> Columba Flegg, *An Introduction to Reading the Apocalypse* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), and also the various books of Scott Hahn for a Roman Catholic, yet very similar approach on this issue.

decades for the Jesus narratives that later became universally accepted as the gospels to be written down, and since it took even longer until they were accepted by the church as the texts that reflect the experience of the early church, even more authoritative as Scripture than the Old Testament, and since the texts underwent several developments until they reached the stable form in which we know them today, it is reasonable to assume that formative shaping ran both ways. Even if we rejected the formative influence of the liturgical tradition on the texts however, we would still need to consider the liturgical culture of worship as the main hermeneutical lens through which the early church approached the texts. This is not just an observation that has to do with information that is available to the researcher. It is also a question about the attitude towards the text, and the preparation that is necessary in order to approach it.

The difference between the liturgical and the historical approach to the Biblical text is that the first allows for a greater degree of participation in it, and in this way it encourages the ones who receive it to undergo a spiritual transformation. By contrast, approaching the text as if it is a historical chronicle of events (in past or in future time) and, especially in the case of the gospels, a collection of testimonies and descriptions of the ministry of Jesus Christ, places a far greater distance between the text and the reader. Seen as a historical text, the Bible may allow us to extract teachings of moral value, that may influence our behaviour, but it is difficult to see how they may facilitate the inner transformation.

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The understanding of the gospel is an act that involves a profound, or rather an active reception, beyond the level of getting to the information or the historical event behind it. Understanding the message of the gospel correctly requires divine illumination (that is, the participation of the Holy Spirit), and takes place in a way that addresses the entire human being, the mind and the heart, as we can see in the prayer that precedes the reading of the gospel in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom: 'Shine within our hearts,

loving Master, the pure light of your divine knowledge and open the eyes of our mind so that we may comprehend the message of your Gospel.'

The Book of Revelation points precisely to this difficulty, as it draws attention to the fact that 'no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it' (Rev. 5.3), except Christ himself. This phrase and this difficulty are developed into a full chapter (the entire fifth chapter of the Book of Revelation), which reflects the impossibility of reading or understanding Scripture without entering into a salvific relationship with Jesus Christ. As it is also reflected in Luke 24, it is Christ who leads to the opening of Scripture, rather than the other way round.

We can conclude from this that Scripture on its own, if it is considered separately from its liturgical and ecclesiological context, is not sufficient to lead to salvation. The sacramental and ecclesiological presence of Christ needs to precede the reception of the text. Otherwise, it is likely to read the text in a misleading way. The early church was fully aware of this difficulty. Irenaeus of Lyons recognized that it was perfectly possible for two people to start from the same text, and to arrive to two different interpretations. To that effect he came up with his celebrated metaphor of the puzzle that may depict a king or a fox, according to the way the pieces are put together.<sup>12</sup> Like the puzzle games we can still find at the local toy store, before we try to put the pieces together, we need an image of where we want to go with this, what is the *hypothesis*, or what is the image on the cover of the puzzle. Moreover, in order to evaluate the interpretation, we consider it, once again according to Irenaeus, against the 'canon of truth' we receive at baptism.<sup>13</sup> The significance of baptism here points to the role and authority of the Eucharistic community and the body of

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the church, and therefore this is, essentially, the first theological consideration of the question of *sola Scriptura* in history, and its outright rejection. We can see however, that the question is not posed in the context of an authoritative

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<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, i, 8, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, i, 9, 4.

structure of power. The reference to baptism, the rite of entry to the church for everyone, points to a sense and claim of the truth which is shared by all its members equally.

In Orthodox ecclesiology it is very clear that the bishop expresses the authority or rather the unity of his Eucharistic community. The responsibility of the bishop (or the priest in a parish) is to ensure that the different views and opinions that exist within the Eucharistic community are committed to a continuous dialogue. This dialogue, conducted in the Holy Spirit of God, enables the continuous discovery and rediscovery of the life of the church, and makes it possible for the members of the Eucharistic body of Christ to maintain their own personhood, while they become 'as one'. The biblical text is the main component of this continuous discovery. However, it is also necessary to keep in mind that this dialogue is not limited by time and space, and therefore it includes the Eucharistic community as it started at the historical and biblical table of the lord, as it passed through the experience and the witness of every Orthodox community in the world, and as it still continues, as a dialogue that includes all the members of the church individually, the entire Orthodox Eucharistic community of the present all over the world, the entire Eucharistic community of the past since the birth of the church, and the Holy Spirit.

