

The Bible in the Life of the Orthodox Church

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Introduction

The Bible, as God's revealed Word, has a unique place in Christians' life. It is worth noting that all forms of normative Christianity, that reached us, represent a faith focused on a *written revelation* and committed to a *text-based* version of God's revelation.¹ The labelling of Christians as 'the people of the Book', however, does not seem to be a very appropriate designation. First, it comes from Quran, 29.45 where the faithful muslims are commanded to 'not dispute with the People of the Book: say, we believe in what has been sent down to us and what has been sent down to you'.² Then, Orthodox Churches would not be very enthusiastic about this designation, either, due to their high view of Tradition, and they would indicate rather the Protestant Churches as better qualifying for such a description, with their heavy emphasis on *sola scriptura*. In many Eastern European countries, the Orthodox would often intimate that, from a historical perspective, Protestants, in general, and Baptists – in particular, have turned from the Roman Catholic Pope only to enter a new bondage, to the text of Bible as a *paper* pope, while desconsidering the special action of the Spirit, who gave both the Bible and the Tradition. The old medieval challenge regarding the intrinsic or extrinsic authority of the Bible and the individual's right and duty to read and study God's Word, has remained fresh and unchanged in the contemporary East European part of the world. This article considers the place and the role of the Bible in the life and worship of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, highlighting certain relevant aspects from a local Baptist perspective, such as: *who*, *when* and *how* is reading the Bible in the Orthodox Church; the relationship between *Tradition* and the *New Testament*; the special relation between *Christ* and the *Gospel*. This article has been conceived as an introduction to the role of the Bible in Eastern Orthodoxy, and is written with the Baptist perception that one's relation with Scripture proves fundamental for Christian maturity and for effective Christian witness in our secular, postmodernistic world.

Bible Reading in the Orthodox Church – A Short Presentation

The first observations have to do with the *when* and *how*, and *by whom* is the Bible read in the Orthodox Church. The Holy Scripture is characteristically used during the worship: in the *Liturgy*, mainly, where there are two specific readings - the *Apostle*, from the book of Acts or from the Epistles, and the *Gospel*; in the *Vespers* (vecernie) - the OT is being read, and in the *Matins* (utrenie) - again, the *Gospel*.³ Many of the church hymns are Psalms and the whole *Psalter* is read once a week (and even twice or more, during Lent). In the

¹ F. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, Cambridge: CUP, 1997, p. 57, in J. Behr, 'Scripture, The Gospel, and Orthodoxy', *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 42:3/4 (1999), 223-248, p. 229.

² M.T. Marshall, 'Exercising Liberty of Conscience: Freedom in Private Interpretation', in E.C. Goodwin (ed), *Baptists in the Balance. The Tension between Freedom and Responsibility*, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1977, 141-150, p. 141.

³ Bishop Dmitri, *Orthodox Christian Teaching, An Introduction to the Orthodox Faith*, Dep.of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, Syosset, NY: 1983 (1980), p. 5.

Byzantine rite, only the NT is read during the liturgy (with the exception of Revelation). Although, apparently, the orthodox believers are offered in the Liturgy ‘a solid diet of the reading, chanting and singing of Scripture’,⁴ the truth is that this exposure to Scripture is fairly limited.

The Bible has its clear place in the *liturgy*, namely during its first part, known as the *Liturgy of the Word*, and before the second part, which is known as the *Liturgy of the Faithful* (when the Eucharist is partaken). The precise moment is related to the middle part of the liturgy - the homily. Most often, this consists only of a short exhortation – it is difficult to call it expository sermon, although there are priests who would make more of this opportunity and preach longer expository messages with clear applications. On the whole, the liturgical context in reading and preaching of Scripture is particularly valuable, since it brings with it the special benefit of sacrificial, eucharistic connotations. The preached Word is understood, in a sacramental context, as eternal Gospel: ‘the sacramental discourse... is not mere garnish to a dull dish of Gospel. Sacrament is to Gospel what style is to meaning.’⁵ The liturgical enacting is important because the rich representation of the Word recapitulates through liturgical symbols the history of salvation. The simple reading of the text is transcended by a richer communication of the cosmic drama of Christ's redemptive sacrifice.

This liturgical Bible reading with its exhortation in a sacramental context, benefits as well, according to some authors, from the fact that the whole congregation is standing during the service. Unlike evangelical denominations, or for that sake, the Roman Catholics and the Protestant churches, as well, etc., the Orthodox are not coming together simply ‘to hear the spoken words of the liturgy, listen to a sermon, partake of the eucharist, and then disperse’. The proclamation of the Word in the liturgy involves more – a ‘responsorial singing, stylized dialogue, and ritual processional movement’.⁶ To a certain extent such an enacted reading of the Bible within the framework of a church service or the rules of a confessional community has its counterparts in the Baptist church services, as well (*service* translates the meaning of *liturgy*, cf. Gk. *leiturge* means ‘service of the people’). There are elements of liturgical enacting in the specific course of Baptist worship programmes, as well, in the ways drama is being used before or after the sermon in order to enhance an evangelistic point, in the prayer times and their structure, in the way the preacher approaches the pulpit, or handles the bread and the wine during the Lord's supper, offering them to the elders, and then to the congregation, in the specific succession of hymns and addresses, etc. The place of the altar and of the *eikonostasis* (an icon ‘wall’ separating the altar area and rest of Church hall – which was just a fence, in many of the first centuries churches) has its Baptist counterpart in the general architecture of a Baptist Church in the almost sacred geometry of the pulpit, the functional design of the front platform, the choir place, the baptistry, etc. The general feel of the Orthodox liturgy it has been said to communicate a greater solemnity;

⁴ T. Grass (ed.), *Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church. A Report by the Evangelical Alliance (UK) Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE)*, London: ACUTE (Paternoster), 2001, p. 102.

