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## **Is There an Orthodox Exegesis?**

### **Engaging Contextual Hermeneutics in Orthodox Biblical Studies**

The readings are mediated through a particular conceptual frame of reference derived from the worldview and the sociocultural context of a particular cultural community. This differs from community to community. It informs and shapes the exegetical methodology and the reading practice and acts as a grid for making meaning of the text.

J. Ukpong<sup>1</sup>

#### **1. The Contextual Interpretation of Scripture: Introductory Remarks**

At the outset of the 21st century, the majority of Christians live in a globalized world, characterized by a swift influx of information and permanent changes to all levels of life. Most of the world participates in the global network of communication. It is hard to find isolated people and communities, unless individuals have sought purposefully to isolate themselves. From this point of view, today's world in some sense resembles the world of the Early Church that was evolving alongside its texts, texts that would later come to constitute the canon of the New Testament. This world was largely a global world that was connected in many ways. The Roman Empire as the political united space was a suitable place for the activities of the Early Church: on the one hand, for external missions, and on the other, for intensive internal communication amongst the geographically distanced communities.<sup>2</sup> Following the paradigm of the Early Church, which is considered as a common heritage by most of the Christian churches, a major priority of the Christians of today is to communicate with one another, to encounter the different contexts of

being a Christian, and to share the experience of reading Scripture, and of the faith expressed in it. In this regard, we can speak about contextual hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup> This concerns the embeddedness of Scripture in the realm of real life, and therefore provides an interpretation that aims to arrive at implications for the contemporary situation of Christian churches.<sup>4</sup>

There are at least three crucial hermeneutical presuppositions of contextual hermeneutics:

- 1) With regard to exegetes: Exegetes must be aware that they are not free from biases and ideologies, but are always bound to their own life setting. The first task of every exegete is to define the “place” where he/she is reading and interpreting from, i.e. his/her own context.
- 2) With regard to the biblical texts: Scripture is not a voice or a sum of voices captured in the past, but rather conveys a message for all times and for all life contexts. The Bible as the Word of God transcends time and space, keeping its message open for various applications, for new understandings. This means, from the point of view of contextual hermeneutics, that the biblical texts do not only have one single meaning that was captured in the past, but are, through their interaction with their readers, able to produce new meanings in order to build the Church as a community, and to support individuals in their faith as well.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Bible is not considered as a monument or as a compilation of the theological evidence from times past, but rather as a collection of powerful, normative texts, whose messages hold the potential for the permanent building of the Church across time.
- 3) With regard to interpretation: Each reading of the biblical texts in the global world—with awareness of one’s own contextuality and the impossibility of any absoluteness in one’s own interpretation—indispensably leads to reading with others. The aim of such a reading is not just to articulate and share one’s own tradition-conditioned exegesis and understanding of Scripture, but also that of being willing to participate in a process of exchange that could result in a revision and transformation of one’s own views.<sup>6</sup> Reading with others reveals the similarities and differences of the *contextual interpretations* of Scripture, within a diverse Christianity that we have inherited.

In the following sections, my aim will be not merely to present and describe the context within which Orthodox biblical studies unfold in order to answer the question “Is there an Orthodox exegesis?”, but also to provide some self-critical observations. In the process of expounding the sense-constructing of contextual hermeneutics for Orthodox biblical scholarship, I am roughly following the scheme described by J. Rüssen: observing (the condition and the roots of it, i.e. of the construction of senses); interpreting (the reasons for the present condition); orientating (the present situation); and finally, motivating (the proposals for further consideration).<sup>7</sup>

## **2. The Eastern Orthodox Context: A Brief Overview**

All texts and all exegetes exist within a “life context.” Regarding the “life context,” I understand this to mean the sum of text–external factors and drives, such as those historical, social, political, economic, and cultural aspects that inevitably affect the reading and understanding of the biblical texts. Dealing with the common Orthodox context of the interpretation of Scripture is not an easy enterprise, as the Orthodox countries and churches did not always share a common fate regarding their historical circumstances, i.e. political, economic, and social contexts. Nonetheless, just as one can speak about the context of Latin America, Africa, or Asia – regardless of their complexity and variability, taking into account their few very common experiences, such as poverty, political instability, their experience with slavery and colonialism, etc.<sup>8</sup>–, it is therefore acceptable to use similar criteria, and to mention some typical traits of the Eastern Orthodox approach to Scripture, which can serve as a wider field in the application of contextual hermeneutics.<sup>9</sup>

Almost all of the Orthodox countries in Eastern Europe were under Turkish occupation for many centuries. This therefore greatly affected their culture, ecclesial life, and theological reflections. During this period, when the Orthodox nations were simply trying to survive, struggling for their basic freedoms, and keeping their Christian identity through fidelity to the holy tradition, including that of worship, the spirit of Enlightenment and historical criticism flourished in Western Europe, involving a paradigm

shift in the sphere of the humanities.<sup>10</sup> For Eastern Europe, this was the period during which the Bible was received almost exclusively through hearing the biblical texts during worship. An additional problem in the reception of Scripture was, e.g. in Greece, the attempts at proselytism on the part of some evangelical communities. These attempts caused a reaction from the Church authorities who, being afraid that their people could be deprived of its confessional and national identity, prohibited private readings and the usage of any translation of Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

After World War II, most of the Orthodox countries—Greece being the exception, whereas Russia had already fallen under the communist regime in 1917—found themselves under communist regimes, which in principle fostered a hostile attitude toward the national Orthodox churches. They saw in them a perilous opponent, who had to be repressed permanently and by any means. It is obvious that under such circumstances, it was not possible to embark on any innovative reception or critical estimation of the Western biblical research from the standpoint of the Orthodox ecclesial experience, nor to develop any original creative work in this field.<sup>12</sup> Obviously, then, modern Orthodox biblical scholarship was influenced for many years by specific external factors—political, social, economic—, which basically hampered the development of biblical studies and the adequate appraisal of the role of Scripture in Orthodox theology and ecclesiastical life.

However, in the second part of the 20th century, an attempt to creatively appropriate Eastern Orthodox theological heritage arose, mostly amongst the Russian Orthodox émigrés in the West, namely through the so-called neo-patristic synthesis. This concept became the insignia of Orthodoxy in a globalizing world of Christian confessions, which were looking to establish contacts with each other. Father George Florovsky, speaking at the Congress of Orthodox Theologians held in Athens at the end of 1936, formulated the project of “neo-patristic synthesis” as follows:

[ - - ] the authority of the Fathers has been re-emphasized and a “return to the Fathers” advocated and approved. Indeed, it must be a *creative turn*. An element of self-criticism must be therein implied. This brings us to the concept of a *Neopatristic synthesis*, as the task and the aim of orthodox theology today. The Legacy of the Fathers is a challenge for our generation, in the orthodox Church and outside of it. Its recreative power has been

increasingly recognised and acknowledged in these recent decades, in various corners of divided Christendom. The growing appeal of patristic tradition is one of the most distinctive marks of our time. For the orthodox this appeal is of special urgency and importance, because the total tradition of Orthodoxy has always been patristic.<sup>13</sup>

However, the setting of Scripture in this new paradigm was quite ambiguous. It remains unclear as to how to treat the Bible in this new attempt to connect contemporary Orthodox theology to the way of theologizing by the great Church Fathers of Late Antiquity.<sup>14</sup> Should we read the Bible as they did? Should we exclusively use their interpretations in our theology today?

