

## **An Orthodox Christian Approach to the Study of the Bible**

### **I. What the Orthodox Church teaches about the Bible.**

- A. The Bible is a divinely inspired and thus authentic record of God's revelation of himself and of his will to humankind. Correctly understood, it is a primary source of truth concerning the nature of God, the human condition, and the overall purpose of the universe. Those who seek such truth must therefore have recourse to the witness of Holy Scripture.
- B. As an inspired record of divine revelation, the Bible is God's Word to mankind concerning himself and his kingdom. That Word is addressed especially to those who are members of the Church, who are called to listen to it, heed it, take it to heart, and respond to it in faith and obedience.
- C. The Bible is a verbal icon of God himself. Just as the persons and events depicted in painted ("written") icons are "really present" in and through their physical representations, so God is "really present" in and through the physical representation of his written Word. Through reading and studying Holy Scripture, through praying over it and meditating upon it, it is possible to make contact with - and commune with - God himself. Through the diligent and prayerful study of and meditation upon the Bible one can both "touch" and "be touched by" the eternal, undivided, and life-creating Trinity.
- D. The liturgical life of the Orthodox Church is grounded in and expressive of Holy Scripture. It has been estimated that in the Divine Liturgy alone, and without counting readings from the epistles and gospels or the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, there are "98 quotations from the Old Testament and 114 from the New" (Ware) In all Orthodox services throughout the year, the Bible is read almost constantly. It follows that one's understanding of and participation in the liturgies and services of the Church will be both deepened and intensified to the extent that one makes oneself familiar with the contents of God's written Word.
- E. The Bible is a major expression of the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church. "The Orthodox Christian of today sees himself as heir and guardian to a great inheritance received from the past, and he believes that it is his duty to transmit that inheritance unimpaired to the future" (Ware). In order to perform this duty, Orthodox Christians will have to overcome a number of rather formidable obstacles. Faced with the secularized culture of the contemporary world, Orthodox Christianity must learn to dwell in the presence of, and frequently in competition with, a multitude of non-Orthodox philosophical and religious movements and organizations. Many Orthodox Christians are, in fact, tempted to depart from the Orthodox Church in response to the often quite attractive and effective enticements of these philosophies and religions. For far too many of today's Orthodox Christians, Holy Tradition has ceased to be a living and life-sustaining tradition. Cut off from their theological roots by political forces, by radical cultural change, and by their own failure to live in the light and truth of God, modern Orthodox Christians must make every effort to comprehend the doctrinal and liturgical

foundations of their tradition and to express that comprehension in a living faith. Only then will they be able to perform their duty of preserving and passing on "the whole system of doctrine, Church government, worship, and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages" (Ware). In seeking to carry out this task, it will be necessary to construct a specifically Orthodox critique of the predominantly secular, non-Orthodox, and even anti-Christian beliefs and values of the present age. An important part of this overall project will be the serious study of the content and meaning of Holy Scripture and the development of a world perspective that is grounded in and expressive of what Fr. Georges Florovsky has called "the scriptural mind."

For these (and other) reasons, then, Orthodox Christians should make the reading and study of Holy Scripture a central concern of their lives. The Bible is, of course, a very large and complex collection of documents; and it is possible for the beginning Bible reader to get lost in the details of the sacred texts. What is important, as one seeks to develop a "scriptural mind," is to strive for a sense of the overall message of God's written Word, "a grasp of the Scriptures in their totality" (Barrois). The major purpose of this seminar series is to present a coherent survey of the central themes of the Holy Bible and to outline, from the standpoint of Orthodox biblical theology, the general message of God's scriptural revelation.

## II. The Books of the Holy Bible.

A. The two parts of the Bible: Old Testament and New Testament – written records of God's revelation concerning the human condition and the means God has employed and is employing to deliver humankind from that condition.

### 1. The basic content of that revelation ("the message"):

Humanity was intended to live in eternal fellowship with God, but has instead rebelled against the Creator. Having alienated itself from God, humanity has cut itself off from that spiritual wisdom, that moral and spiritual perfection, and that eternal life that God originally intended for the human race. As a result of this self-induced alienation from God, humanity is lost and in bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil. However, God has acted, in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ, to save humanity from its alienated condition.