⁵ A. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, NY: Pueblo, 1984, pp. 48-49. Cf. T. Clark, ‘The Function and Task of Liturgical Preaching’, *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 45:1 (2001), 25-53, p. 32.

⁶ Clark, ‘Liturgical Preaching’, p. 36.

however, the standing and the permanent movement of the participants at the worship – in and out of the Church – may have a countereffect.⁷

It is worth noting during liturgy that the whole congregation just listens and only one person does the reading, the priest. A collective reading or listening to the reading of the Bible, in the church, or within a programme run by a certain local church or denomination, and supervised by pastors and elders, is not uncommon to the evangelical believer.⁸ However, the Orthodox Church aims at keeping a tighter control on the private reading of the Bible. Dositheus' *Confession of Faith*, approved by the Council of Jerusalem (1672), restricts Bible reading to the educated specialist:

... [it] is permitted to every Orthodox to hear the Scriptures, that he may believe with the heart unto righteousness, and confess with his mouth unto salvation; but to read some parts of the Scriptures, and especially of the Old [Testament], is forbidden... For it is the same thing thus to prohibit persons not exercised thereto reading all the Sacred Scriptures, as to require infants to abstain from strong meat.⁹

Modern Orthodox requirements in this respect, have not changed from the medieval times, reminding one of arguments and attitudes that were common, for example, in William Tyndale's time. The new converts do acknowledge the authority of the Church in matters of reading and interpreting the Bible: 'the Holy Scriptures 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 holds.'¹⁰ Orthodox believers do 'interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church'.¹¹ In practice, the faithful are rarely encouraged to have a deeper contact with the Scriptures, apart from liturgy.¹² The

⁷ C.S. Lewis has a different assessment: 'what pleased me most about a Greek Orthodox mass I once attended was that there seemed to be no prescribed behaviour for the congregation. The beauty of it was that nobody took the slightest notice of what anyone else was doing', in C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, London: Fontana Books, 1966, p. 12.

⁸ Grass, *Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church*, p. 103.

⁹ *The Confession of Dositheus*, Question 1, in J.H. Leith (ed), *Creeeds of the Churches*, 3rd ed., Louisville, KE: John Knox Press, 1982, pp. 506-507. Similar interdictions for the lay people to read the Bible are found in the medieval Roman Catholicism, cf. S. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 21. To a certain extent, however, academical biblical scholarship and the hegemony of the historical critical method failed to provide the Christian community with proper access to its Scriptures and erected a hermeneutic wall between people and the Bible, cf. J.B. Green, 'Biblical Authority and Communities of Discourse', in E.C. Goodwin (ed), *Baptists in the Balance. The Tension between Freedom and Responsibility*, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1977, 151-173, p. 155.

¹⁰ I.F. Hapgood, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic (Greco-Russian) Church*, NY, 1906, pp. 458-459. Cf. K. Ware, 'The Exercise of Authority in the Orthodox Church', *Ecclesia kai Theologia*, tome G, London: Thyateira House, 841-969, p. 947; T. Ware (bishop Kallistos), writes that the 'orthodox, when they read the Scripture, accept the guidance of the Church' (*The Orthodox Church*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985 (1963), p. 208).

¹¹ K. Ware and C. Davey (eds), *Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue*, London: SPCK, 1977, pp. 83-84, *The Agreed Statement* adopted by the Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission at Moscow (26 July-2 August 1976).

¹² V. Prelicean and G.T. Marcu, 'La Parole de Dieu dans la Vie de L'Eglise Orthodoxe Romaine', in V. Prelicean (ed), *De la theologie orthodoxe roumaine des origines a nos jours*, Bucharest: Editions de L'Institute Biblique et Mission Orthodoxe, 1974, p. 25, quoted by P. Negruț, *The Development of the Concept of Authority Within the Romanian Orthodox Church During the Twentieth Century*, PhD Thesis, unpublished, LBC London, 1994; cf. also, the Romanian short version of this thesis, P. Negruț, *Revelație, Scriptură, Comunitate. O interogație asupra autorității în cunoașterea teologică*, Oradea, Romania: Cartea Creștină, 1996.

argument goes that ‘if the Word of God were to come in the life of the believer through another way than the Church, it would cease to be the Word of God.’¹³ As a consequence, the preaching of the Word and catechism should be performed only if the reading programme is decided by the Church, if the teaching is performed by an authorized person, and if the assembly of the believers is canonically constituted.¹⁴ It is accepted, however, that one can engage in private, scientific reading of the Bible,¹⁵ with the provision that ‘the Church has the right and the duty to test the results of critical study, accepting, discarding or modifying them in the light of its inherited faith and its liturgical practice’.¹⁶ For the Orthodox the Church has the right to decide how the Bible is read because as the Body of Christ, it ‘stands mystically first and is fuller than Scripture’.¹⁷ One of the reasons mentioned to this effect, is, also, that the Bible is not an autonomous reality – only God has this status, *i.e.*, exists on His own, and is the foundation, the ground of all being.¹⁸ Since the Holy Scripture has been born in the Church, it reflects the life and the faith of the Church and the fundamental criterion for any correct understanding of it is the need to relate all hermeneutics to the life of the Church.¹⁹ At this point, of course, one could ask what church is the Church, and how would this church make sure that she provides the needed tools and environment for people’s access to the Word of God? Can Orthodoxy continue to claim that she is the only true church, while Romano-Catholicism, Protestantism, or evangelical denominations are entirely left in the unknown, somewhere at God’s eternal and impenetrable mercy?²⁰ This exclusivist attitude of the Orthodox Church, as well as her claims as the true keeper of Scripture and of Tradition, and the relative low emphasis on the first, have raised historically, certain stern walls in the way of people’s awareness and obedience of Scripture.²¹

¹³ Prelipcean and Marcu, ‘La Parole de Dieu’, p. 36.