During this same period, there were also some theoretical reflections on the significance of the Liturgy for the Orthodox identity. Alexander Schmemmann, one of the greatest Orthodox theologians of the 20th century, wrote:

Return to the Bible, return to the Fathers ... This means, above all, the return to the Church through the Eucharist and to the Eucharist through the Church: here the "texts" of the Scripture are given to us again and again as the living and life-creating Word of God, here we meet our Fathers not in "books" but in reality, the Reality to which they bore witness in their time and in their language, to which we are called to bear witness in our time and in our own language. "For the languages in the world are different," says St. Irenaeus, "but the power of tradition is one and the same." (Adv. Haer. 1, 10, 2)<sup>15</sup>

However, neither these nor similar reflections sufficiently took into account the crucial role of the Bible in the formation of the liturgical texts, or the biblical background and spirit of the Orthodox Liturgy.<sup>16</sup> Scripture was mainly considered as the theological authority and origin of the revelation of God, but the hermeneutical consequences of these convictions did not sufficiently effect the elaboration of the theology itself. The problem was that the Bible had lost its own independent and prophetic voice, which was mixed with the many voices of the liturgical texts.<sup>17</sup>

These two notions lead us to two issues of vast importance for Orthodox contextual hermeneutics: the patristic heritage and the focus on worship. Now we turn to focus on each of these issues.

## 2.1. The patristics as mediator of the biblical message: Scripture in theology

The so-called patristic age covers a historical period of the Early Christian Church, approximately from Late Antiquity until the early Middle Ages, concluding with John of Damascus (in the 8th century).<sup>18</sup> The Greek, Syrian, and Latin Church Fathers of this period grounded their theology directly on Holy Scripture in the form of the concrete exegesis, and indirectly by taking the Bible as the starting point and criterion for their theological reflections. Overall, the Bible took on a special and most important place in patristic literary activities.<sup>19</sup> It was interpreted through various genres, such as scholia, comments, homiletics, etc. A break in the biblical exegesis came after the Council in Trullo (680–681), which enacted, probably as a reaction to the appeal to Scripture from the non-Orthodox, canon XIX. This canon sought to prevent any autonomous or creative interpretation of the biblical texts.<sup>20</sup> During the period after the Council, a specific mode of Scripture interpretation came into being, the “catenae” (σειρές, catenae), which was a compilation of the patristic interpretations of the biblical texts.<sup>21</sup>

After the prolonged neglect of the patristic exegetical heritage, which was principally considered as pre-critical and thus irrelevant for the contemporary enlightened exegetes, one gets the impression that in the West during the last few decades, it has been met with remarkable and growing interest.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the investigation of the ancient rhetorical theories, for example, and their intertwinement with the biblical texts, became an important topic in the studies of the New Testament during the second part of the 20th century. Although rhetorical criticism has been applied primarily to the epistles of Paul, scholars have seen the enormous importance of patristic exegesis for this field, not least because of its cultural closeness to the biblical texts.<sup>23</sup> Today, patristic exegesis is an inevitable factor in the frame of the history of interpretation (*Auslegungsgeschichte*) and the history of the effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of Scripture.<sup>24</sup>

Following the common trends in Christian theology of the second half of the 20th century, Orthodox biblical scholars felt the need to present their own positions to the wider Christian community, positions that could be considered as specific for the Orthodox interpretation of Scripture. Having relied on the “neo-patristic synthesis,” which was the prevailing theological paradigm in the Orthodox stream, they expressed the opinion

that Orthodox biblical scholarship ought, as Savvas Agourides put it, “to combine the analytical method of contemporary science with the synthetic and organic ‘method’ of the Fathers,” and in this way define its own hermeneutical framework.<sup>25</sup> Since that time, there have been some significant achievements in the field of the history of the patristic exegesis,<sup>26</sup> but on the theoretical level, one can observe the conviction that the patristic heritage has to play the role of *mediator* between the biblical text and a contemporary Orthodox interpreter.<sup>27</sup> In some sense, this has paralyzed the autonomous and creative work of Orthodox biblical scholars on the biblical texts themselves. This is the consequence of a lack of an understanding of the biblical texts within their own historical context and it has led to an unnatural fusion between the original meanings and the meanings that the texts have gained throughout the history of their reception. In short, the problem is due to a lack of respect for the historical and theological otherness of the biblical texts. Instead of investigating patristic exegesis as a specific station and aspect of the reception of Scripture, and from this position regaining certain hermeneutical insights, it is considered as a starting point for the interpretation of a biblical text, and from this position, the interpreter goes back to the biblical texts themselves. This is methodologically a problematic step, to say the least. Thus, instead of the direct work on the texts, Orthodox biblical scholarship has often reduced itself to the description of the interpretation and effects of biblical texts by the patristic authors. This is apparently a consequence of the non-reception of historical criticism, which primarily deals with the historical context of the theological expressions, making a difference between a possible original meaning and various receptions of this meaning in the different historical circumstances and contexts. There is an obvious oversight of the historical dimension of the theology of the Fathers, whose exegetical works must also be interpreted firmly with respect to their historical contexts and ecclesiastical needs. In this sense, the problem becomes apparent when something which itself has to be interpreted is treated as the main instance and measure for the interpretation of something that precedes it chronologically and theologically. Nevertheless, the already mentioned appeal of Savvas Agourides to combine the contemporary methods and the patristic methods needs further clarification. This clarification is still missing, especially with regard to using contemporary scientific methods in the exegesis of Scripture.<sup>28</sup>



With regard to patristic exegesis as a mediator between the Bible and contemporary exegetes, it is, however, difficult to speak about *the* Orthodox biblical exegesis of today. Rather, we can speak about Orthodox biblical scholars with a shared religious, spiritual, and partly, cultural background. They all feel obliged to the patristic heritage when undertaking their biblical studies and theology, but they display this obligation in different ways, on different levels, and to different degrees. For a common hermeneutical ground regarding the patristic heritage, I propose the following points for further reflection:

The distinction between patristic exegesis and hermeneutics made by Ulrich Luz could prove to be very helpful for the integration of patristic biblical insights into the modern interpretation of Scripture.<sup>29</sup> This distinction can help us to clarify the appeal of Savvas Agourides to the combination of contemporary methods and the methods of the Fathers. The patristic exegesis as an explanation of the text—despite its sporadic, useful insights—has to be fully replaced with a historical-critical methodology and/or a set of synchronic methods. On the other hand, patristic hermeneutics could remain as the guide and measure for contemporary Orthodox biblical interpretation.<sup>30</sup> That means, firstly, retaining the conviction that Scripture mediates the energies of God, then, secondly, that in Scripture, one can encounter the living Christ, and, thirdly, that the Bible contains the Christological message as a living force that is able to transform our lives and our self-understanding.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, in order to make these points clear, it is not enough simply to repeat the patristic interpretations, because we have to convey these convictions in a radically changed condition of life from that of the ancient Fathers. If we truly want to be on the path of the Fathers and to demonstrate their “spirit,” we need to speak our language, as they spoke theirs, and respect our cultural and historical context, as they respected their own. Thus, instead of quoting or imitating the style of the writing of the Fathers, we have to look deeper into their hermeneutics and into the ways in which they engaged the Bible in their theology. For example, the moral approach of John Chrysostom, or the engagement of the Bible in the field of the scientific themes of Basil the Great, can offer a good guide for our exegetical activities in the real world we live in.<sup>32</sup>

It must be taken into account that patristic exegesis is based on a certain “pre-understanding,” one that is radically different from ours.



Their pre-understanding was characterized by a lack of interest in the original meaning of the biblical texts. In this regard, the Church Fathers merely expressed the common hermeneutics of their own time: ancient scholars held no interest in the original meanings of the philosophical or religious texts that were interpreted. Rather, all of their effort was focused on mediating the “matter” (πράγμα, *res*) of a text. This effort was accomplished primarily through allegorizing. Therefore, a text was not considered as an object of analysis in the sense that a truth needed to be discovered within the text. Rather, a text had the role of confirming a truth that existed independently of it. Any difficulty an exegete encountered in the quest for the truth in a text simply required a specific interpretation, e.g. an allegory.<sup>33</sup> The patristic concept of θεωρία or “higher meaning” also has to be understood within this frame.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, a number of “external factors” played a considerable role in their biblical exegesis. Those factors were primarily the Christological and Trinitarian disputes of the time, or the affinity to the ascetical approach/reading. When the Orthodox biblical scholars of today insist on the legacy of patristic exegesis and repeat it without further reflection, without seriously taking into account these and the other aspects, as though the exegesis of the patristic age were timeless, then they find that there is hardly any reasonable connection to their own contemporaries.