### 2. The original, unwritten revelation and the Bible:

- a. God has revealed himself, his will, and his plan for the salvation of the human race to the patriarchs and prophets of ancient Israel and to the apostles of Jesus – not in writing, but by way of direct revelation. The Bible is the written record of that original and unwritten revelation.
- b. The Old Testament tells the story of God's dealings with ancient Israel from approximately 2000 BC until the time of Jesus; and it contains, as its central message, God's promise to save mankind and the world through the "anointed one" (Messiah, Christ) of Israel.

- c. The New Testament proclaims Jesus of Nazareth to be the promised Christ, who has, through his life and deeds, fulfilled the divine plan of salvation and made it possible for man to be reconciled to God.

## B. The history and content of the Old Testament.

### 1. The Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible.

The original writings that were to become the "Old Testament" were composed in Hebrew (and partly in Aramaic), were copied and copied again, and were thus passed on from generation to generation. During the 3d century BC, those ancient writings were translated into Greek by scholars from the Jewish community situated in Alexandria, Egypt, while the Jewish authorities in Palestine continued the process of copying, compiling, and preserving the scriptures in Hebrew and Aramaic. In this way, the ancient scriptures came to be transmitted in both a Hebrew and a Greek version.

Eventually, in the late pre-Christian and early Christian periods, certain disputes developed among Jewish authorities as to the precise content and meaning of the Jewish Sacred Scriptures. One of those disputes had to do with the total number of books that should be regarded as divinely inspired and thus authoritative. The Greek version of the scriptures contained 49-51 books, and some Jewish leaders favored that "longer canon" (the Greek word *kanon* means "standard" and has come to be used in the sense of "authoritative text"), while others adhered to a "shorter" canon containing 39 books written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Those who favored the shorter canon also thought that some portions of a few of the thirty-nine books should be deleted from Sacred Scripture (for example, certain parts of the books of Esther and Daniel).

By the end of the 1st century AD, the advocates of the shorter canon had won out, and the Hebrew version of the Old Testament, which has been passed down to the present day, thus contains only 39 books. Among the Jews, this version has come to be known as the Hebrew Bible. The 39 books of the Hebrew Bible are organized so as to be counted as 24 books (see chart).

The longer Greek canon, known as the *Septuagint*,<sup>1</sup> also survived, mainly because of its importance in the formation and transmission of the Christian biblical heritage.

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<sup>1</sup>According to an ancient tradition, the Greek version had its beginning in Egypt during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246 BC). King Ptolemy wanted a copy of the *Pentateuch* ("the five scrolls," the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) for the famous library in Alexandria. Under his sponsorship, 72 Jewish scholars, working for 72 days, produced a Greek translation of the Pentateuch from ancient Hebrew manuscripts. On the basis of this traditional story, the number "72" was rounded to "70," and the Greek Old Testament became known as the *Septuagint* (or *LXX* – *septuaginta* means "seventy" in Latin). By the middle of the 1st century BC, 44-46 additional books had been appended to the Septuagint. The Greek Old Testament, therefore, contains the shorter canon of the Jewish scriptures as well as other texts not included in the Hebrew Bible.

2. The Septuagint and the New Testament.

The Septuagint was the text most often quoted by the writers of the New Testament, and it was the version of the Old Testament most widely used in the early Christian community. For these reasons, the Orthodox Church has always regarded the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew Bible, as the authoritative version of the Old Testament. In those (many) places where the wording of the Septuagint differs from that of the Hebrew Bible, the Orthodox Church holds that the Greek rendering is to be accepted as divinely inspired. The Church is here following the practice of the New Testament writers themselves. For example, the Hebrew text of Isaiah 7:14 reads, "a young woman [*almah*] shall conceive and bear a son," while the rendering of the Greek text is, "a virgin [*parthenos*] shall conceive and bear a son." This Old Testament verse refers, of course, to the birth of the Messiah. Faced with the significant contrast between the Hebrew and Greek renderings of this verse, the New Testament follows the phrasing of the Greek text (see Mt 1:23).

3. The books of the Orthodox Old Testament.

- a. The Books of the Law (Pentateuch): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Content: God's creation of the world, the original rebellion and fall of man, and the history of God's chosen people, Israel, from the time of Abraham (c. 2000 BC) to the time of Moses (c. 1290-1250 BC).

Written (compiled in written form): 10th-5th centuries BC. Designated by the Jews as *Torah* (Hebrew for "law") because so much of the Pentateuch is concerned with the revelation of the divine law to God's people.

