

# SCRIPTURE AND HERMENEUTICS: AN ORTHODOX VIEW

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Indeed, the hermeneutics of Holy Scripture must be a *sine qua non* theme of the dialogue between contemporary Orthodoxy and Judaism. We Orthodox include the hermeneutic tradition of Holy Scripture in the category of tradition as well. We also have, before our times, a tradition of centuries of Old Testament hermeneutics coming from great personalities in this field. This hermeneutic activity was not formulated, as in Western Christianity, as a theory, but remained in principle a hermeneutic praxis, which gives guidelines for every aspect of the practical life of the Church. What must be done from the hermeneutic point of view, has been formulated in principles and in practical attitudes which have standing and paramount importance for contemporary Orthodox hermeneutics. I hurry to say that many of these principles and practical attitudes of Orthodox hermeneutics have been inherited and adopted by Christianity from Judaism. In the meantime, we must not forget that Jewish hermeneutics has also adopted some great hermeneutic themes and answers contributed by ancient Greek thought.

The question of the relationship between semiotics and semantics has been a very important one in ancient Greece, in Christianity and in Judaism. I think that the eminent question of the hermeneutics of Greek Orthodox patristic activity in its ecumenical dimension, was precisely this theme of the relations of human words, as the relation of the letter to the Spirit which was being expressed through it. Orthodox hermeneutics had a very important reason to confront this problem, given that the Old Testament was from the very beginning, and still is, held in high

esteem on the part of the Church. As is well known, the Church has warmly defended its validity and authority and has over the centuries condemned a great number of heresies and heretics who wholly or partially called into question the value of the Old Testament for the mystery of the salvation in Christ. The Church has taken very severe measures, one would say, in cutting out of its body those who questioned the necessity and authority of the Old Testament within the Orthodox Church.

The Old Testament presented a great problem because of the critical mind of the Greek-raised faithful — as were almost all of them in the first century A.D. — that is its anthropomorphisms. This problem exists until today and provokes in those who read the Old Testament unprepared the impression that there is a mythology of the Hebrews. They then come to the following question: “What do we Orthodox want from the Old Testament? This is the mythology of the Jews.” And, of course, we know that there are plenty of anthropomorphisms in the Old Testament which also cause problems of misinterpretation. Anthropomorphisms have always been understood by the Orthodox hermeneutic tradition as accepted ways of condescension of God, responding to the weakness of humanity to understand and express God and the divine things. Humanity — and many Fathers of the Church underline this — could not conceive the revealed will of God outside the limits of human reason, i.e., the receptacles of human words. God reveals Himself within these limits, or more exactly on the borders of human understanding. This, according to the Orthodox hermeneutic tradition, is called the condescension of God. This is used in hermeneutics in analogy of the dogma of the incarnation of the Word of God. The word is considered as the flesh which contains the spirit, in other words the meaning, the will, etc., of God.

The principle which puts language at the center of hermeneutics is the principle of the condescension of God Who makes Himself accessible to human weakness to understand Him. This principle is connected with another hermeneutic principle, that of the ontological inability of human language to express in a befitting way God and His will. God wants to come into contact with humankind in order to direct and conduct their lives. Therefore, God is condescending to the comprehensive capacity of humankind in order to make Himself understood. He reveals Himself within the limits of human reason, that is in the realm of the human possibilities of understanding and expression.

This is the way the Old Testament has been written, and this is what scandalizes those who do not know that anthropomorphisms and expressions according to human possibilities do not prove the inability of divine Revelation, but rather witness to the incapacity of man's weak-

ness. However, the Orthodox hermeneutic tradition has not stopped at this ascertainment, which is completely acceptable to contemporary linguistics. It has proceeded in applying the principle of an understanding befitting God. What has been written and formulated regarding God in the Old Testament in a way that befits man, must be understood in a way that befits and respects God. This principle was persistently respected by the Greek Fathers.

With this dialectic of expression befitting man and understanding befitting God, the Orthodox hermeneutic activity and tradition, which we follow up to this day, has solved the problem of discord between the linguistic garment of the Old Testament and its meaning. This principle has set the Old Testament apart and has saved it from the visible danger of being equated with the ancient Greek texts, for instance the epics of Homer, for there too we have gods who appear and express themselves in human form and behave accordingly. Orthodox hermeneutics has segregated the Old Testament from this equating understanding. On the contrary, it has taken the same stance toward ancient Greek mythological texts: they were regarded as pagan texts. And surely that was a unique contribution by the Greek Fathers to the saving of the Old Testament as an authoritative text for the faith of Christians and Jews alike.

At this point, I must open a necessary parenthesis in order to remind you that the major point of criticism on ancient Greek religion concerns its anthropomorphisms which presented gods in human forms and qualities. And this is rightly recognized as one of the main causes of the disappearance of the religion of the ancient Greek world. That achievement must be attributed not only to the mechanism of the metaphorical function and value of language, but above all to the spirituality of those great men, which was built upon the principle of the inseparable bond between the tradition of the Old Testament and that of the New Testament.

