

How To Read Your Bible

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Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk, writing in eighteenth-century Russia, has this to say about our Orthodox attitude towards the Holy Scriptures: “If an earthly king, our emperor, wrote you a letter, would you not read it with joy? Certainly, with great rejoicing and careful attention. You have been sent a letter, not by any earthly emperor, but by the King of Heaven. And yet you almost despise such a gift, so priceless a treasure.” He goes on to say: “Whenever you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to Him.”

We are to see Scripture as a personal letter addressed specifically to each one of us by God. We are each of us to see Scripture reading as a direct, individual dialogue between Christ and ourselves. Two centuries after Saint Tikhon, the 1976 Moscow Conference between the Orthodox and the Anglicans expressed in different but equally valid terms the true attitude towards Scripture. Signed also by the Anglican delegates, the Moscow statement provides an admirable summary of the Orthodox view of the Bible: “The Scriptures constitute a coherent whole. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative witness to God’s revelation of Himself—in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word, and the whole history of salvation. And as such they express the word of God in human language. . . . We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church. Our approach to the Bible is one of obedience.”

Combining Saint Tikhon and the Moscow statement, we may distinguish four key qualities which mark an Orthodox reading of Scripture. First, our reading should be obedient. Second, it should be ecclesial, within the Church. Third, it should be Christ-centered. Fourth, it should be personal.

Reading the Bible with Obedience

First of all, then, when reading Scripture, we are to listen in a spirit of obedience. Saint Tikhon and the 1976 Moscow Conference both alike emphasize the divine inspiration of the Bible. Scripture is a letter from God. Christ Himself is speaking. The Scriptures are God’s authoritative witness of Himself. They express the Word of God in our human language. They are divinely inspired. Since God Himself is speaking to us in the Bible, our response is rightly one of obedience, of receptivity and listening. As we read, we wait on the Spirit.

But, while divinely inspired, the Bible is also humanly expressed. It is a whole library of different books written at varying times by distinct persons. Each book of the Bible reflects the outlook of the age in which it was written and the particular viewpoint of the author. For God does nothing in isolation; divine grace cooperates with human freedom. God does not abolish our personhood but enhances it. And so it is in the writing of inspired Scripture. The authors were not just a passive instrument, a dictation machine recording a message. Each writer of Scripture contributes his or her particular human gifts. Alongside the divine aspect, there is also a human element in Scripture. We are to value both.

Each of the four Gospels, for example, has its own particular approach. Matthew presents more particularly a Jewish understanding of Christ, with an emphasis on the Kingdom of heaven. Mark contains specific, picturesque details of Christ’s ministry not given elsewhere. Luke expresses the universality of Christ’s love, His all-embracing compassion that extends equally to Jew and to Gentile. In John there is a more inward and more mystical approach to Christ, with an emphasis on divine light and divine indwelling. We are to enjoy and explore to the full this life-giving variety within the Bible.

Because Scripture is in this way the word of God expressed in human language, there is room for honest and exacting critical enquiry when studying the Bible. Exploring the human aspect of the Bible, we are to use to the full our God-given human reason. The Orthodox Church does not exclude scholarly research into the origin, dates, and authorship of books of the Bible.

Alongside this human element, however, we see always the divine element. These are not simply books written by individual human writers. We hear in Scripture not just human words, marked by a greater or lesser skill and perceptiveness, but the eternal, un-created Word of God Himself, the divine Word of salvation. When we come to the Bible, then, we come not simply out of curiosity, to gain information. We come to the Bible with a specific question, a personal question about ourselves: “How can I be saved?”

As God’s divine word of salvation in human language, Scripture should evoke in us a sense of wonder. Do you ever feel, as you read or listen, that it has all become too familiar? Has the Bible grown rather boring? Continually we need to cleanse the doors of our perception and to look in amazement with new eyes at what the Lord sets before us.