- b. The Books of History: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1, 2, 3, and 4 Kingdoms (1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings), 1 and 2 Chronicles, 1 Esdras (Esdras A), Ezra-Nehemiah (Esdras B), Esther, Judith, Tobit, and 1, 2, and 3 Maccabees. (4 Maccabees in Appendix.)

Content: the history of ancient Israel from the 13th century BC to the time of Christ (c. 1300 years).

Written: 12th century BC-1st century AD.

- c. The Books of Wisdom: Psalms, The Prayer of Manasseh, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus, the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach).

Content: poetic, philosophical, and theological discourses that argue that happiness is possible only through faith in and obedience to God.

Written: 11th-1st centuries BC.

- d. The Books of the Prophets: Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Lamentations, the Letter of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel,

Content: the coming of the Messiah and of the kingdom of God.

Written: 8th-4th centuries BC (but the Daniel and Baruch may have been composed as late as the 2d century BC).

#### 4. The deuterocanonical books.

- a. Septuagint materials not contained in the Hebrew Bible: 1 Esdras (Esdras A), Judith, Tobit, 1, 2, and 3 Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), the Letter of Jeremiah, Baruch, Psalm 151, the Prayer of Manasseh, and certain portions of Esther and Daniel.
- b. The canonical status of these materials?

Their canonicity was sometimes doubted even in the early Church and has been disputed by many later Christian scholars. It is noteworthy, for example, that while there are many quotations from the Septuagint in the New Testament, none of these quotations are taken from the disputed portions of the longer canon. However, it must also be noted that many of the early Church fathers considered the entire Greek Old Testament to be divinely inspired. In the course of time, therefore, the Orthodox Church has come to accept the disputed texts of the Septuagint as "deuterocanonical," i.e., canonical in a secondary sense and standing "on a lower footing than the rest of the Old Testament."

The Roman Catholic Church is in basic agreement with the Orthodox point of view on this matter, but does not accept 1 Esdras (Esdras A), 3 Maccabees, Psalm 151, or the Prayer of Manasseh as possessing even "deuterocanonical" authority; these latter texts are therefore excluded from Roman Catholic editions of the Old Testament.

The Protestant churches have accepted the Hebrew Bible as the authoritative version of the Old Testament. Among Protestants, the disputed materials of the Greek Old Testament are known as the Apocrypha, the term "apocryphal" being used in the sense of "noncanonical." In some Protestant editions of the Bible, the Apocrypha are placed in a separate section between the Old and New Testaments or at the end of the New Testament; and in many Protestant editions, the "apocryphal" texts are not included at all.

C. The history and content of the New Testament.

1. The motivation to create a written "New Testament": the Church's need to preserve the apostolic message of salvation.

By the middle of the second century AD, a great deal of writing about Jesus had been done. Since some of this literature was fanciful and unreliable, the Church, seeking to preserve the apostolic message of salvation through Christ, found it necessary to distinguish clearly between those writings which did and those writings which did not possess apostolic authority. And, on this basis, the New Testament canon as it is known today came into being. There were debates in the early Church concerning the canonicity of the book of Revelation, the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude. But by the 5th century, all of these books – along with the four gospels, the book of Acts, and the Letters of St. Paul – had been accepted by the Church as apostolic in origin, divinely inspired, and thus canonical.

2. The twenty-seven books of the NT.

Written (in Greek): 50-100 AD, either by apostles of Christ (Matthew, John, Peter, and Paul), or by close associates of the apostles (Mark, Luke, James, and Jude).

Content: eyewitness testimonies and theological interpretations concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ; overall message = through faith in Christ man can be reconciled to God and thus saved from the powers of ignorance, sin, and death.

3. The four divisions of the NT:

- a. The Four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Content: a recount of the major events in the life of Christ and a proclamation the "good news" of salvation through Christ.

Written: Mark, c. 65 AD; Matthew and Luke, c. 70 AD; John, c. 85-90 AD.

- b. The Acts of the Apostles (or the Book of Acts).

Content: a history of the foundation and growth of the first-century Church; a survey of the development of the Church from the ascension of Christ (c. 30 AD), through the missionary travels of Paul (c. 47-56 AD), to the first imprisonment of Paul in Rome (c. 59-61 AD).

Written: c. 70 AD by Luke.

c. The Letters (or Epistles) (21 of them):

The (14) Pauline Epistles: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews.

The (7) Catholic Epistles: James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude (known as the "Catholic Epistles" because they are addressed not to local churches (for example, the Roman or the Galatian) or to individuals (such as Timothy or Titus) but to the whole (i.e., universal or "catholic") Christian community.