It would be a mistake to think that in the patristic heritage we can find normative, obligatory interpretations. The reason is simple: The Fathers display enough disagreement in this regard. However, it is important, and an essential aspect of our critical confrontation with the past, to stress not only the continuities, but also the discontinuities in the patristic heritage. The latter were an essential part of the patristic theological discourse in the basic sense of this word, namely, to run in different directions. It suffices to mention the examples of Origen and Methodius or the Alexandrian and Antiochian exegetes. The freedom of an ancient interpreter toward the authorities of the past can be illustrated by a statement from John Chrysostom (on Gal. 4:24), who did not hesitate in saying that the apostle Paul used the term “allegory” in Gal 4:24 “in the wrong way” (καταχρηστικῶς). Orthodox exegetes today are obligated to consider and evaluate the large spectrum of patristic work on Scripture, and to clearly recognize and respect its cultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions.<sup>35</sup>

## **2. 2. Worship as mediator of the biblical message: Scripture in faith**

The word ἐκκλησία is the most important self-designation of early Christianity. The Christian assemblies as ἐκκλησία, the community coming together in one place (1 Cor 11: 20), has from the beginning constituted the identity of Christianity.<sup>36</sup> The Christian rites of worship have developed throughout history, gaining new shapes and content, but in essence, they have always constituted the authentic expression of the faith and hope of the Church.<sup>37</sup> The social function of worship depends on the degree of integration of the Christians in the society in which they live. If the Church is socially marginalized, worship becomes an important social place for Christian people: They get a unique opportunity for the sharing of religious experiences with other sisters and brothers. If the society concedes more public space for the Church, worship, although retaining its central place in the lives of Christian people, becomes only one of many spheres that enables the practice of the faith, since there is the freedom to expose Christian identity on the different levels of social and public life. The Eastern Orthodox Churches have experience of both settings. In the first case, the Bible is narrowly related to worship and is received chiefly through hearing, while in the second case, the Bible is a book that belongs to the home library and can be read privately and discussed publicly.<sup>38</sup> For the Orthodox nations that until the 19th century, and then again for most of the 20th century, were under regimes that repressed the Church, and accordingly excluded it from public life, worship was the center of national and religious identity. It was also the main, often the only, place where the Bible was heard and interpreted.<sup>39</sup>

In Orthodox worship, the biblical texts are surrounded by songs, hymns, prayers, and icons. The major part of these songs, hymns, prayers and icons are either deeply inspired by the biblical texts or form artistic repetitions of them. Thus, the biblical texts strongly impact liturgical expression. One can therefore speak about a hermeneutics of Scripture through the liturgical readings.<sup>40</sup> In the setting of worship, the Bible is heard as the Word of God, which is directed immediately to the assembled believers. In this setting, in the liturgical reception of Scripture, original meanings of the biblical texts are transcended. We can describe this event of hearing and understanding the Bible with the concept of H.-G.

Gadamer, as a “fusion of horizons” of the message of the texts, and the recipients and their encounter at the *point of the faith*.<sup>41</sup> There is no need for any method in order to understand the message. There is no need for critical distance.

With regard to the liturgical dimension of the understanding of Scripture, I offer some general observations:

### ***2.2.1. Formative uses of Scripture***

We can determine that there is a difference between normative and formative uses of Scripture. Before the biblical texts became the Holy Bible, the canonical collection of normative texts, they were used in different settings of the Church’s life. This context of formative uses of the biblical texts deserves more attention in academic work. Actually, they “ought to be at the forefront of our hermeneutical thinking.”<sup>42</sup> The formative uses of the text are prior to the normative uses. The rich and splendid liturgical life of the Eastern Orthodox Church involves a specific way of interpreting Scripture and of achieving existential self-understanding, and could be a wide field for historical and hermeneutical research. W. A. Meeks writes:

I hope that not only the historians of religion but also our colleagues from the Eastern churches can help to remind us that the formative uses—in liturgy, hymnody, and contemplative discipline, in the shaping of ethos and the formation of conscience, in the making of discourse and of art—are logically and developmentally prior to the normative uses.<sup>43</sup>

Such research could be helpful for not only recovering and presenting this entire precious legacy from the past, in order to preserve, and eventually to copy and repeat it proudly, but rather to motivate Orthodox biblical scholars to *produce* new interpretations for their own time, just like their ancestors did. In this legacy lies the capacity of Orthodoxy to create new frameworks of uses of the Bible.

### ***2.2.2. Arriving directly at the matter of the text (identification)***

As an example of this kind of reception of the biblical texts, I draw attention to the apostle's passage from 1 Thess. 4:15–17 (especially the direct addressing, "we who are alive," "we shall always be with the Lord"), which is read at the funeral service, immediately before the reading of the Gospel passage. In this text, Paul tried to convey to the young Christian community in Thessaloniki the hope of the resurrection of the members who had passed away before the final coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. During funeral services when this text is read and heard today, none of the present recipients assembled for a funeral *reflect* on the text in its historical context, e.g. on things such as the concrete circumstances that had led to the writing of the text; the problem of the reception of "the word of the Lord" (verse 15) by Paul, i.e. the question regarding how much Paul really knew about the "historical Jesus" and his words; whether Paul was wrong in his expectation that the Lord would come soon, during his lifetime; the usage of the image of the arrival of Caesar in a city for the description of the final advent of Jesus Christ, and so on.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, the reading and hearing of the text in a liturgical context such as this excludes any question about the pseudonymity and authenticity of a particular biblical text. When the epistles of Paul are read in the setting of worship, they retain their traditional titles ("reading from the Epistle by St. Paul to the Ephesians"). Even the epistle to the Hebrews is presented with its traditional authorship ("reading from the Epistle by St. Paul to the Hebrews"). This oversight of consideration of historical details of the biblical texts is typical for their usage in the liturgical context, where almost all questions posed in the frame of the academic work lack importance. The Word of God is *hodie usque ad nos* ("today, even for us") or simply *pro nobis* ("for us").<sup>45</sup> The main point is that the Bible, read and heard in the middle of the assembled believing community, witnesses to the faith in and the energies of Jesus Christ, who is present in Scripture.<sup>46</sup>

### ***2.2.3. Closeness and distance to the biblical text***

The understanding of the Bible in the liturgical context could be considered hermeneutically as an actualization and appropriation of

the matter of the text, of the “world of the text,” i.e. the world of faith in the present situation: “The subjective concept that corresponds to that of the world of the text is the concept of appropriation. By this I mean the very act of understanding oneself before the text.”<sup>47</sup> Hence, the believing community has the capacity, legitimacy, and right to take the biblical texts out from their historical settings, and to understand itself *for a moment* as the direct recipient of their message.<sup>48</sup> Some questions arise, however. For example, if not the liturgical event could also be a good opportunity to let the Bible speak anew through a principally text-oriented exegesis. How can Scripture tell us something new, and even strange, if we always understand it in terms of a “fusion of horizons”?<sup>49</sup>

Up to now, I have discussed the two mediators of the biblical texts that are important for the Orthodox context. Both of them raise the following question: How should we treat the biblical texts in themselves? Do they have voices that could be heard somehow independently of the mediators through which we have become used to hearing them? Herewith, we arrive at the question of contemporary scientific methodology in biblical studies.