Some time ago I had a dream which I remember vividly. I was back in the house where, for three years as a child, I lived in boarding school. At first in my dream I went through rooms that were already familiar to me. But then the companion who was showing me round took me into other rooms that I had never seen before—spacious, beautiful, full of light. Finally we entered a small chapel, with candles gleaming and dark golden mosaics.

In my dream I said to my companion, “How strange that I have lived here for three years, and yet I never knew about the existence of all these rooms.” And he replied to me, “But it is always so.”

I awoke; and behold, it was a dream.

We are to feel towards the Bible exactly the awe, the sense of wonder, of expectation and surprise, that I experienced in my dream. There are so many rooms in Scripture that we have never yet entered. There is so much depth and majesty for us to discover. This sense of wonder is an essential element in our responsive obedience.

If obedience means wonder, it also means listening. Such is the original meaning of the word in both Greek and Latin.

As a student I used to follow the Goon Show on the radio. In one particular incident that I recall, the telephone rings and a character reaches out his arm to pick up the receiver. “Hello,” he says, “hello, hello.” His volume rises. “Who is speaking—I can’t hear you. Hello, who is speaking?” The voice at the other end says, “You are speaking.” “Ah,” he replies. “I thought the voice sounded familiar.” And he puts the receiver down.

That unfortunately is a parable of what happens to us all too often. We are better at talking than listening. We hear the sound of our own voice, but we don’t pause to hear the voice of the other who is speaking to us. So the first requirement, as we read Scripture, is to stop talking and to listen—to listen with obedience.

When we enter an Orthodox Church, decorated in the traditional manner, and look up towards the sanctuary at the east end, we see there in the apse the Mother of God with her hands raised to heaven—the

ancient scriptural manner of praying that many still use today. Such symbolically is to be our attitude also as we read Scripture—the attitude of receptivity, of hands invisibly raised to heaven. Reading the Bible, we are to model ourselves on the Blessed Virgin Mary, for she is supremely the one who listens. At the Annunciation she listens with obedience and responds to the angel, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She could not have borne the Word of God in her body if she had not first listened to the Word of God in her heart. After the shepherds have adored the newborn Christ, it is said of her: “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Again, when Mary finds Jesus in the temple, we are told: “His mother kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). The same need for listening is emphasized in the last words attributed to the Mother of God in Scripture, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee: “Whatever He says to you, do it” (John 2:5), she says to the servants—and to all of us.

In all this the Blessed Virgin Mary serves as a mirror, as a living icon of the biblical Christian. We are to be like her as we hear the Word of God: pondering, keeping all these things in our hearts, doing whatever He tells us. We are to listen in obedience as God speaks.

Understanding the Bible through the Church

In the second place, as the Moscow Conference says, “We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church.” Our approach to the Bible is not only obedient but ecclesial.

It is the Church that tells us what is Scripture. A book is not part of Scripture because of any particular theory about its dating and authorship. Even if it could be proved, for example, that the Fourth Gospel was not actually written by John, the beloved disciple of Christ, this would not alter the fact that we Orthodox accept the Fourth Gospel as Holy Scripture. Why? Because the Gospel of John, whoever the author may be—and for myself I continue to accept the Johannine authorship—is accepted by the Church and in the Church.

It is the Church that tells us what is Scripture, and it is equally the Church that tells us how Scripture is to be understood. Coming upon the Ethiopian as he read the Old Testament in his chariot, Philip the Apostle asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And the Ethiopian answered, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:30, 31). We are all in the position of the Ethiopian. The words of Scripture are not always self-explanatory. God speaks directly to the heart of each one of us as we read our Bible—Scripture reading is, as Saint Tikhon says, a personal dialogue between each one and Christ—but we also need guidance. And our guide is the Church. We make full use of our own personal understanding, assisted by the Spirit, we make full use of the findings of modern biblical research, but always we submit private opinion—whether our own or that of the scholars—to the total experience of the Church throughout the ages.

The Orthodox standpoint here is summed up in the question asked of a convert at the reception service used by the Russian Church: “Do you acknowledge that the Holy Scripture must be accepted and interpreted in accordance with the belief which has been handed down by the Holy Fathers, and which the Holy Orthodox Church, our Mother, has always held and still does hold?”