Content: expositions of the moral and doctrinal implications of the Christian faith – aimed at maintaining good order and orthodoxy of belief in the many Christian communities which had sprung up in the Mediterranean world by the middle of the 1st century AD.

Written: The letters of Paul were written between 50 and 67 AD, and the Catholic Epistles were composed between 60 and 100 AD.

d. The Apocalypse (or the Book of Revelation).

Content: an "apocalyptic" prophecy, i.e., a prophecy pointing toward the end of time. Written in highly symbolic language, the book describes a vision of the Second Coming of Christ, the Last Judgment, and the final establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Written: c. 95 AD; traditionally viewed as the work of John the Apostle.

D. The unity of the Old and New Testaments: one revelation in two dispensations.

1. Common ground: Both were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; they both contain the same central theme and message concerning God's plan for the salvation of the human race; and they both point in the same direction – the coming of the kingdom of God.
2. The key to the unity of Holy Scripture: Jesus Christ.

He is the central figure in the divine plan of salvation revealed in God's written Word. From the Christian point of view, the Old Testament is a promise of, and a preparation for, the coming of the Messiah, of the Christ through whom the salvation of mankind will be effected; and in its proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the New Testament, affirms the fulfillment of the Old Testament message of salvation: in and through Jesus Christ, God has saved mankind and the world.

### III. The Inspiration and Infallibility of the Bible.

#### A. The divine-human origins of the Holy Scriptures:

The Bible, as we have seen, is a book of books, a collection or library of sacred writings. The books contained in Holy Scripture were written, edited and, compiled at various times, in various places, and by various authors; but the Orthodox Church regards this collection of writings as an authentic and authoritative (i.e., "canonical") revelation of truth concerning the relationships between God, man, and the universe. The Bible is the written Word of God, "the supreme expression of God's revelation to man" (Ware).

#### B. Divinely inspired and thus infallible:

The books of the Bible were written by men – i.e., by Old and New Testament saints – who were guided in their writing by divine inspiration. From the standpoint of the Orthodox Church, "the entire Bible is inspired by God," and this means that it "contains no formal errors or inner contradictions concerning the relationship between God and the world" (Hopko). The overall message of the Bible, that mankind has fallen under satanic bondage and that God has graciously acted in and through Christ to save us from that bondage, is infallibly true. According to the Orthodox doctrine of infallibility, the Church as a whole is the guardian of "the eternal spiritual and doctrinal message of God" and is protected from error by the Holy Spirit. The Bible, therefore, as a testimony and proclamation of the Church concerning God's revealed plan of salvation, is without error in its central theological themes and affirmations.

#### C. Not necessarily inerrant (re: the fundamentalist Protestant doctrine of verbal inerrancy):

It is not necessary, however, for the Orthodox Christian to insist upon the literal truth of every statement contained in Holy Scripture. Many Orthodox scholars believe that the Bible may contain "incidental inaccuracies of a non-essential character" (Hopko).

For example, the author of the book of Daniel describes Belshazzar as the "king" of Babylon and as the son of Nebuchadnezzar (r. 605-562 BC); but, in fact, Belshazzar was the son of King Nabonidus (r. 556-539 BC) and never became king himself, although he did serve as viceroy during his father's absences (see Dn 5:1-31).

For another example, many scholars think that the story of God's creation of the world in the first chapter of Genesis assumes that "the universe [is] enwrapped in waters held back by a solid bell-shaped barrier called the firmament" (Brown) – and such an assumption is certainly at odds with what modern science has to say about the cosmos.

These kinds of historical and scientific inaccuracies do not undermine the coherence and validity of the essential theological message of Holy Scripture. The Orthodox Church, in affirming the divine inspiration and infallibility of the Holy Bible, does not exclude the possibility that the Bible might contain some minor errors of fact, but she insists upon the absolute truth of scripture's overall message of salvation.

#### IV. The Interpretation of the Bible: Scripture and Tradition.

##### A. The Church, the Apostolic Succession, and Holy Tradition.

The Orthodox Church believes herself to be the "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church" spoken of in the Nicene Creed, the community of faith founded by Christ through his apostles (see Mt 16:13-20 and 18:15-20; and 1 Pt 2:4-10), the New Israel.