### **3. The Non-Reception of Historical-Critical Methodology in Orthodox Biblical Scholarship**

The question of the methodology in Orthodox biblical scholarship is strongly influenced by the two conceptual frames of reference of patristic exegesis and worship. In the first case, we have seen that the method of the Fathers prevails over contemporary methodologies. In the second, that there is in fact no need for a method, as the recipient meets “the matter” (*Sache*) of the text directly during a liturgical event. However, I would argue that both of these frames need to be considered anew with regard to the methodology of interpretation of Scripture: 1) In order to make their interpretations academically, socially, and ecumenically recognizable, the Orthodox exegetes must work scientifically, that is to say, historic-critically; 2) In order to retain the voices of Scripture as the living Word of God, speaking always anew to the believers, their interpretations must respect the historical and theological otherness of the biblical text. Only by doing so can the biblical texts maintain their prophetic, educative, and corrective function in the Church.

Nevertheless, a striking feature of Orthodox biblical scholarship is the non-reception—openly or by simply ignoring it—or very selective and partial application of the historical-critical methodology in the exegesis.<sup>50</sup> This condition could be explained on the one hand by the historical circumstances: The Orthodox theologians were not able either to make a creative connection to the process of the Enlightenment, where historical criticism has been employed in biblical research, or to bring about an adequate reaction on the theoretical level to this new development in biblical scholarship with their own paradigm.<sup>51</sup> Historical criticism mainly remains as something problematic for the Orthodox self-understanding, even having the capability to counteract traditional faith and theology. This state of affairs influences the current discussions between Western and Eastern biblical scholars, and is encountered in the problems within the terminology, scientific methodology, and the exegetical results of the historical criticism. On the other hand, there is another reason for the non-reception of historical criticism in the countries that for a long time were under communist regimes. It is perfectly understandable that the theologians there were not motivated to “criticize” the Bible and thus to pose critical questions to Christianity itself in an environment that was hostile toward the Church. This is, however, an explanation for the non-reception of historical criticism in the past, but cannot be a justification for the reluctant attitude of Orthodox biblical scholars toward historical criticism today, taking into account particularly that the historical criticism pursued today is far removed from its original positivistic claims and logocentrism.<sup>52</sup>

### **3.1. Terminology**

The realm of terminology, which has been developed and domesticated in distinct ways in the East and West’s theological vocabulary, is often a realm of misunderstanding. While biblical studies in the West have to a great extent adopted the terms and concepts of contemporary religious studies, sociology, psychology, anthropology, literal theory, and other sciences—thus being involved and engaged in a dynamic, not necessarily fruitful, dialogue with them, which requires a minimum common linguistic basis—, Orthodox biblical scholars have still not tested their

own theological heritage in the field of new scientific discourses, partly because there was no social and academic need for such an experiment, and partly because they desire to remain faithful, even *terminologically*, to the authorities of the past.<sup>53</sup> There is an altogether serious problem in Orthodox biblical theology and theology: The problem of language and discourse. The Eastern Orthodox theology, together with Christian theology in general, ought to foster a discourse that is no longer formulated in obsolete and unrecognizable theological language. It has to translate theological concepts effectively into a language that is accessible to participants from other public discourses.<sup>54</sup> The field of biblical and patristic studies offers a convenient context for the beginning of a paradigm shift in the usage of theological language and discourse, as biblical and patristic studies particularly have clearly illustrated how the challenges of new situations demand new linguistic creations and a renewed theological discourse (Old and New Testament, New Testament and the early patristic period, etc.).

### **3.2. Methodology**

While the historical-critical methodology has been accepted in the West as an indispensable part of the scientific investigation of the biblical texts, in order to establish the historical context of the concrete theological ideas and thoughts, most Orthodox biblical scholars, instead of analytical historical-philological exegesis and a quest for hypothetical original meanings, prefer a dogmatic approach, i.e. by applying theological views to the biblical texts, views that are surely secondary to the Bible.<sup>55</sup> The dogmatic approach as such does not occur merely in the case of Orthodox scholars, and this approach, under certain conditions, has a legitimate place within biblical hermeneutics.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, the attempt to read the Bible purely “dogmatically” faces many difficulties; there is no theological coherence in the Bible on which one can base a doctrinal system.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, for Orthodox scholarship, one cannot underscore enough the fact that the formulation of biblical “truths” has firstly to be conceived and interpreted in their own historical context. It might well be argued that the promotion of the historical-critical methodology is an important agenda for Orthodox biblical scholars. I will return to this topic below.



### 3.3. Results of the historical-critical research

From the perspective of the dogmatic approach, most results of historical criticism are suspect, false, and dangerous for the faith. Indeed, some results of historical criticism are doubtlessly problematic, especially when the scholars involved insist on their “correctness” or “accurateness.” However, Orthodox scholars would do well to pay attention to the paradigm shift that is taking place in historical criticism amongst the majority of Western biblical scholars.<sup>58</sup> Today, exegetes are more cautious and fully aware of the limits of the historical-critical methodology than before. A certain hermeneutical revision is unfolding in two directions. Firstly, the historical-critical method is considered as merely one of several “criticisms”; it is not the only one, not even the dominant one. Secondly, in the frame of various hermeneutical approaches, the historical-critical methodology plays a different role: The role and limits assigned to it depends on one’s epistemological position.<sup>59</sup> Having said that, the problem of the reception of historical criticism in Orthodox biblical studies is not, however, resolved. There are some results that enjoy almost a consensus within the academic community, but nonetheless are rejected by the majority of Orthodox scholars, mostly through resorting to traditional arguments. A classic example is the issue of pseudoepigraphy in the Bible.<sup>60</sup> This is not only a technical question, but also one in which the interpretation of a text is largely dependent on the position chosen. Of course, Orthodox scholars have every right to defend the authenticity of a biblical text, but they have to do it through their insights from the text itself, and not by resorting to tradition.

After this brief survey of the conditions in Orthodox biblical studies regarding some basic issues, we now have to provide some observations with regard to the future perspectives of biblical hermeneutics in the Eastern Orthodox context.

## 4. The Perspectives of Biblical Hermeneutics in Eastern Orthodox Theology

The majority of Orthodox nations today are part of the global world, and this is particularly the case in the Eastern European part of the European Union. "To be part of" means not only to be partners in trade, to participate in the economic aspects, but also to be a part of the spiritual goods. This also means sharing certain values and shaping a common future. Again, the lack of the spirit of the Enlightenment in Eastern Europe is a factor that also plays a considerable role in the understanding of the biblical texts and theology. One gets the impression that the Eastern Orthodox Church has taken a leap from the Middle Ages into postmodernity.<sup>61</sup> If the West is to understand the East better, it needs to recognize that. However, recent historical factors admittedly have never been so convenient regarding possibilities for a fruitful dialogue between East and West, and overall, between Christian communities around the world. This dialogue offers an opportunity for some self-reflection for all involved. Hearing how others see me can be helpful for me to improve myself. I would like to offer a few proposals for a self-reflection on Orthodox biblical scholarship:

### 4.1. Proposal 1

The reception of the historical-critical methodology must be a permanent undertaking in the educational system of Orthodox theological faculties.<sup>62</sup> The historical criticism that we have to adopt in our biblical studies is not the same criticism as that which dominated in Western biblical studies in the 19th and the first part of the 20th century.<sup>63</sup> The fact that historical criticism did not have any remarkable impact on the daily life of the Church in the West could therefore be an important lesson for the scholars and theologians in the East. Shall we, therefore, import something so strange into our spirituality, which, by the way, is in advance, convicted of defeat? It is not enough to argue that historical criticism is an important instrument in academic studies and that it is what makes theological studies able to participate in the academic life of a university. This is certainly true, but the Church is a much wider space than the academic community is, and it is also the place in which the fruits of historical criticism have to be

acknowledged. What then can we learn by studying the Bible historical-critically? Can we expect a theological benefit from this enterprise?