¹⁴ Prelipcean and Marcu, ‘La Parole de Dieu’, p. 50.

¹⁵ S. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 22-23. Scientific study is allowed, yet it should be limited at studying the historical context of the Bible passages, without going beyond that, and without formulating dogmatic statements. Bulgakov supports the idea that the deep significance of the Bible surpasses the text and its history, being open only to the initiated or illuminated believer (S. Bulgakov, *Lumina neînsurată. Contemplații și reflecții metafizice*, trad. E. Drăgușin, Bucharest: Anastasia, 1999, p. 499). Baptists are aware, as well, of the problems involved by individual hermeneutics. Cf. D. M. Scholer, ‘The Authority of the Bible and Private Interpretation: A Dilemma of Baptist Freedom’, in E.C. Goodwin (ed), *Baptists in the Balance. The Tension between Freedom and Responsibility*, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1977, 174 – 193, p. 176: ‘All [biblical] interpretation is socially located, individually skewed and ecclesiastically - theologically conditioned’ (see, as well, D.M. Scholer, ‘Unseasonable Thoughts of the State of Biblical Hermeneutics: Reflections of a New Testament Exegete’, *American Baptist Quarterly* 2 (1983), 134-141). For a balanced understanding of Scripture one needs both *biblical authority* and the authority of a *community of discourse* (Green, ‘Biblical Authority’, p. 165).

¹⁶ K. Ware, ‘Authority in the Orthodox Church’, p. 947.

¹⁷ G. Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition. An Eastern Orthodox View*, (*Collected Works*, Belmont, MA: Nordland, vol. 1, 1972), p. 48.

¹⁸ C. Coman, *Biblia în Biserică. Eseuri pe teme biblice*, Bucharest: Editura Bizantină, 1997, p. 75.

¹⁹ Coman, *Biblia în Biserică*, p. 78.

²⁰ J. Stamoolis, III, ‘Scripture and Tradition in the Orthodox Church’, in *Churches, Scripture and Tradition, Evangelical Review of Theology*, 19/2 April 1995, emphasizes this historical claim of the Orthodox Church, quoting Bulgakov, as well: ‘Orthodoxy is Christ’s Church on Earth’ (*The Orthodox Church*, p. 9).

²¹ Cf. Coman, *Biblia în Biserică*, pp. 8-9, referring to father D. Stăniloae, who has acknowledged this tendency in his own work, as well.

The Bible, the Church, and Tradition as a Guardian of the Bible

The Orthodox Church sees the relevance of the NT strictly in the context of the primacy of the *Church* and of *Tradition* ('the Church existed before the New Testament scriptures were written'... and 'these scriptures were composed by members of the Church to record the institution and early history of the Church'); at that time 'the early Christians had scriptures, but these were the books of the OT, and their religion was the fulfillment of all that was prophesied and anticipated in them'.²² These statements have a true ring, yet, they cannot be used in supporting the view that the NT, in some sense, is less Scripture than the VT, or that it shares the Scripture status, or authority, with Tradition, as many Orthodox authors would intimate.

The discussion concerning the meaning and the content of Tradition is a complex one, and it has been the subject of countless addresses, articles and books. As a rule it is accepted that tradition, *paradosis* (Gk.), is a term rich in nuances and perspectives which can include even the NT as such, cf. Gal. 1.12, 1 Cor. 15.33 (there is also an authoritative *Tradition*, a respectable and inclusive *tradition*, and many local church *traditions*).²³ The Tradition issue has proved a highly dividing one: 'ultimately, the conflict between East and West resides in two conflicting spiritual perceptions of tradition'.²⁴ On the one hand, there is the magisterial representative authority of the Pope - in Roman-Catholicism, and the external authority of the Bible - *sola scriptura* of the Reformers;²⁵ on the other, the Orthodox Churches emphasize the internal authority of the Spirit and of the Church, or of the Spirit *within* and *through* the Church.²⁶ The Orthodox Church consistently and emphatically presents herself as the faithful treasurer of this Tradition,²⁷ many Orthodox theologians insisting that her testimony is a Spirit filled and Spirit inspired one: 'reference to tradition is not historical

²² Bishop Dmitri, *Orthodox Christian Teaching*, p. 6. This view, that the NT is a mere *record* of the early existence of the Church, while spiritual authority resides in the Church institution, as such, is quite a debated issue in the Orthodox Church itself.

²³ D. Wells, 'Tradition: A Meeting Place for Catholic and Evangelical Theology?', *Christian Scholar's Review* 5 (1975), p. 55, in Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox*, p. 96. On the differences between *Tradition*, *tradition*, and *traditions*, cf. Grass, *Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church*, pp. 98-101; J. Meyendorff, 'Tradition and Traditions', *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, 6 (1962), 118-127; G. Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Belmont, MA: Northland Publishing, 1972, pp. 105-113.

²⁴ J. Meyendorff, *Catholicity and the Church*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1983, p. 97.

²⁵ In terms of paying respect to an external authority, Protestants and Roman-Catholics are seen by the Orthodox as being fairly similar: 'all Protestants are Crypto-Papists...' (A. Khomiakov, quoted in Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 9). For J. Meyendorff, 'Christian faith and experience can in no way be compatible with notion of *Scriptura sola*', cf. J. Meyendorff, 'Light from the East? Doing Theology in an Eastern Orthodox Perspective', in J.D. Woodbridge and T.E. McComiskey (eds), *Doing Theology in Today's World*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991, p. 341. History records, however, certain reciprocal influences and attempts to dialogue, cf. R.H. Balmer, 'Sola Scriptura: The Protestant reformation and the Eastern Orthodox Church', *Trinity Journal* 3:1 (1982), 51-56; G. Hadjiantoniou, *Protestant Patriarch. The Life of Cyril Lucaris (1572-1638) Patriarch of Constantinople*, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961; C. Davey, *Pioneer for Unity. Metrophanes Kritopoulos (1589-1639) and Relations Between the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches*, London: British Council of Churches, 1987.