This suggests that the interpretation of the Bible is not a closed event with a reading that is handed down from the top, but that the text is owned by the entire community, of the present generation and of all the previous generations, and that any kind of dialogue as to its meaning necessarily includes the Fathers, the theologians and the saints of the past, as much as it does modern theologians. Therefore, we can see the biblical event as a continuous, living process, which helps define the very body of the church, and which is ultimately substantiated beyond time.

This leads us to consider another aspect that reveals much about Scripture in the Orthodox Church: eschatology.



## The Holy Spirit and the eschatological approach

Despite the direct Christological references we saw regarding the opening of the Scriptures, the revelation of Christ in all possible ways – historically, sacramentally, through Scripture – is the work of the Holy Spirit, and it is important to bring in the third person of the Holy Trinity here. The Creed also reminds us that the Holy Spirit spoke ‘through the prophets,’ connecting directly Scripture and the Holy Spirit. However, the operation of the Holy Spirit cannot be reduced to either an abstract motivation or to an exhortation of moral nature, and certainly not to a disembodied quest for information. The Holy Spirit awakens the spiritual senses, it reveals the relationship between what is created and what is uncreated, and it leads to the truth by means of a spiritual process of transformation. For this reason, reading Scripture in the Holy Spirit is not a passive process, but one that involves an internal, transformative spiritual movement.

The presence and the operation of the Holy Spirit is often described as an illumination, which is also how the prayer before the reading of the gospel in the Divine Liturgy refers to it. This illumination is understood in the context of the vision of the uncreated light that was developed into a full theological teaching in the fourteenth century, as a union with God through his energies, which is experienced as a bright light – for lack of a better way to describe it. But either in reference to hesychastic theology, or in reference to the illumination of the transfiguration, the operation of the Holy Spirit and the revelation of God as light is seen by the Fathers as a foreshadowing of the kingdom of heaven. To bring this back to the context of biblical study, we can talk of an apocalyptic illumination that allows us to interpret Scripture through the perspective of God, not bound by the limitations of time and space, and therefore looking back on the biblical events as though they are remembered from the end of time, after the fulfilment of all history.

Maximos the Confessor described this in his theological analysis of the transfiguration in his *Ambigua*, by identifying the white garments of Jesus Christ with the pages of the gospel, which become fully understood only in

the light of God – the light of the transfiguration as a foretaste of the light of the second coming of Christ and the kingdom of God.<sup>14</sup> The liturgical

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approach that we discussed above makes sense only when it leads to the time-beyond-time and the place-beyond-place of God.

The way to consider this, drawing all the other exegetical strands together, is by thinking of the gospel as the beginning of a path that leads to the kingdom of God. The request to make the kingdom present, as it is reflected in the third phrase of the Lord's Prayer, is an invitation to the operation and the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup> It is this internal transformation that allows us to follow the ascent from the theology that can be expressed with words (cataphatic) to that which no words are sufficient to describe (apophatic) – a fundamental topos in Orthodox theology. The Bible and the entire cataphatic (written or oral) tradition of the church can serve as the beginning of the quest for the person of Jesus Christ and the meaning of divine revelation, but it does not stop there. The next step, which is expressed by apophaticism, implies a journey beyond words, something that can be seen in the 'inexpressible things' that St Paul heard when he found himself beyond the confines of the created world (2 Cor. 12.4). The hermeneutics of the Orthodox Church treats Scripture as an open sign, an entrance and a way, whose interpretation cannot be separated from doxology, and whose final meaning can only be understood in the context of the eschaton made present in history. Within the framework of the liturgical, doxological engagement with the biblical events, these events are less about historical memories, and more about the continuous life of the congregation in Christ: Jesus Christ, and the entire body of the Church, are continuously born, continuously crucified and continuously resurrected.<sup>16</sup> The sacramental bread that is offered, fractured and then transformed into the body of the resurrected Christ, reflects the whole congregation who

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<sup>14</sup> Cf the analysis of the Transfiguration in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), 70.

<sup>15</sup> This may be seen in the analysis of the Lord's Prayer and the *Mystagogy* of Maximos the Confessor.

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Andreopoulos, *Gazing on God* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2013), 81.

participates in the sacramental presence of Christ in precisely the same way. The process may be liturgical and doxological, the end may be in the eschaton, but the foundation is certainly biblical. Therefore, the entire Bible can be seen as one of the first steps into a continuous heuristic<sup>17</sup> that leads the travellers beyond the literal meanings, transforming them into members of the body of Christ.

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<sup>17</sup> Andreopoulos, *Gazing on God*, 137–54.