Under the administrative and spiritual leadership of her bishops, who stand in the "apostolic succession" – i.e., whose office and authority are derived historically from the apostles of Christ – the Church regards her own historic life and experience, her Holy Tradition, as a faithful preservation, continuation, and development of the apostolic tradition, the spiritual legacy imparted by Christ to his apostles and handed on by them to later generations of Christian believers.

To be an Orthodox Christian is to accept the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church as *the* Christian tradition, to see the Orthodox Church as the divinely-appointed guardian and teacher of the Christian faith, and to live under the spiritual authority and guidance of the bishops of the Church, the living successors and representatives of Christ and his apostles.

##### B. Holy Tradition as the basis of the Orthodox faith.

###### 1. The essence of Holy Tradition.

The Orthodox faith is a living and experiential faith. It is grounded in the conviction that God has revealed himself and his plan of salvation to his chosen people of the old and new covenants, to ancient Israel and to the Christian community. Orthodox Christians believe that God has made himself present and known, and that he continues to make himself present and known, within the continuing life and experience of his people – i.e., within the Holy Tradition of the Church.

Holy Tradition is the living and developing expression of the Orthodox faith, of the Church's ongoing experience of and response to the grace and love of God. Holy Tradition is not merely a collection of written documents, or a body of doctrinal beliefs, or a set of customary practices. It is "the total life and experience of the entire Church transferred from place to place and from generation to generation . . . the very life of the Church as it is inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit" (Hopko). To live one's life within the Holy Tradition of the Church is to experience the reality and presence of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in the midst of his people.

2. The outward forms of Holy Tradition: (1) the Bible (the primary and normative articulation of Holy Tradition); (2) the liturgies and liturgical texts of the Church; (3) the Nicene Creed; (4) the doctrinal definitions of the seven ecumenical councils (held between the 4th and the 8th centuries); (5) the writings of the fathers of the Church (i.e., the great theologians and spiritual teachers who have explained and defended the Christian faith through the ages); (6) certain pronouncements of local councils and of individual bishops that have been accepted by the Church as a

whole; (7) the canon laws of the Church; and (8) the icons and other art forms produced by the Church in her ongoing effort to give expression to her faith in God.

Through these (and other) outward forms of Holy Tradition, the Orthodox Church has sought to preserve, defend, and proclaim the deposit of faith which has been entrusted to her by Christ and his apostles.

### C. The Bible and Holy Tradition.

#### 1. Holy Tradition as the source of Holy Scripture.

The Bible is a part of the Holy Tradition of the Church, of the Church's living, experiential, and faithful response to God. Scripture and tradition are not two different expressions of the Christian faith. Holy Tradition is the *source* of Holy Scripture; Holy Tradition is the faith of which Holy Scripture is an expression. Scripture exists, lives, and reveals its meaning within the tradition of the Church. To separate, isolate, and contrast scripture and tradition "is to impoverish the idea of both alike" (Ware). The full meaning of God's written Word can be expounded, therefore, only from within the historic unfolding and expression of the faith of the Church, only from the standpoint of Holy Tradition in its entirety.

#### 2. The Church as sole authoritative interpreter of the Bible.

Since scripture is "given" within the context of tradition, it must also be read, interpreted, and understood within that context; and since, as we have seen, tradition is "the total life and experience" of the Church, it follows that the Church is the sole authoritative interpreter of the Bible.

Christ is the founder and head of the Church, and the Church is the body of Christ (see Eph 4:1-16 and 5:21-33). This means that Christ lives in, inspires, and guides his Church through the Holy Spirit. Christ, in and through the Church, "provides the correct interpretation of the Bible" and of other aspects of Holy Tradition. "It is only within the living Tradition of the Church and the direct inspiration of Christ's Spirit that the proper interpretation of the Bible can be made" (Hopko).

Thus, the Orthodox Christian must make every effort to read the Bible in the light of the historic and living faith of the Church. Entering into the life of the Church as fully and as faithfully as is possible for him – through regular participation in the liturgical and sacramental services of the Church, through continual and fervent prayer, through diligent study of the various elements of Holy Tradition, and especially the writings of the great fathers of the Church – the Orthodox Christian must seek an understanding of Holy Scripture that is consistent with and expressive of the spiritual and doctrinal content of the Orthodox faith as a whole. The Orthodox Christian's judgment of scriptural truth must never be a merely private judgment (see 2 Pt 1:20) but must be a judgment in harmony with the mind of the Church as expressed in Holy Tradition.