In the biblical tradition—oral and written alike—, we see a recurrent tendency to transcend original meanings of the previous texts through the new readings in the light of new experiences. Original meanings have always been transcended for the sake of the new “significance” for each generation. To find out these points’ potential original meanings and the historical contexts in which they emerged means reading and interpreting Scripture theologically: By so doing, one can learn how theology functions, and how humans are enabled to speak about God, and how they bring out, like a householder, what is new and what is old (Matt. 13:52). In this way, historical criticism can serve theology and help us to grasp the patterns of how theology was done in the past in order to gain insights for the present and future. Hence, the first and basic exegetical task in the academic frame is, and remains, historical-critical work, the critical and accountable dealing with the texts. The outcome of this work helps us to consider the means through which the texts responded to the challenges of their own age and how they built the Church in the times of their emergence. A basic trait of a theologically contrived historical criticism is the effort to explore the possibilities of transcending the hypothetical original meanings of the biblical texts, which have to be established through the historical-critical method. Today, this could further offer us paradigms for doing theology for the new life contexts that we live in. By pursuing historical-critical exegesis, we respect the otherness of the biblical texts, and we allow them permanently to question our identity.<sup>64</sup>

## 4.2. Proposal 2

Another significant enterprise that functions as an essential supplement to today’s historical criticism is the history of effects. Research in this field does not mean merely the collection of information about different influences of the biblical texts in patristic thought, in liturgy, art, literature, customs, or politics. This is surely a great and necessary job, but one that has to unfold under certain hermeneutical propositions set out by the whole concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, as developed in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>65</sup> According to him, the epistemological status of

tradition needs a revision: Understanding is not so much an action of one's own subjectivity as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition in which past and present are constantly fused.<sup>66</sup> History is not merely an object for our accurate analysis and neutral observation, but the essential component of life, to which we owe our language, our way of thinking, the whole of our life.<sup>67</sup> The biblical texts have a history and we, present readers, are part of this history:

The history of effects brings together the texts and us, their interpreters; or better: the history of effects shows us that we are already together and that it is an illusion to treat the texts in a position of distance and in a merely "objective" way.<sup>68</sup>

The history of effects also teaches us to be aware of our conditionality, particularity, and contextuality. Our traditions largely shape our interpretations. The interpreter is not only an observer but also a participant in his or her own tradition. However, the traditions differ, just like the interpretations. The Eastern Orthodox experience with the Bible, expressed in the different realms of life—patristic exegesis, liturgy, icons, ascetic life, etc.—has to offer its own approach to the Bible. However, that does not mean a passive and uncritical reception of the tradition. The act of understanding also demands critical reflection, revision, and even a confrontation with tradition. It demands the "power of reflection," which is able to question and abandon some claims of tradition.<sup>69</sup>

### 4.3. Proposal 3

There is an agreement amongst Orthodox biblical scholars that the patristic tradition is more than simply a trace in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Scripture.<sup>70</sup> However, with regard to the patristic heritage, it has been clearly emphasized that there is a need for a paradigm shift in the Orthodox theology generally.<sup>71</sup> The respectable attempt of the "neo-patristic synthesis" necessarily requires a reconsideration and even a questioning of whether such a type of synthesis is needed and possible to undertake. In the wider sense of this shift, biblical scholars have to contribute substantially toward a new biblical-patristic paradigm. It is necessary to appreciate the context of

understanding, to have the courage, freedom, and responsibility to do the same things that the Fathers have done: To interpret the Bible according to the needs and the understanding of the horizons of our time, as they did for their own.<sup>72</sup> Despite the difficulty in speaking of *the* Orthodox approach to the Bible,<sup>73</sup> the Orthodox experience surely has to offer some unique views. In order to make these views communicable in an academic framework, Orthodox scholars ought to set up a network, within which they could exchange their experience of the study of Scripture in their own contexts. This process could begin with the establishment of an institution that assembles the Orthodox biblical scholars with the aim of researching the Orthodox biblical-patristic heritage.<sup>74</sup> However, this would be impossible without the help and support of Western colleagues.

#### **4.4. Proposal 4: Context and dialogue**

David Tracy writes: “Hermeneutics shows how dialogue remains the central hope for recognizing the ‘possibilities’ which any serious conversation with the ‘other’ and the ‘different’ way can yield.”<sup>75</sup>

The Christian communities of today share a number of overlapping interests. One of the dominant interests is, in my opinion, the shaping and promoting of a “new humanism” in a world that finds itself in a global crisis.<sup>76</sup> This could be a responsible attempt to provide the values that would yield a basis for peace and respect for every human being. The story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord Jesus Christ, narrated, re-narrated, and lived by his fellows in the Church throughout history, possesses an immense potential to contribute to this project.

Our interpretation of the biblical message participates in the dialogue with other interpretations. Therefore, contextual hermeneutics is unreservedly dialogical. It includes the encounter with others who have their own horizons and understandings.<sup>77</sup> Thus, contextual hermeneutics is a collective task and it can only succeed within an ecumenical context. Contextuality “is precisely the call for a concrete, embodied form of living ecumenicity and togetherness, even and precisely in ideological conflicts.”<sup>78</sup> The decision in favor of dialogue means taking responsibility for discovering resources and possibilities to face human problems amongst ourselves, rather than in metaphysical constructs.<sup>79</sup>

The contextual interpretation is always contextual in the widest sense of the word: It is contextual historically and hermeneutically. That means that no interpretation can be seen as an idol, neither an interpretation from the past, nor an interpretation that appears in the current situation. For example, different political conditions constitute specific life contexts and in each of them particular biblical texts are actualized, such as a text that in a certain moment can give hope, while in another situation, it can be shifted to the margins, put on standby.<sup>80</sup> Hence, one might say that contextual hermeneutics bears a certain relativism, arguing that no interpretation can be absolute. Here the question of the limits, validity, and range of contextual hermeneutics arises. How can one, when undertaking contextual interpretations, avoid relativism? Are there boundaries that can mark the borders within a contextual interpretation? How can we be sure that an interpretation remains in line with the claims of the biblical message? How we can recognize possible deviations from its authentic message? A second set of questions arises: May not an interpretation that seems to build and constitute a particular community at the same time be destructive for another? How can one face up to the dangers of a conceived absoluteness of one's own context and the interpretations that proceed out of it?<sup>81</sup>

The exegetes, in their dialogue about Scripture, and in the exchange of their traditions in the interpretation of it, are called to foster a contextual hermeneutics with a specific ethos, the ethos of "an engaged fallibilistic pluralism."<sup>82</sup> But how can relativism be avoided? In my opinion, the answer to this question depends on what we understand by "relativism." If by "relativism" we mean our inability to possess definite knowledge, to formulate eternal truths that we can possess and even impose on others, then I do not see anything problematic in assigning our theological attempts as "relative." By so doing, we stand in a good part of the Christian tradition, the tradition of Paul (1 Cor. 13) or later Eastern apophatic theology. The exchange of our particular and imperfect knowledge that will pass away (1 Cor. 13:8-13) is, I think, the soul of contextual hermeneutics. In this sense, another question may be put thus: Have we the right to consider some interpretations as best for today? I think we have to, just like the Christian generations before us, who always provided interpretations that were the most appropriate for their time. It suffices here to note Jesus's or Paul's reading of the Jewish Bible or the reading of the New Testament by the Church Fathers during the 4th and 5th centuries.

## 5. The Voice of Orthodox Contextual Hermeneutics: Concluding Remarks

We can now return to the question: Is there an Orthodox exegesis? My answer would be no, there is not an Orthodox exegesis (μέθοδος), rather there is Orthodox hermeneutics, based on a specific approach to the biblical texts. Firstly, this approach appreciates the interpretations from the past, considering them as hermeneutically relevant for the present interpretations. To follow the hermeneutical line of the Church Fathers means doing the same in our time as they did in their own time. Secondly, this approach stresses a communal dimension of the interpretation of Scripture. Interpretation must be recognizable and understandable for the believing community and for the wider society. The exegete and his community and society must speak the same language. They must also be ready to hear something new from the Bible and not always something that they already know. Thirdly, in a context of the global community, the Orthodox exegetes have the task of communicating with others to teach something to others and to learn something from others.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ukpong 2002, 27.