We read the Bible personally, but not as isolated individuals. We read as the members of a family, the family of the Orthodox Catholic Church. When reading Scripture, we say not “I” but “We.” We read in communion with all the other members of the Body of Christ, in all parts of the world and in all generations of time. The decisive test and criterion for our understanding of what the Scripture means is the mind of the Church. The Bible is the book of the Church.

To discover this “mind of the Church,” where do we begin? Our first step is to see how Scripture is used in worship. How, in particular, are biblical lessons chosen for reading at the different feasts? We should also consult the writings of the Church Fathers, and consider how they interpret the Bible. Our Orthodox manner of reading Scripture is in this way both liturgical and patristic. And this, as we all realize, is far from easy to do in practice, because we have at our disposal so few Orthodox commentaries on Scripture available in English, and most of the Western commentaries do not employ this liturgical and patristic approach.

As an example of what it means to interpret Scripture in a liturgical way, guided by the use made of it at Church feasts, let us look at the Old Testament lessons appointed for Vespers on the Feast of the Annunciation, on March 25. They are three in number: (1) Genesis 28:10-17: Jacob’s dream of a ladder set up from earth to heaven; (2) Ezekiel 43:27-44:4: the prophet’s vision of the Jerusalem sanctuary, with the closed gate through which none but the Prince may pass; (3) Proverbs 9:1-11: one of the great sophianic passages in the Old Testament, beginning “Wisdom has built her house.”

These texts in the Old Testament, then, as their selection for the 25th of March and other feasts of the Theotokos indicates, are all to be understood as prophecies concerning the Incarnation from the Virgin. Mary is Jacob’s ladder, supplying the flesh that God incarnate takes upon entering our human world. Mary is the closed gate who alone among women bore a child while still remaining inviolate. Mary provides the house which Christ the Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24) takes as his dwelling (in another interpretation, the title Wisdom or Sophia refers to the Mother of God herself). Exploring in this manner the choice of lessons for the various feasts, we discover layers of biblical interpretation that are by no means obvious on a first reading.

Take as another example Vespers on Holy Saturday, the first part of the ancient Paschal Vigil. Here we have no less than fifteen Old Testament lessons. Regrettably, in all too many churches most of these are omitted, and so God’s people are starved of their proper biblical nourishment. This sequence of fifteen lessons sets before us the whole scheme of sacred history, while at the same time underlining the deeper meaning of Christ’s Resurrection. First among the lessons is Genesis 1:1-13, the account of Creation: Christ’s Resurrection is a new Creation. The fourth lesson is the Book of Jonah in its entirety, with the prophet’s three days in the belly of the whale foreshadowing Christ’s Resurrection after three days in the tomb (cf. Matthew 12:40). The sixth lesson recounts the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites (Exodus 13:20-15:19), which anticipates the new Passover of Pascha whereby Christ passes over from death to life (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:7; 10:1-4). The final lesson is the story of the three Holy Children in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3), once more a “type” or prophecy of Christ’s rising from the tomb.

Such is the effect of reading Scripture ecclesially in the Church and with the Church. Studying the Old Testament in this liturgical way and using the Fathers to help us, everywhere we uncover signposts pointing forward to the mystery of Christ and of His Mother. Reading the Old Testament in the light of the New, and the New in the light of the Old—as the Church’s calendar encourages us to do—we discover the unity of Holy Scripture. One of the best ways of identifying correspondences between the Old and New Testaments is to use a good biblical concordance. This can often tell us more about the meaning of Scripture than any commentary.