The Greek translation of the Septuagint through which the Old Testament became known beyond Palestine and beyond Judaism, was a necessity for Alexandrine Judaism. But, as it became accepted, it also was a blessing for the world: "dispensation by God," as it is characterized by some new Greek theologians. Of course, this translation has imperfections; some of them major and others minor. The former are due to the translation from the Old Testament tradition to another cultural frame of reference (acculturation), and it would be inappropriate to call them mistakes. The latter are due to the fact that man makes his way through history accompanied by his language which wears off and develops in many ways. The language of a text cannot retain the initial clarity of its message over many centuries and offer to the contemporary reader what it said when it was expressed for the first time.

At the same time, we should not forget that the translation of the Septuagint was done by Jews in the lingua franca of that day, Greek, first to serve the needs of Diaspora Judaism and second in order to have the possibility of proselytism or at least to present the Old Testament to non-Jews. At that time there was, as far as I know, no resistance to or ambivalence concerning its authority, but for the preparation of three other translations in the following centuries, by Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion, and some others which did not survive. They finally amount to five or six, and this witnesses to what has been stressed by the previous speaker, that the character of absoluteness does not apply to the translation. Up to that point contemporary Orthodox theology and its tradition fully agree, starting from the work of the great Origen, the *Hexapla*, in that we encounter the problem of absurdities and contradictions when translating one and the same masoretic text, based on inner-biblical observations as well, like the one of the prologue of Wisdom of Sirach (verse 20). According to the translator of that book there is no equivalence between translation and original text, for what is being said in Hebrew is not equaled when put in another language. At this point, we can recall Saint John Chrysostom of Antioch, who did not know Hebrew and who said that the difficulty to understand the Old Testament is caused by its translation.

Here I must open another parenthesis to underline that Orthodox tradition has shown sympathy toward the Hebrew language. Not only do transliterated words and names survive, but also lessons in Biblical Hebrew. For example, in the work of Eusebius of Caesarea from the fourth century A.D. there survives what can be regarded as a first lesson in Biblical Hebrew. There is an instruction for learning the Hebrew alphabet by using a mnemotechnic method of the time: forming phrases by using the meaning of every letter's name. In Gregory of Nyssa's erudite work *Contra Eunomium* we also find a reference to the Hebrew language. And most astonishing and unknown of all is the fact that Hebrew and Greek are to be found together in liturgical prayer, e.g., the refrain exhorting us to "Praise the Lord" is pronounced in Hebrew as *Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia* (literally "praise you the Lord") and the response to the refrain is expressed in Greek, *Doxa soi Theos* ("Glory to You O God"). This witnesses to the fact that in holy worship there has been no tendency to exclude the Hebrew language. Consequently, it has been preserved until today and passages of the Old Testament are being read during the first days of Holy Week. I now close the parenthesis.

Notwithstanding the fundamental principle concerning language which I have mentioned above, in the case of the Old Testament, there are other principles involved which can be divided into theological, linguistic, methodological ones, etc. I will refer to a few indicative

examples for the present meeting.

Beginning from the text, it is the principle of progressive revelation that applies. The distinction between the Old and the New Testament is given. And on the basis of witnesses from this same Old Testament it can be concluded that it was never one. We know that there was an epoch when there was no Old Testament either, i.e., up to the times of Moses, when God ordered things as He wished.

Certainly, when we say "Holy Scripture," we never mean only the Old Testament, but Old and New Testament inseparably, as one theological unity. Even if from a philological point of view there are many units and not just two, the Old and the New, each Testament being a whole library of books, written by different persons at different times and in different places in different literary style. What is common to both is the inner or spiritual unity and continuity of the Old and New Testament. The Old Testament did not come to an end with the coming of the New; the New did not abolish the Old but its self-sufficiency, its self-supporting adequacy. The Old Testament contains the germs and the announcements of what has been realized through the New Testament. The New Testament, as a philological text, appears to be absolutely dependent on the Old Testament. Whoever opens a critical edition of the New Testament is astonished to see how many words, phrases and concepts make up the common fabric of the Old and the New Testament.

The criterion used to adopt the Old Testament as the authoritative word of God revealed to Moses and through him to his people, and through the devotion of this people to the whole of humanity, namely the criterion for its inclusion in the Christian canon of Holy Scripture, was the rule which the Fathers of the Church and exegetes called the ecclesiastical canon. That is why Bible books are called canonical. The canon implies the agreement between the books of the Old Testament and the spirit and the universal soteriological direction of the events of the epoch of the New Testament. This canon binds the New and the Old Testament together, Jewish tradition and the developing Christian one. From then on this bond started and it got stronger every time there was an attempt, from wherever, to call into question the value of the Old Testament for Christianity.

Until today, all Greeks who are being taught religion learn about the unity of the Old and New Testament which no Orthodox Christian has the right to abolish or ignore. This is completely clear in the hermeneutic tradition: there is no theological treatise, hermeneutic or polemical, that does not link the Old and the New Testament and does not argue by way of cross references. The Old and the New Testament are used inseparably and indiscriminately. That is the reality of the Orthodox hermeneutic tradition.