<sup>2</sup> See Thompson 1998, 49–70.

<sup>3</sup> It is convenient to make a distinction between, on the one hand, “exegesis” as the act of interpreting, which in the academic tradition involves first of all the historical-critical methodology, and, on the other hand, “hermeneutics” as a theoretical consideration of a certain kind of exegesis. Therefore, it is not proper to speak about contextual *exegesis*, rather about contextual *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics provides the grounds, goals, and acts as a guide for the employment of a certain methodology that an exegete chooses. For the reception and inevitability of the historical-critical approach in contextual hermeneutics, see Tamez 2002, 13–14; Schottroff 2007, 143–144.

<sup>4</sup> With regard to this theme, see: Dietrich and Luz 2002; GBC 2004 with three contributions by the Orthodox scholars Vasile Mihoc 342–345, Petros Vasiliadis 412–418, and Stelian Tofana 527–534. See the contribution of an Orthodox scholar Perišić 2012, 399–436 (esp. 401–402). See also Croatto 1987. Theology is *always* contextual: “thus to say that a theology is ‘contextual’ is, strictly speaking, tautological; in one way or another every theology is contextual” (Gutiérrez 2003, 89).



- <sup>5</sup> See Luz 1994, 17: “biblical texts do not *have* a meaning, but rather they *produce* a meaning—new meanings—again and again in history.”
- <sup>6</sup> Patte 2006, 81: “Reading with others means that we read the Biblical text with the expectation that we will learn from the others ... something about this text and its teaching. This also means that we expect that others ... will bring to the discussion insights, understandings and interpretations that are different from ours; otherwise we would not learn anything from them.” See also the statements of H.-G. Gadamer: “Die Möglichkeit, dass der andere Recht hat, ist die Seele der Hermeneutik” (Grondin 1991, 160); Gadamer 1997, 75: “Das macht die eigentliche Wirklichkeit menschlicher Kommunikation aus, dass das Gespräch nicht die Meinung des einen gegen die Meinung des anderen durchsetzt oder die Meinung des einen zu der Meinung des anderen wie in einer Addition hinzufügt. Das Gespräch verwandelt beide.”
- <sup>7</sup> See Rüssen 1997, 28.
- <sup>8</sup> Gutiérrez 2003, 103: “the challenge of modernity to the Western world, that of poverty to Latin America and Africa, and that of religious pluralism in Asia.”
- <sup>9</sup> It is worth mentioning that the brand new *Hermeneutics* by U. Luz offers remarkable space to Orthodox hermeneutics, bringing it into a creative connection with other approaches. This suggests that Orthodox hermeneutics might become very recognizable on the contemporary map of theological hermeneutics. See Luz 2014, 12.71–81.511–515.
- <sup>10</sup> See Vasiliadis 2004, 38f. See also Kalaitzidis 2009, 151–152.
- <sup>11</sup> Vasiliadis 2004, 39 (note 13); see also Agourides 2002, 65.
- <sup>12</sup> Pelikan 2005, 217: “The triumph of Marxism–Leninism in Orthodox Russia after World War I and eventually in the rest of Eastern and East-Central Europe after World War II launched a campaign to eliminate the Bible from the collective memory of entire generations, from schools and homes and churches.”
- <sup>13</sup> Florovsky, 1975, 22; See also Florovsky 1972, 105–113. Florovsky has also dealt with the theological significance and use of the Bible in Orthodox theology. See e.g. his great article on the topic in Florovsky 1972, 17–36 (particularly p. 28f). He preferred the patristic *exegesis* (ibid. 30–36) and it seems that he was rather reserved with regard to the process of “continuous reinterpretation.” See Florovsky 1972, 10. The “language of tradition” was, according to him, crucial for the preservation of the timeless identity of the biblical message: “What can we offer instead of Holy Scripture? I would prefer the language of the Tradition, not because of the lazy and credulous ‘conservatism’ or a blind ‘obedience’ to some external ‘authorities’, but simply because I cannot find any better phraseology” (ibid. 11).
- <sup>14</sup> The appeal of Orthodox biblical scholars to the authority of the Church Fathers could be brought into a constructive and creative relation to modern biblical research, as most Church Fathers were firstly exegetes, interpreters of Scripture. Unfortunately, the lack of adequate hermeneutic frames, e.g. the neglect of historical criticism, on the level of the biblical and patristic studies alike, did not allow the Orthodox biblical scholars to offer a biblical-patristic synthesis as a hermeneutical proposal for reading and understanding the Bible. Although it was constantly insisted upon that it was not about repeating the Fathers (not

- a “theology of repetition,” but a “theology of creative extension,” see *Florovsky* 1972, 114), in the radically changed situation of humanity today (see *Agourides* 1972, 51), the Orthodox biblical scholars have not found their own “creative” way within the project of “neo-patristic synthesis.”
- <sup>15</sup> See *Schmemmann* 1961, 23. Schmemmann thus makes a clear distinction between the language of the Fathers (“their language”) and that of today (“our language”).
- <sup>16</sup> For a criticism of the lack of biblical theology in the modern Orthodox liturgical studies within the so-called Eucharistic ecclesiology, see *Agourides* 2002, 91–94. See also *Stylianopoulos* 1997, 62–64.
- <sup>17</sup> See *Agourides* 2000, 140.
- <sup>18</sup> The work of John of Damascus does not mark the end of the “patristic age,” for Church Fathers appear again and again, and by their presence and life, to build up the Church (e.g. the later Fathers Gregory Palamas, Nicodemus the Hagiorite, Silouan the Athonite, Porphyrios Kafsokalyvitis, etc.). See *Karakolis* 2004, 21 (note 1). However, when we speak about the Church Fathers, we usually have in mind the period up to John of Damascus, who, in his work *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (Εκδοσεις ἀκριβῆς τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως), tried to systematize the entire previous theological heritage. On the other hand, his interest in the interpretation of Scripture was minimal. He confined his exegetical work to a summarizing of the earlier Fathers’ interpretations (see e.g. his interpretation of the Epistles of Paul in accordance with those of John Chrysostom: PG 95, 441–1033).
- <sup>19</sup> *Lubac* 1998, 27–28. See also *Agourides* 2002, 91: “Οἱ πατέρες τῆς Εκκλησίας ... ὅταν ἐρμῆνευσαν τὴ Βίβλο, θεολογοῦσαν.”
- <sup>20</sup> The first part of the text of canon 19, which concerns the interpretation of Scripture, reads: “We declare that the deans of Churches, on every day, but more especially on Sundays, must teach all the Clergy and laity the word of truth out of the Holy Bible, analyzing the meanings and judgments of the truth, and not deviating from the definitions already laid down, or the teaching derived from the God-bearing Fathers; but also, if the discourse be one concerning a passage of Scripture, not to interpret it otherwise than as the luminaries and teachers of the Churches in their own written works have presented it; and let them rather content themselves with these discourses than attempt to produce discourses on their own, lest, at times, being resourceless, they overstep the bounds of propriety.” (Greek text in *Ohme* 2006, 209–211.)
- <sup>21</sup> The catenae served to preserve the interpretations of the Fathers. They were like handbooks on Orthodox-patristic exegesis. The aim was to avoid autonomous and individual interpretations of Scripture. However, although that was not primarily their scope, the catenae have also preserved the *polyphony* of patristic exegesis, since the collators did not try to harmonize different interpretations. Thus, the catenae appear today as an almost “postmodern phenomenon,” giving an advantage to diversity in relation to the unified center. See *Luz* 2000, 42. The problem is, however, that in the modern Orthodox context, the catenae have often become a “model” of the interpretation of Scripture. See *Agourides* 2000, 141: “a selective collation of the patristic biblical legacy ... was a task

which, while undoubtedly serving the period and its objectives, at the same time unwittingly laid the historical and psychological foundations and became the model for studying the Bible in the centuries that followed.”