In Bible study circles within our parishes, it is helpful to give one person the special task of noting whenever a particular passage in the Old or New Testament is used for a festival or a saint’s day. We can then discuss together the reasons why each specific passage has been so chosen. Others in the group can be assigned to do homework among the Fathers, using above all the biblical homilies of Saint John Chrysostom, which have all been translated into English. But remember, you’ll have to dig to find what you are looking for. The Fathers were speaking to a different age from ours, and need to be read with

imagination. We must not be as literal-minded as the nineteenth-century Russian village priest who was told by his bishop, "Take your sermons from the Fathers." So on the next great feast he decided to read at the Liturgy a sermon of Saint John Chrysostom without changing a single word. The church was packed, and his parishioners were disconcerted when he commenced in ringing tones, "What is this? What do I see? The church is empty. There is nobody here. Where have they all gone? Everyone is in the hippodrome."

Father Georges Florovsky used to say that Orthodox today need to acquire a patristic mind. But to gain that, we must penetrate beyond the bare words of the Fathers to the kernel of their inner meaning. Christ, the Heart of the Bible

The third element in our reading of Scripture is that it should be Christ-centered. When the 1976 Moscow Conference tells us, "The Scriptures constitute a coherent whole," where are we to locate this unity and coherence? In the person of Christ. He is the unifying thread that runs through the entirety of Holy Scripture, from the first sentence to the last. We have already mentioned the way in which Christ may be seen foreshadowed on the pages of the Old Testament. As my history teacher at school used to say, "It all ties up." That is an excellent principle to employ when reading Scripture. Only connect. Much modern critical study of Scripture in the West has adopted an analytical approach, breaking up each book into different sources. The connecting links are unraveled, and the Bible is reduced to a series of bare primary units. There is certainly value in this. But we need to see the unity as well as the diversity of Scripture, the all-embracing end as well as the scattered beginnings. Orthodoxy prefers on the whole a synthetic rather than an analytical approach, seeing Scripture as an integrated whole, with Christ everywhere as the bond of union.

Always we seek for the point of convergence between the Old Testament and the New, and this we find in Jesus Christ. Orthodoxy assigns particular significance to the "typological" method of interpretation, whereby "types" of Christ, signs and symbols of His work, are discerned throughout the Old Testament. A notable example of this is Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem, who offered bread and wine to Abraham (Genesis 14:18), and who is seen as a type of Christ not only by the Fathers but even in the New Testament itself (Hebrews 5:6; 7:1). Another instance is the way in which, as we have seen, the Old Testament foreshadows the New; Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh at the Red Sea anticipates our deliverance from sin through the death and Resurrection of the Savior. Such is the method of interpretation that we are to apply throughout the Bible. Why, for instance, in the second half of Lent are the Old Testament readings from Genesis dominated by the figure of Joseph? Why in Holy Week do we read from the Book of Job? Because Joseph and Job are innocent sufferers, and as such they are types or foreshadowings of Jesus Christ, whose innocent suffering upon the Cross the Church is at the point of celebrating. It all ties up.

"A Christian," remarks Father Alexander Schmemmann, "is the one who wherever he looks finds everywhere Christ, and rejoices in Him." We can say this in particular of the biblical Christian. He is the one who, wherever he looks, finds everywhere Christ, on every page of Scripture.

The Bible As Personal

In the words of an early ascetic writer in the Christian East, Saint Mark the Monk: "He who is humble in his thoughts and engaged in spiritual work, when he reads the Holy Scriptures, will apply everything to himself and not to his neighbor." As Orthodox Christians we are to look everywhere in Scripture for a personal application. We are to ask not just, "What does it mean?" but, "What does it mean to me?"

Scripture is a personal dialogue between the Savior and myself—Christ speaking to me, and me answering. That is the fourth criterion in our Bible reading.

I am to see all the stories in Scripture as part of my own personal story. Who is Adam? The name Adam means “man,” “human,” and so the Genesis account of Adam’s Fall is also a story about me. I am Adam. It is to me that God says, “Adam, where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). “Where is God?” we often ask. But the real question is what God asks the Adam in each of us: “Where are you?”

When, in the story of Cain and Abel, we read God’s words to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” (Genesis 4:9), that also is addressed to each one of us. Who is Cain? It is myself. And God asks the Cain in each of us, “Where is your brother?” The way to God lies through love of other people, and there is no other way. Disowning my brother, I replace the image of God with the mark of Cain, and deny my own essential humanity.