²⁶ A.S. Khomiakov, 'On the Western Confessions of Faith', in A. Schmemmann (ed), *Ultimate Questions: An Anthology of Modern Russian Religious Thought*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977., p. 50, *idem*, 'The Church is One', in W. J. Birkbeck, *Russia and the English Church*, London: SPCK, p. 198.

²⁷ S. Zankov, *The Eastern Orthodox Church*, D. A. Lowrie (trans), London: SMC Press, 1929, p. 33; F. Gavin, *Some Aspects of Contemporary Greek Orthodox Thought*, Milwaukee, WI: Morehouse, 1923, p. 17.

inquiry. Tradition is not limited to Church archaeology... Tradition is the witness of the Spirit... the constant abiding of the Spirit... Tradition is a charismatic, not a historical principle'.²⁸ While this is quite true, it has to be reminded, though, that the Holy Spirit is even more present in the way the Bible has been revealed, written and kept, as well, *cf.* Mat. 22.43, Jn. 14:26, 2 Tim. 3.16, 1 Pet. 1:11-12. Such statements convey a special status to Tradition, akin to that of Scripture, and proclaims, as well, a unitary view on Tradition; it stands, however, for too romantic a view on the writings of the holy Fathers, which are not as unified and monolithic as might be wished.²⁹ This is a difficult to assess issue, since Orthodoxy 'is not at all consistent about the relationship between Scripture and tradition.'³⁰

It would be helpful, however, to remind that there are two main views concerning the relation between Scripture and Tradition. According to the *two-source* view, Christian heritage consists of two different witnesses, *i.e.* Scripture and the later Tradition (a two unit bookshelves view). According to this view, next to Scripture, with its OT and NT books, the Tradition includes the later literature, such as: (1) the interpretation of the Scripture by the Church; (2) official confessions of faith; (3) definitions and creeds of the Ecumenical Councils; (4) the teaching of the Fathers and later ecclesiastical authors; and (5) the forms, acts and institutions and liturgies of the early church.³¹ The second theory affirms a *one-source* view on Scripture and Tradition, a more unitary perspective (an inclusive integrative view, like a basket and everything in it). According to this view, Tradition includes everything of value in the life of the Church: (1) the Scripture; (2) the seven Ecumenical Councils and the Creed; (3) the later councils; (4) the writings of the Fathers; (5) the liturgy; (6) the Canon Law; and even (7) the icons.³² For both of these views the Bible is, in a sense, the primary *written* tradition of the Church, although *not the only* one (the specific emphasis of the second view).³³ The first approach is rather characteristic of Protestants, for whom 'the principle of *sola scriptura* places Scripture above tradition', while the second is shared by the Orthodox who tend to see Scripture and Tradition 'as two coequal forms of one organic whole'.³⁴ For the Orthodox, the supremacy of Scripture over Tradition, in Protestantism, is seen as a proclamation of the self-sufficiency of Scripture, an elevation of Scripture above the Church, in other words - the 'sin of the Reformation'.³⁵ However, even

²⁸ Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, pp. 46-47, *cf.* pp. 97-106.

²⁹ D.B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity. A Western Perspective*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994, p. 56.

³⁰ Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox*, p. 155.

³¹ C. Konstantinidis, 'The Significance of the Eastern and Western Traditions within Christendom', in C. Patelos (ed), *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 1978, 220-230, p. 224.

³² Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, pp. 207-215. The seven councils acknowledged as ecumenical and binding upon the Church are the councils from Nicea: 325; Constantinople 1: 381; Ephesus: 431; Chalcedon: 451; Constantinople 2: 553; Constantinople 3: 680; and Nicea, the second: 787. The seven councils acknowledged as ecumenical and binding upon the Church are the councils from Nicea: 325; Constantinople 1: 381; Ephesus: 431; Chalcedon: 451; Constantinople 2: 553; Constantinople 3: 680; and Nicea, the second: 787. *Cf.* A. A. Boglepov, 'Which Councils are Recognized as Ecumenical?', *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, 7 (1963), 54-72. The concept of universal acceptance is particularly well handled by J. Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981, pp. 29-32.

³³ Bishop Dmitri, *Orthodox Christian Teaching*, p. 7.

³⁴ Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox*, p. 104.

³⁵ Florovsky, quoted in Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox*, p. 105. Philaret's *Catechism*, arts. 4, 5 affirms that Tradition is more ancient, closer to the sources - for Christ and the apostles taught orally at first (in Grass, *Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church*, p. 101), yet, he also affirms the preeminence of Scripture, which *is* the Word of God, as the test of all

for some Orthodox authors, Scripture and tradition are still ‘unequal in value’, and Scripture alone ‘has first place’.³⁶ The testimony of the Fathers is not uniform, either. Even some of the first Fathers who advocated the need for Tradition, such as Vincent of Lerins, for example, understood that Scripture has a primary place and as ‘the only, primary, and ultimate *canon* of the Christian truth’.³⁷