- <sup>22</sup> See *Hauschild* 1971, 5–25. See *Luz* 2000, 37ff; id. 1994, 34–38; *Reiser* 2005, 79–88. A good example is the international project *Novum Testamentum Patristicum* (NTP, ed. A. Merkt), which aims at publishing a series of commentaries on the particular books of the New Testament in terms of the reception by the Church Fathers in the form of a compiled commentary on one New Testament book from different patristic exegetical sources. The protestant principle “*sola scriptura*” and the Enlightenment are considered as factors that have essentially contributed to the long ignorance of the patristic exegesis in the West. See more in *Stylianopoulos* 1997, 155f.
- <sup>23</sup> See *Mitchell* 2010, 20–21. See also *Young* 1989, 182–199.
- <sup>24</sup> On the distinction between *Auslegungsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, see *Luz* 2014, 360–361.
- <sup>25</sup> See *Agourides* 1972, 57.
- <sup>26</sup> See the most important Orthodox work in the field of the history of patristic hermeneutics and exegesis: *Panagopoulos* 1991. See also the attempts at hermeneutical considerations: *Stylianopoulos* 1997, 147–238; *Breck* 1986, 49–113.
- <sup>27</sup> See e.g. the statement of the great Orthodox thinker *Giannaras* 1992, 69: “Who is Paul and who is John, who are Matthew and Luke for us? They are respected Apostles of Christ, to whom, however, a direct approach is extremely difficult ... The orthodox theology becomes acquainted with them only through the mediation of the Fathers, who undoubtedly understood them correctly and who thus become indispensable in helping us to get know them.”
- <sup>28</sup> See *Clark* 2007, 337.
- <sup>29</sup> *Luz* 2000, 34ff.
- <sup>30</sup> *Karakolis* 2004, 27, summarizes the motto of patristic hermeneutics sharply: “*der Ziel ist wichtiger als Methode.*” On σκοπός see *Fiedrowicz* 1998, 50.
- <sup>31</sup> *Panagopoulos* 1996, 578.
- <sup>32</sup> See also *Kubat* 2010, 64.
- <sup>33</sup> See *Reiser* 2005, 79ff; *Stylianopoulos* 1997, 115ff. See also *Fiederowicz* 2007, 114–125.
- <sup>34</sup> See *Young* 2003, 347ff.
- <sup>35</sup> Regarding the contemporary Orthodox usage of the patristic tradition, one can say that it is focused almost exclusively on the Hellenistic Fathers (“Hellenocentrism”) and is largely lacking in any mention of other traditions, such as the Syrian, Latin, or Georgian traditions. See *Alfeyev* 2002, 91–111.
- <sup>36</sup> See *Theissen* 2008, 87–89; *Dirscherl* 2013, 189ff.
- <sup>37</sup> For the Early Church, see *Colpe* 2008, 200–225 (p. 223).
- <sup>38</sup> In his book on hermeneutics, S. Agourides (2002, 79–95) felt the need to dedicate an entire chapter to the theme of the relation between liturgical and private readings of the Bible. This echoes a particular problem in the Greek Orthodox Church (but not only there!), which is related to the specific historical experience of Western missionaries with the Bible in their hands.

- <sup>39</sup> Vasiliadis 2004, 38. See also Schmemmann 1961, 21: "The Eucharist, whether it is expressly referred to or not, is the organic source and the necessary 'term of reference' of theology, for if theology is bearing witness to the faith and the life of the Church, to the Church as salvation and the new life in Christ, it bears witness primarily to the experience of the Church manifested, communicated and actualized in the Eucharist. It is in the Eucharist that the Church ceases to be 'institution, doctrine, system' and becomes Life, Vision, Salvation, it is in the Eucharist that the Word of God is fulfilled and the human mind made capable of expressing the mind of Christ. Here then is the source of theology, of *words about God*, the 'event' which transforms our human speculation into a message of Divine Truth." See also Luz 2014, 95.
- <sup>40</sup> See Markschies 2004, 80: "Der einzige Ort, wo die allermeisten Gemeindeglieder mit biblischen Texten in Berührung gekommen sein dürfen, war ohne Zweifel der Gottesdienst und hier insbesondere die Rezitation, bzw. die Lesung der Schriften und die Wiederholung einzelner Schriftpassagen in der Auslegung (ὁμιλία) die sich bisweilen (aber durchaus nicht immer) an die liturgische Lesung anschloss."
- <sup>41</sup> With the "fusion of horizons," Gadamer understands the event of interpretation in which the reader exposes himself to the effects of the text, while the text is exposed to the reader's prejudices. See Gadamer 1997, 49: "Man kann diesen Sachverhalt auch so beschreiben, dass Interpret und Text je ihren eigenen 'Horizont' besitzen und dass jegliches Verstehen eine Verschmelzung dieser Horizonte darstellt."
- <sup>42</sup> Meeks 2005, 166.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> All these and similar issues belong to the realm of historical-critical research.
- <sup>45</sup> Dirscherl 2013, 191.
- <sup>46</sup> Panagopoulos 1996, 581: "In diesem Sinne wohnt Christus in seinem Wort, und diese Einwohnung ist seine Energie. Wenn man darum mit Origenes oder Johannes Chrysostomos meint, dass die bloße Lesung der Hl. Schrift, auch ohne ihr Verstehen, die Energie Gottes herbeiführen kann, setzt man seine personale Gegenwart in der Sache des verkündigten bzw. geschriebenen Wortes voraus"; See also Breck 1986, 110–113. There are, surely, biblical texts with different claims (*Ansprüche*) regarding our faith and self-understanding as believers. Some of them have to be explained and even questioned in their claims, e.g. the texts that deliver anti-Judaism.
- <sup>47</sup> Ricoeur 1980, 108.
- <sup>48</sup> This kind of reception of the biblical texts is entirely legitimate and welcome within the frames of postmodern hermeneutics. See Adam 2006, 60: "The Legitimacy of an interpretation is determined by the body of readers evaluating it." See also Stylianopoulos 1997, 173.
- <sup>49</sup> In order to preserve the otherness of the biblical texts and thus their capacities to speak to us anew, U. Luz prefers the term "encounter of horizons" rather than "fusion of horizons." See Luz 2014, 386–387.