There are many other principles, discussing which would lead us too far afield. I will refer to some aspects which Prof. Wurzbürger presented. Yes, for us the Old Testament has authority. The Orthodox Church has used the tradition of the Septuagint while conscious of the fact that it was not she who did it and therefore she could not be blamed for its imperfections. The imperfections are given with the development of human language. Therefore, the Church believes that constant interpretation is necessary. That is, of course, interpretation by men who are within the Church. Exactly because the Church does not want to lose that which most probably is being lost in a translation, Biblical Hebrew has been taught again in the theological faculties from the beginning of the twentieth century. I can assure you that this program is not new in Orthodox theological studies; it is rather a return to an old tradition, which for several centuries had been lost. Surely, for us Holy Scripture is Old and New Testament.

How does an Orthodox approach the Old Testament? With linguistic principles and the hermeneutic tradition. There is a parallel here to what has been heard before. The hermeneutic tradition is the intellectual work, participation and approach, carried out during centuries after the appearance of Christianity and which fed practical and social life. Tradition is not to be approached in a fundamentalist way, that is as a mechanical repetition of an hermeneutic formulation from earlier times. Hermeneutic tradition is open to new formulations and interpretations and it is judged on the basis of Holy Scripture. What appears to be a great difference between us and contemporary Judaism in hermeneutics is the lack of hermeneutic authority, because no one has self-sufficient and self-supporting hermeneutic authority, even if he takes the common denominator for reference, the letter, and transcending it makes a profound impression. Orthodox hermeneutic tradition as well has used the allegorical and transcendent method of historico-grammatical meaning, but has soon realized that this method absolutely abolishes the limits of the letter and allows every kind of subjectivism and many kinds of contradictory interpretations.

The Orthodox Church, however, has tried with success to hold on to the principle of one meaning in every verse of the Scripture, the principle that a verse cannot have several meanings according to the epoch. Of course, there can be many different aspects of one meaning, emphasized at different periods of time, for one period of time can be more receptive than another. However, a verse cannot have many meanings simultaneously. When this happened in the past, it kindled a very lively hermeneutic dialogue. Whenever this dialogue did not succeed in creating a consensus, it was necessary that the whole of Christendom decide — I am speaking of the first millennium of Christianity — by convoking

an ecumenical council which would give the authoritative answer in the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that all the existing and accepted meanings of Holy Scripture have been defined. Only great and important topics were solved with decisions that were binding. These can be interpreted with a more modern terminology without removing their essential meaning.

The Orthodox Church has accepted in its praxis a multi-leveled interpretation. If one concentrates all the interpretations which have been given on every verse of Holy Scripture — and I myself have had this experience with the book of Genesis — one can encounter different views of understanding in one verse. Starting with the first word of Genesis (*bereshith*) one notices that the interpretations that have been given are manifold. And one sees that between the different approaches there is no conflict. The difference depends on the linguistic or pragmatic level of understanding of every patristic hermeneutist. There is a choice, a blessed variety of points of views. But it is not allowed for anyone to interpret Holy Scripture as he likes and to teach it as he likes. For that reason, the Orthodox Church reached a decision in the Quintsextine Council (691 A.D.) and determined that Holy Scripture should be interpreted as understood by the Fathers of the Church.

But we have to remark that understanding the hermeneutic tradition requires its interpretation. That is an accepted principle of interpretation in the hermeneutic tradition. However, Orthodox hermeneutics insists on the principle of one meaning for every verse, as has already been pointed out, and considers that the multi-leveled interpretations, as has been heard, do not contribute to a homogenous spirit. Homogenous spirit produces homogenous action. It is impossible for a principle or opinion to be understood and to produce peace, when everyone interprets Holy Scripture as he pleases, from the vantage point of the tolerance of his freedom. I believe that we behave like we behave toward one another because we think the way we think, and because we understand or read Holy Scripture the way we read it. When someone reads it as he likes, then I think he will act toward someone else according to an individualistic principle of understanding, as I would like to call it. Unfortunately, I do not know of any co-existence in the history of societies based upon the principle that belongs to unbridled subjectivism.

And I would like to ask you to allow me to express another key problem of mine. I think that what makes our effort and my personal understanding of contemporary Judaism especially difficult, is exactly this variety and multiformity in its interpretation of Holy Scripture. There are exegetical views that are familiar; one agrees and is pleased to hear them. On the other hand, there are views that are so distant, and perhaps that is — allow me to use the Christian expression — the cross

we have to take upon our shoulders.

I could talk further about these topics, but I will limit myself to this. I hope that I have made my position clear. I have commented on quite a number of points expressed by the previous speaker, but I did not want to deal with each of them separately. However, I really enjoyed his presentation and concluding my presentation here, I would like to make a practical remark: a following meeting should be devoted exclusively to hermeneutic ways of approaching and understanding Holy Scripture. I think we must approach the matter more closely. Instead of speaking in general terms that are necessary to begin an approach, the topic of a future meeting should be on hermeneutic methods. Our meeting as an academic one should be more specific.

IMMANUEL 26/27