In order to understand the relationship between the context of the NT writing and that of the Tradition, one could suggest a parallel often ignored in the theological discussion about the nature of Tradition, namely, the relationship between rabbinical Judaism, during its formative years, when the Talmud was written, and the growth of Christian Tradition as an interpretative body of writings, on OT and NT alike. Talmudic literature claimed to preserve the oral law (the *oral* Torah, transmitted by Joshua and developed by prophets, teachers, rabbis, etc.) as a fence for keeping the true meaning of the *written* Torah (the books of Moses), and was, at the same time, a reaction against Christian interpretation of the written Torah (against Christ’s messianic interpretation of the OT, communicated further by the apostles and evangelists), as well as a reaction to the recent loss of Temple and country (AD 70, 132), which sprang from the need to emphasize a different Jewish identity for those of the Dispersion, in the Roman and the Parthian empires. It is not unfair to suggest that Christian Tradition came into being, as well, as a reaction against the Talmud and against the heresies of the time, as an attempt at establishing an appropriate interpretation of the OT, according to Jesus’ message and that of the subsequent apostolic preaching.³⁸ This would mean that there is a slight difference between the context of the writing of the NT and that of the Tradition, as a collection of commentaries, letters, homilies, rules, creeds, etc. aimed at preserving the correct meaning of the Gospel. The first has appeared in an evangelistic, missionary context, the second in a markedly apologetic context.

the other traditions of the Church (Cf. ‘Comparison of the Differences in the Doctrines of Faith betwixt the Eastern and Western Churches’, in R. Pinkerton, *Russia: or, Miscellaneous Observations on the Past and Present State of that Country and its Inhabitants*, London: 1833, pp. 41-45). The Moscow Statments (1976) are more restrictive, in the sense that Scripture *represents* the Word of God and is the *main criterion* in testing the Tradition (cf. Negruț, *The Concept of Authority*).

³⁶ Bulgakov, *Orthodox Church*, p. 207. p. According to T. Hopko, Tradition can never contradict Scripture, and in this sense Scripture is the ‘main written authority’ by which ‘everything in the church is judged’ (Hopko, ‘The Bible in the Orthodox Church’, *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly*, 15 (1970), 49-50, cf. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox*, p. 109).

³⁷ Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, p. 75, on St. Vincent of Lerins.

³⁸ For an introduction to the Talmud, cf. J. Neusner, *Invitation to the Talmud*, London: Harper and Row, 1975; M. Mielziner, *Introduction to the Talmud*, New York: Bloch, 1968; H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, M. Bockmuehl (trans), Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991; A. Cohen, *Talmudul*, C. Litman (trans), București: Hasefer, 1999. The principles of early Jewish hermeneutics can be found in D. Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutics in Palestine*, Missoula, MO: Scholars Press 1975; M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985; S.J.D. Cohen, ‘The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis and the End of Jewish Sectarianism’, *HUCA* 55 (1984) 27-53; etc. For an understanding of the tension between early Judaism and early Christianity, see J. Neusner (ed), *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults*, Leiden: Brill, 1975; R.T. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, Clifton, NJ: Reference Books, 1965 (1903); C.J. Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians. History and Polemics, 30-150 C.E.*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994; G. Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity*, M. Eugene Boring (trans), Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989; G. Constantinescu, *Marginalii la Talmud*, Cluj-Napoca, Romania: Dacia, 1999, etc.

Tradition appeared, thus, in the normal confrontation with heresies. Heretics were able to use the Scriptures in detail and extensively, while twisting their meaning according to their own ends. In a famous metaphor, Irenaeus explained the perfidy of such a faulty quotation through the story of a brilliant king who used the pieces of a beautiful mozaic to reconstruct the picture of a fox, as well as that of a dog, in both instances claiming a reconstruction true to the original, since on both accounts he used all the original fragments.³⁹ Many of the Fathers of the Church expressed a deep concern regarding such perversion of Scripture. Basil the Great emphasized the need for keeping the traditional interpretations of Scripture: ‘if we attacked the unwritten customs, claiming them to be of little importance, we would fatally mutilate the Gospel, no matter what our intentions - or rather, we would reduce the Gospel to bare words’;⁴⁰ and bare words, outside the context of spiritual authority of the Church, are open to misuse.⁴¹ Tertullian made similar points, arguing that God himself has let Scripture as such, so that heretics might misuse it and believers might defend it.⁴²

However, even this tradition, seen as a guardian to the true meaning of Scriptures, could be misappropriated, as well: *par excellence*, the Gnostics were those who appealed to such external testimonies in order to justify their teachings, which were alien to the Scriptures.⁴³ In order to understand how heresies operated in relation to Scripture, and how the Early church felt the need to impose document limits to the NT books, through the Canon, or interpretative limits, through the commentaries of the Fathers, one could look at two notorious examples of heretics, of Gnostic source, at Marcion of Pontus and at Valentinus of Alexandria, both active during the first half of the second century AD. Marcion mutilated the Scriptures physically, reducing the four NT gospels to one, based on Luke and purged of all OT references (*Euaggelion*), and keeping only Paul’s epistles (*Apostolikon*), cleansed, as well, of all references to OT, creation, Law, etc (for him the God of the OT was a cruel one, different from the God of the NT, whom Christ represented, and whose rule was based on love for the whole humankind). Valentinus, on his part, intervened theologically and stylistically in the NT, copying its style and creating new NT books, like the *Gospel of Truth*, which he included in his authoritative collection of Scriptures. He is notorious for dismissing any distinction between the NT Scriptures and his own works, claiming that he was inspired by the same spiritual light from within.⁴⁴ Both men were instrumental in determining Christians to come together and decide what was normative and fundamental testimony about Christ’s proclamation, *i.e.*, the *Canon*. The main function of Tradition, in the early Church, was then, that of a guardian to the true meaning of the NT, it served to

³⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.8., 1.9.4.

⁴⁰ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27.66.

⁴¹ Cf. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium*, 2.