- <sup>50</sup> A well-informed survey of the developments and tendencies of the Greek Orthodox biblical scholars in the last thirty years (with a bibliography), including the perception of “serious methodological confusion,” is offered by *Clark 2007*, 322–340 (esp. 337). It is, however, important to stress that the degree of the reception of historical criticism, its methodology and terminology, is different in the different Orthodox countries. While in Greece, the life context was more convenient for the reception of scientific methods—this fact one can observe from the long and fruitful exegetical tradition in Greece from the second part of the 20th century until today—, the situation in the East European countries and Russia was and still is quite different.
- <sup>51</sup> This is the point that has to be taken into account through the dialogue between Eastern and Western biblical scholars. See *Dunn 2000*, 109: “But if the East is to understand the West better, it needs to recognize the importance of the Enlightenment in the development of the Western traditions of scholarship—for good and ill.”
- <sup>52</sup> There is the obvious failure of “classical” historical criticism to establish any meaningful contact with the reality of past events. It can only observe and analyze the interpretation by humans of the divine in the past. See *Luz 1994*, 10ff. See also *Vanhoozer 1998*, 157. 162.
- <sup>53</sup> This is, in my opinion, the main problem with “the language of the tradition.” See *Florovsky 1972*, 11.
- <sup>54</sup> See *Tracy 1989*, 198.
- <sup>55</sup> *Karakolis 2008*, 282: “Die heutige orthodoxe Theologie hat oft das Problem, dass sie losgelöst vom historischen Kontext ihre eigene Wahrheit in den Texten begründet sehen will. Das war eine legitime prämoderne exegetische Methode, die von den biblischen Autoren und den Kirchenvätern auch in diesem Sinn gebraucht wurde. Sie kann auch heute im spirituellen und kirchlichen Kontext unter Umständen legitimiert sein. Aus wissenschaftlicher Perspektive aber wird sie heute nicht mehr als legitim angesehen, wenn sie nicht wenigstens mit einer historisch ausgerichteten Exegese kombiniert wird.”
- <sup>56</sup> On the dogmatic approach, see *Oeming 2007*, 141–150. The basic problem of the dogmatic approach to the Bible is that it bears the risk of treating the Bible as one amongst the many books of the Church, with the greatest authority for sure, but not with a crucial place in the Church’s life and theology. See *Zumstein 1997*, 31–42. On the other hand, in the frame of the dogmatic approach, the Bible is often considered and used as a collection of “proof-texts” or “a ready-made banquet.” See *Agourides 2000*, 157.
- <sup>57</sup> See e.g. with regard to the New Testament Christology, the excellent contribution by *Goppelt 1978*, 103–125.
- <sup>58</sup> See *Luz 1994*, 85ff; *Dunn 2000*, 116–117.
- <sup>59</sup> See a postmodern position by *Jenkins 2003*, 56: “when we study history we are not studying the past but what historians have constructed about the past.” See *Dunn 2000*, 117.
- <sup>60</sup> *Karakolis 2008*, 279. See id. 2009, 134–136.

- <sup>61</sup> *Kalatzidis* 2009, 160–163.
- <sup>62</sup> See also *Karakolis* 2009, 161–162.
- <sup>63</sup> See *Phillips* 1990, 7–39.
- <sup>64</sup> *Luz* 2015, 1–2: “Darum ist die Distanzierung der Texte von uns selbst nötig. Es könnte ja sein, dass ein biblischer Text etwas anderes oder viel mehr sagt, als wir meinen! Es könnte auch sein, dass er uns—nach einer wissenschaftlichen Exegese—nichts mehr sagt, weil er in eine ganz andere Situation hineinsprach als unsere. Es könnte es auch sein, dass er uns etwas sagt, was wir gar nicht gerne hören.” See *Dunn* 2000, 119.
- <sup>65</sup> See *Gadamer* 1990, 305ff.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 295: “Das Verstehen ist selber nicht so sehr als eine Handlung der Subjektivität zu denken, sondern als Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen in dem sich Vergangenheit und Gegenwart beständig bestimmen.”
- <sup>67</sup> So also *Tracy* 1987, 48.
- <sup>68</sup> *Luz* 1994, 25.
- <sup>69</sup> See *Gadamer* 1993, 447: “Verstehen meint gewiss nicht bloß die Aneignung überlieferter Meinung oder Anerkennung des durch Tradition Geheiligten.” See *Habermas* 1971, 49.
- <sup>70</sup> Ch. *Karakolis* argues that the Church Fathers own “extraordinary importance for orthodox theology and biblical exegesis” and the praxis of the appeal to the authority “the Fathers” appeared in the Church very early, e.g. the invoking of Origenes by Eusebius and Gregory of Nyssa (*Karakolis* 2004, 21–22).
- <sup>71</sup> See *Kalaitzidis* 2009, 158ff.
- <sup>72</sup> *Luz* 2014, 511: “Natürlich können wir das, was sie mit ihren Entwürfen für ihre Zeit geleistet haben, nicht kopieren. Vielleicht können sie uns aber Richtungen angeben und uns anregen, für unsere Zeit Ähnliches zu versuchen.”
- <sup>73</sup> See *Karakolis* 2008, 283: “Klar ist jedenfalls geworden dass es keine einheitliche orthodoxe Exegese gibt, ebenso wenig wie eine einheitliche evangelische oder katholische Exegese.”
- <sup>74</sup> See the proposal by *Karakolis* 2004, 66–67.
- <sup>75</sup> *Tracy* 1990, 41.
- <sup>76</sup> See the excellent contribution to the theme by *Lategan* 2009, 79–90.
- <sup>77</sup> *Gadamer* 1997, 56: “Doch enthält Hermeneutik stets ein Element, dass über die bloße Rhetorik hinausgeht: Sie schließt stets eine Begegnung mit den Meinungen des anderen ein, die ihrerseits zu Worte kommen ... Die hermeneutische Reflexion schließt viel mehr ein, dass im allen Verstehen von etwas Anderem oder eines Anderen Selbstkritik vor sich geht. Wer versteht, nimmt keine Überlegene Position in Anspruch, sondern gesteht zu, dass die eigene vermeintliche Wahrheit auf die Probe gestellt wird ... Das Grundmodell jeder Verständigung ist der Dialog, das Gespräch.” Dialogue, however, does not exclude critical reflections. See *Tracy* 1987, 107: “every conversation, if it is worthy of being named a conversation at all, will not shun necessary moments of conflict; every response to their readings must be critical and active, not passively receptive.”



- <sup>78</sup> *Smit* 2007, 7. See also *Vanhoozer* 1998, 173: "It may be that consensus will only be won when each community engages in a certain measure of self-criticism."
- <sup>79</sup> See e.g. *Vattimo* 2002, 5: "one might ask how we can rationally argue once we forgo the claim of grasping an ultimate foundation that would be valid for all, above and beyond any cultural difference. To this one might answer: the universal validity of an assertion can be constructed by building consensus in dialogue, though without claiming any right in the name of an absolute truth. Dialogical consensus may be reached by acknowledging that we share a heritage of cultural, historical, and technological-scientific acquisitions."
- <sup>80</sup> A good example is the destiny of the Book of Revelation in the Orthodox Church: The almost complete absence of the Book in the liturgical life on the one hand, and an intensive interpretation of it during the hard times of slavery, on the other.
- <sup>81</sup> See examples by *Vanhoozer* 1998, 174–182.
- <sup>82</sup> See a text that is strongly recommended for every theologian willing to take a part in the ecumenical conversation: *Bernstein* 1989, 15.

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## Tiivistelmä

Predrag Dragutinović, *Onko olemassa ortodoksista eksegetiikkaa? Ortodoksisen raamatuntutkimuksen kontekstuaalisen hermeneutiikan tarkastelua.*

Artikkelissa esitellään ortodoksista raamatuntutkimusta, jossa voidaan havaita raamatuntulkintaan liittyvä metodologinen sekaannus. Omanlaisensa historialliset, poliittiset ja sosiologiset olosuhteet ovat vaikuttaneet pyhien kirjoitusten reseptioon idän kirkossa. Tämä selittää lännessä kehitettyjen ja sovellettujen nykyaikaisten ja postmodernien tieteellisten menetelmien torjunnan. Raamatuntulkinnassa ortodoksista itseymmärrystä määrittää kaksi keskeistä tekijää: patristinen eksegeettinen perinne ja pyhien kirjoitusten liturginen reseptio. Artikkelissa esitetään, että kontekstuaalinen Raamatun hermeneutikka tarjoaa ortodoksisille eksegeeteille hyvän mahdollisuuden sekä muiden tulkintaperinteiden kohtaamiseen että oman raamatunselitystradition arvioimiseen, uudelleentulkintaan ja jopa kyseenalaistamiseen. Ortodoksisen teologian kehyksessä on tarpeen harkita uudelleen (post)modernin eksegeettisen metodologian vastaanottoa ja tarkastella sen avaamia mahdollisuuksia. Isien "hengestä" tai "hermeneutiikasta" ja liturgisesta herkkyudestä ei silloinkaan tarvitsisi luopua. Dialogi muodostaa kontekstuaalisen hermeneutiikan sielun. Myös ortodoksisia raamatuntutkijoita kutsutaan nauttimaan hedelmällisen keskustelun hyödyistä muiden eksegeettien kanssa.