In reading Scripture, we may take three steps. First, what we have in Scripture is sacred history: the history of the world from the Creation, the history of the chosen people, the history of God Incarnate in Palestine, the “mighty works” after Pentecost. The Christianity that we find in the Bible is not an ideology, not a philosophical theory, but a historical faith.

Then we are to take a second step. The history presented in the Bible is a personal history. We see God intervening at specific times and in specific places, as He enters into dialogue with individual persons. He addresses each one by name. We see set before us the specific calls issued by God to Abraham, Moses and David, to Rebekah and Ruth, to Isaiah and the prophets, and then to Mary and the Apostles. We see the particularity of the divine action in history, not as a scandal but as a blessing. God’s love is universal in scope, but He chooses to become incarnate in a particular corner of the earth, at a particular time and from a particular Mother.

We are in this manner to savor all the specificity of God’s action as recorded in Scripture. The person who loves the Bible loves details of dating and geography. Orthodoxy has an intense devotion to the Holy Land, to the exact places where Christ lived and taught, died and rose again. An excellent way to enter more deeply into our Scripture reading is to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Galilee. Walk where Christ walked. Go down to the Dead Sea, sit alone on the rocks, feel how Christ felt during the forty days of His temptation in the wilderness. Drink from the well where He spoke with the Samaritan woman. Go at night to the Garden of Gethsemane, sit in the dark under the ancient olives and look across the valley to the lights of the city. Experience to the full the distinctive “isness” of the historical setting, and take that experience back with you to your daily Scripture reading.

Then we are to take a third step. Reliving biblical history in all its particularity, we are to apply it directly to ourselves. We are to say to ourselves, “All these places and events are not just far away and long ago, but are also part of my own personal encounter with Christ. The stories include me.”

Betrayal, for example, is part of the personal story of everyone. Have we not all at some time in our life betrayed others, and have we not all known what it is to be betrayed, and does not the memory of these moments leave continuing scars on our psyche? Reading, then, the account of Saint Peter’s betrayal of Christ and of his restoration after the Resurrection, we can see ourselves as each an actor in the story. Imagining what both Peter and Jesus must have experienced at the moment immediately after the betrayal, we enter into their feelings and make them our own. I am Peter; in this situation can I also be Christ? Reflecting likewise on the process of reconciliation—seeing how the risen Christ with a love utterly devoid of sentimentality restored the fallen Peter to fellowship, seeing how Peter on his side had the

courage to accept this restoration—we ask ourselves: How Christlike am I to those who have betrayed me? And, after my own acts of betrayal, am I able to accept the forgiveness of others—am I able to forgive myself?

Or take, as another example, Saint Mary Magdalene. Can I see myself mirrored in her? Do I share in the generosity, the spontaneity and loving impulsiveness, that she showed when she poured out the alabaster box of ointment on the feet of Christ? “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.” (Here I follow the normal Western opinion, which identifies the sinful woman in Luke 7:36-50 with Mary Magdalene; in the Christian East this identification is not usually made.) Or am I timid, mean, holding myself back, never ready to give myself fully to anything either good or bad? As the Desert Fathers say, “Better someone who has sinned, if he knows he has sinned and repents, than a person who has not sinned and thinks of himself as righteous.”

Have I gained the boldness of Saint Mary Magdalene, her constancy and loyalty, when she went out to anoint the body of Christ in the tomb (John 20:1)? Do I hear the risen Savior call me by name, as He called her, and do I respond “Rabboni” with her simplicity and completeness (John 20:16)? Reading Scripture in this way—in obedience, as a member of the Church, finding Christ everywhere, seeing everything as a part of my own personal story—we shall sense something of the variety and depth to be found in the Bible. Yet always we shall feel that in our biblical exploration we are only at the very beginning. We are like someone launching out in a tiny boat across a limitless ocean.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 118[119]:105).