⁴² Tertullian, *Prescriptions against Heretics*, 39. ‘I think I may say without fear of contradiction that by the will of God the Scriptures themselves were so arranged as to furnish matter for the heretics. For without the Scripture there can be no heresy’; *idem*, *Prescriptions against Heretics*, 15-17: heretics ‘plead Scripture...’ yet they use a false exegesis which injures truth: ‘they rely on passages which they have put together in a false context or fastened on because of their ambiguity’.

⁴³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.8-10.

⁴⁴ Cf. J. Behr, ‘Scripture, The Gospel, and Orthodoxy’, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 42 (3/4), 1999, 223-248, pp. 230-235; D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*, Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1992, p. 167.

have ‘Scripture rightly understood’,⁴⁵ not conveniently replaced. As well, the Canon of the NT, set by the early Church, implies a definite separation of inspired Scripture from heretical writings, but also from other later yet good, maybe inspired and, to a degree, even authoritative, Church testimony (*cf.* some of the apocrypha, such as *The Shepherd of Hermas*, or the pseudepigrapha, such as *The Epistle of Barnabas*, the epistles of Clement, of Ignatius, other later letters or homilies of the various Fathers, commentaries to the Scripture, *i.e.* the main core of the Tradition).⁴⁶ The uniqueness of Scripture, as opposed to Tradition, derives then, as well, from the special relationship between Christ and the Gospel, a relationship clearly affirmed by the Fathers, as well.

The Special Relationship Between Christ and the Gospel

Among the Orthodox theologians one can detect a certain struggle for affirming that Scripture is somehow more than a Church record, a historical primer approved and used by the Church. J. Behr notes, for example, that Scripture should not be seen ‘as a [mere] *record* of the relationship between God and the human race’ but, rather, ‘as *constitutive* of that relationship or as the medium of that relationship. [...] ...if Scripture is only a record of these events, then of what relevance is it today for our relationship to God in Christ? [...] why has this record been fixed in a closed canon?’⁴⁷ According to such an understanding, Scripture represents a meeting place with God himself. The Canon is an open invitation to a Christocentric reading of *all* Scripture (OT and NT), a focused proclamation of Christ.⁴⁸ Paramount to a correct understanding of Scripture, then, is an *illumination* initiated by the Holy Spirit, in order to see Christ - in the words of Hilary of Poitiers ‘Scripture is not in the reading but in the understanding’.⁴⁹ This special relation between NT as Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ, in the understanding of the early Church, can be illustrated particularly well – and interestingly so, by reference to two specific authors from the beginning of the second century AD, Ignatius of Antioch and Papias of Hierapolis.

Ignatius, writing approximately in AD 110 to Christians in Philadelphia, saw Jesus as being the essence of the apostolic kerygma, and of the OT, as well. In his letter, he advises Philadelphians to preserve the unity of the church, in submission to their bishop, and to stand against heresies (Judaizers, Ebionites, certain groups with a restrictive teaching on Scripture) and his advise for them is to ‘do nothing out of strife, but according to the doctrine of Christ’ (mhden kat’ epiqeian prasseto, alla kata cristomaqian). He motivates his counsel by remembering that he himself heard some saying, ‘if I do not find the Gospel in the archives, I will not believe it’ (hkousa gar tinwn legontwn, oti, ejan mh epi toi~ ajrceioi~ eurw tou euaggeliou, ouj pisteuw).⁵⁰ Apparently, these were people who preached a restrictive, OT centred teaching on Jesus, rejecting the authority of

⁴⁵ Behr, ‘Scripture’, p. 246. *Cf.* G. Florovsky, ‘The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church’, in Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition. An Eastern Orthodox View*, Vaduz: Buechervertriebsanstalt, 1987, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox*, p. 156.

⁴⁷ Behr, ‘Scripture’, p. 227.

⁴⁸ Behr, ‘Scripture’, p. 246-247; *cf.* Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 6.15.125.3

⁴⁹ Hilary, *Ad Constantium Augustum*, 2.9. *Cf.* Jerome, *Galatians*, 1.1.2.

⁵⁰ Ignatius, *Philadelphians*, 8.2-3.

the local bishop, as well, and certain forms of apostolic oral witness. Were these ‘archives’ mentioned in Ignatius’ letter, simply the Scriptures of the OT, or, they did include certain Christian written testimonies, in the form of simple gospel messages, a primitive outline of Jesus’ preaching, or samples of the earlier letters of Paul (so that the later letters of Paul, the Catholic Letters of the other apostles, and some later Gospels, such as John and Luke were rejected by them)? Whatever the case, Ignatius’ response emphasizes for all that, for him, Christ himself is the authoritative archives, the authoritative Word of God:

For me the archives are Jesus Christ, the inviolable archives are His cross and death and His resurrection and the faith which is through Him - in these I desire to be justified by your prayers... the beloved prophets made their announcement with Him in view, but the Gospel is the completion of incorruption.⁵¹

Ignatius runs to the words of the Gospel to find salvation and comfort as if he were running to embrace Jesus Himself, in the body: ‘I flee to the Gospel as to the flesh of Jesus, and to the apostles as to the presbytery of the Church...’⁵² Even if some commentators read here an appeal to the authority of the Church in reading and understanding Scripture,⁵³ it is clear that, in a special way, unmatched by other apostolic writings or testimony, a complete communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in written or oral form, was seen as the locus of one’s encounter with Christ himself. Reminiscent of K. Barth,⁵⁴ J. Behr notes that ‘for Ignatius, Jesus Christ is the sole locus of God’s revelation’, for Christ and the Gospel are inseparable.⁵⁵ This understanding was not a rare phenomenon among the holy Fathers. In some of his writings, for example, Irenaeus has expressed a similar view describing the NT as a recapitulation of the OT, a focused, enhanced resumé of God’s revelation and of human history. He saw Jesus Christ as the One in whom history becomes reenacted and redeemed, in whom the stories of the OT become types and prophecies fulfilled.⁵⁶

This special link between Christ and the power of the Gospel appears, as well, in one of Papias’ statements (bishop of Hierapolis, cca. AD 110 -130). Papias gives an interesting testimony when he disclosed that ‘I did not suppose that the things from the books would help me so much as the things heard from the living and continuing voice’.⁵⁷ For Papias, the audible proclamation of Christ’s Gospel coming from first hand witnesses was a greater blessing than the reading of the written Gospels. One can detect the same deep attachment to Christ, through his Gospel, as seen in Ignatius’ letter to the Philadelphians. In an age when eye-witnesses of Jesus’ life are not available, any longer, failing to encourage Christians to a

⁵¹ Ignatius, *Philadelphians*, 8.4-9.3. ...εμοι αρχεια εστιν ιησου ολCristo-, κτλ. Cf. Behr, ‘Scripture’, p. 239.

⁵² Ignatius, *Philadelphians*, 5.2-4.

⁵³ Lossky interprets the above quotation as meaning that ‘the Scriptures are not [the] archives of the Truth but its living body’... and that ‘the Scriptures can be possessed only within the Church, which is the unique body of Christ’ (Lossky, *In the Likeness*, p. 149).

⁵⁴ Evangelical theology celebrates ‘God with us’ and ‘God for us’ and this knowledge is ‘nothing else but the most thankful and happy science’ (K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

⁵⁵ Behr, ‘Scripture’, p. 240.

⁵⁶ Behr, ‘Scripture’, p. 246.

⁵⁷ Papias, quoted by Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 3.39.4.30-33, ουγάρ τα εχ των bibliων tosouton me wjfel ein uper lambanon, oison ta para zwsh/fwnh/kai menoush/

personal reading of the NT, as Scripture revealing Jesus Christ, leaves one in with a feeling of an intense contrast with these early Fathers.

To be sure, there are some positive developments in certain Orthodox parishes, as well, mainly in the USA communities, most probably under the influence of evangelical ethos:

...Bible studies are organized and held regularly as church activities...These study groups, usually under the leadership of their pastors, ask for Biblical commentaries.... This is a challenge to Orthodox scholars and teachers, to translate their research and to convey in clear terms an Orthodox perspective within which the people would be able to use, to judge and evaluate new ideas which are appearing so frequently in our pluralistic society. In view of these developments, Biblical interpreters may influence Christian life significantly. Their findings or interpretations not only furnish information to satisfy public curiosity, but become a call to a new life in Christ, as it was in the early Church.⁵⁸

The final document of the *European Seminar on the Role and the Place of the Bible in the Liturgical and Spiritual Life of the Orthodox Church*, held in Prague, September 12-18, 1977, made the following remarks:

Holy Scripture is the Source and basis of the whole liturgical and spiritual life of the Church... The incarnate Word of God nourishes the Church in the liturgy, as Good News and as spiritual Bread. Indeed, one cannot share in the eucharistic part of the liturgy without fully sharing in its kerygmatic part (biblical readings, sermons, etc.)... The faithful should have a better knowledge of, and a more direct access to the biblical texts printed wholly or in part in the language they speak. The translation and distribution of the Bible remains an important task and responsibility of the Church.⁵⁹

Despite such documents, however, Eastern European Orthodoxy, appears to have difficulties in implementing a dynamic emphasis on the study of the Word. The agenda here is still dominated by confrontational polity in relation to Greek-Catholics, Evangelicals, by continuing attempts at defining Orthodoxy as *the* State Religion in these countries.⁶⁰ Among

⁵⁸ V. Kesich, 'The Orthodox Church and Biblical Interpretation', *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37: 4 (1993), 243-251, p. 251; V.I. Istavridis, 'The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement 1948-1968', in H.E. Fey (ed), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, London: SPCK, 1970, vol. 2, 287-309, (cf. p. 300). See, for example, the famous commentary on Genesis, of fr. Seraphim Rose, *Genesis, Creation and Early Man. The Orthodox Christian Perspective*, Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2000 (trans. into Romanian, as Serafim Rose, *Cartea Facerii, crearea lumii și omul începuturilor. Perspectiva creștin ortodoxă*, C. Făgetan (trad), București: Sofia, 2001). In the last decades, one could witness a number of Romanian initiatives, as well, cf. S. Todoran, *Epistola Sf. Iacov. Introducere, traducere și comentariu*, Alba Iulia: Tipografia Arhiepiscopiei, 1997.

⁵⁹ *International Review of Mission*, LXVI, 264 (Oct. 1977), pp. 385-388.

⁶⁰ Cf. O. Gillet, *Religie și naționalism. Ideologia Bisericii Ortodoxe Române sub regimul comunist*, M. Petrișor (trans), București: Compania, 2001. [French ed.: *Religion et Nationalisme. L'idéologie de L'Église orthodoxe roumaine sous le régime communiste*, Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1997]; also, G. Nemeth, 'Christianity's Answer to Nationalism', *Religion in Communist Lands*, 10:1-2 (1991), 82-87, esp. pp. 85-87; C. M. Hann, 'Socialism and King Stephen's Right Hand', *Religion in Communist Lands*, 18:1 (1990), 4-24; M. Marynovitch, 'Towards Religious Freedom in Ukraine: Indigenous Churches and Foreign Missionaries', *Religion in Eastern Europe* 20:5 (2000), 1-14, cf. p. 11, concerning the local isolationism of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the 'superfluous dependence of the Church on protective walls drawn up by the State'; G. van Dartel, 'The Nations and the Churches in Yugoslavia', *Religion, State and Society*, 20:3-4 (1992), 275-288. For the Romanian scene, cf. the Baptist editorial 'Legea Cultelor stârnete din nou reacții de protest' [The Religion Law stirs up protests, again], in *Creștinul Azi* 2 (2001), p. 9; and the following secular

the implications of this two-minded attitude towards the Bible, at the same time based on Tradition and, yet, in contrast with many of the major Fathers of the Early Church, there is a certain mutual exclusion in terms of Bible studies and Bible approaches, among the Baptist and the Orthodox. For example, along with all protestants, Baptists are charged with having ‘uprooted the Bible from its natural context and attempted to transform it into a reality of itself, the ultimate authority in the life and the faith of the people’; while ‘for us [*i.e.*, the Orthodox, in the article] the Bible is the Book of the Church, of a very concrete Church - the same in its historical continuity from the time when the NT canon was created until today - which continuity they [*i.e.*, the Baptists, in the article] do not acknowledge and, consequently, they are not justified in using this Bible’.⁶¹ This denial of others’ right to read and interpret the Bible is supported, as well, by a certain inertia in Bible translating projects and by a certain lack of interest in hermeneutics.⁶²

Conclusions

The authority of the Bible as the Word of God remains a subject of major importance, both for the Orthodox and for the Baptist believer. In an increasingly secular culture individuals and institutions are increasingly confronted with an aggressive questioning of authority, particularly so, of the authority the state and, as well, of the spiritual authority of the Church and of the Scripture. As the Orthodox Church is still advocating an authoritarian response, built on the argument of Tradition and on nationalist feelings, will this approach be sufficient or appropriate in answering people’s questions, or in defending Christian faith, or in building a new, healed society? It has to be reminded, in this context, that one of the major disenchantments of people with the Orthodox Church is the fact that it has produced so few individuals of character,⁶³ and has joined so many debatable courses of religious polity; the Eastern European countries, of which many are proud of their Orthodox heritage, are chronically ridden with corruption, with desconsideration of human rights, with disregard of others view on faith and life. In our view, one of the causes for this problem is a chronic lack of Bible reading, which for the Fathers, was nearly as important as embracing

newspaper articles: B. Ficeac, ‘Subminarea Crediței’ [The Undermining of Faith], *Romania Libera* newspaper, 4th July 2001; the editorial, ‘Ce ascund mahării Bisericii’ [Whatever have the VIP of the Church to hide...], *Evenimentul Zilei* newspaper, 3rd July 2001; ; N. Omuș, ‘Jihadul ortodox la Niculițel!’ [Orthodox Jihad at Niculițel], *Romania Mare – nr. 595*, vineri, 7 decembrie 2001, p. 18, cf. și ‘Fețe bisericești, instigare la violență fizică; Reprezentanții Alianței Evanghelice au fost izgoniți, cu amenințări’ [Church leaders instigate to physical violence; The Evangelical Alliance representatives are chased away under threats], *Telegraf*, joi, 29 noiembrie 2001, ‘Jihadul Ortodox la Niculițel’, *Independentul*, joi, 29 noiembrie 2001, etc. Cf. D. Barbu: ‘[for the Orthodox Church] the discriminatory judicial status as *national church* is indispensable: her ierarchy needs a new *law*, not *faith*...’ (D. Barbu, *Republica absentă*, București: Nemira, 1999, p. 253).

⁶¹ Coman, *Biblia în Biserică*, p. 78.

⁶² Orthodox Seminaries in Romania, or Russia, etc., do not have any hermeneutics course. Cf. Coman, *Biblia în Biserică*, pp. 71, 74, 75, 98. Cf. that, at p. 74, Coman notes ‘The West has known hermeneutical problems and looks for solutions. The Orthodox East has got the solutions but has no manifest interest in hermeneutics’ (although, it is difficult to have solutions in underdeveloped research fields...). He notes, as well that ‘the lack of any such interest, the want of orthodox hermenutics – of a theological hermeneutic, in general, made it possible the alienation of orthodox theology from the life of the Church, at large; efforts for developing an Orthodox biblical hermeneutics would narrow the gap between orthodox theology and the life of the Church’ (*idem, op.cit.*, p. 74).

⁶³ This is not to say that Orthodoxy has not provided great men, this century, like Father Dimitri Dudko, Alexander Elchaninov, in Russia, etc. However, this has not been perceived as one of her distinctive features, especially not in her relationship with the State (traditionally known as the Church-State, or Emperor-Patriarch principle of *symphony*).

Christ himself and listening to Him in person. One of the possible solutions to this state of affairs is, then, to acknowledge the capacity of biblical texts *to form* and *transform us*, not only *to inform us*: ‘Scripture is not an object to be manipulated, dissected, explained. It is, rather, a subject, a partner in conversation, with questions and challenges of its own.’⁶⁴ Part of the Baptist vision is that one should read the Scripture individually and in community, as well, and do so with a ‘hermeneutic of participation’ not out of mere scientific or archaeological interest, or on short selections and excerpts.⁶⁵ This goes beyond a vision status and constitutes, in fact a traditional Baptist emphasis. It is worth noting that in their approach to Scripture ‘rather than beginning with revelation as “a way of securing epistemological foundations” as the scholastics of the Reformed tradition do, the Anabaptists began not with a theory of inspiration “but with a sense of participation in the Story, of being addressed by a living Word”.’⁶⁶ The Baptist battle for a revitalized reading of the Bible is deeply founded on the conviction that while the Scriptures shape our views of God they also invite us to engage the Word as faithful communities who struggle to live by it, growing in faith and in Christian character, in witness, enlarging the Kingdom of God and looking forward for the Second Coming of Christ.

⁶⁴ Green, ‘Biblical Authority’, p. 168.

⁶⁵ J.W. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Doctrine*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 64.

⁶⁶ Marshall, ‘Exercising Liberty of Conscience’, p. 143; Cf. G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984, p. 118.