

“READING OVER THE SHOULDERS OF THE FATHERS”—A Call for an Orthodox Approach to Scripture

The much needed ‘return to the Fathers’, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann said, “means, above all, the recovery of their spirit, of the secret inspiration which made them true witnesses of the Church” (quoted in *Liturgy and Tradition*, p. 84f). That is, what is needed is a return to the mind-set, the inner attitude and spiritual world-view of the Fathers.

This return to the Fathers is nowhere needed more than in a return to their view and veneration of the Divine Scriptures. The Church is now suffering from a low and deficient view of the Scriptures, one gained from the liberal world of western *Academia*, one which feels itself free to dissent from the received meaning and interpretation of the Scriptures in favour of more modern and politically-correct views.

In the writing of ostensibly Orthodox authors, in casual conversations with some clergy, in letters to the editor in our Orthodox journals, one can often find evidence of this alienation from the attitude of the Fathers. In one article, supporting references to the Scriptures are pilloried as “biblical literalism”, in another, Pauline use of the Old Testament is discounted as “rabbinic exegesis”, in yet another, one is warned against “the hazards of appealing too quickly to patristic testimony”. Anyone who is a convert from liberal protestantism, can easily identify the common disease which produced all the above citations: a low view of the Scriptures in which they are praised as sources and authorities but ultimately discounted as products of their age rather than as living oracles of Truth.

When one steps oneself in the literature of the Fathers, one is aware of entering a different world, of breathing a different air. For the Fathers, the Scriptures spoke with the voice of God and an apt citation of a Scriptural text (read and interpreted, of course, through the Tradition of the Church) was seen as bringing all godly controversy to an end. This was not “proof-texting” (which involves the use of Scripture separated from Holy Tradition). Rather, it was an awareness of Scripture as a locus and carrier of that Holy Tradition and therefore as a reliable arbiter in all Christian disputes.

A casual reading of the Fathers will confirm that this was their approach. Consider the words of St. Clement of Rome: “You well know that nothing unjust or fraudulent is written in the Scriptures”. Or the words of St. Irenaeus: “the Scriptures of certainly perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and by His Spirit”. Or the words of St. Hippolytus: “those who not believe that the Holy Scriptures were spoken by the Holy Spirit...are unbelievers”. Or Origen: “With complete and utter precision the Holy Spirit supplied the very words of Scripture through His subordinate authors...according to which the wisdom of God pervades every divinely-inspired writing, reach out to each single letter”. The Fathers did not adhere to a view of dictation, which would reduce the human authors of Scripture to merely passive conduits of the Divine Word. They knew full well that these were human documents, subject to the normal human variants of style and didactic purpose. Nonetheless, they were also very aware that these same human documents were vehicles for the Spirit of God, containing, as Divine Oracles, God’s timeless and transcendent Truth, and thus not subject to error.

According to the Fathers, how should we read the Scriptures today? I would point out two components of an Orthodox and patristic approach to the Divine Scriptures.

We should read the Scriptures in the Church. That is, we should interpret the Scriptures guided by our Holy Tradition as preserved in the interpretations of the Fathers. As Origen expresses it, “That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with ecclesiastical and apostolic Tradition”. This does not mean a rejection of all the fruit of modern commentary and criticism. It does mean a selective use of such modern work. The plumb-line of Tradition is to be hung against new work: only such as is consistent with Tradition is to be accepted.

We should read the Scriptures on our knees. That is, we should come to the Scriptures as humble learners to be taught, not as judges to teach and correct. Humility is the pre-condition for everything in the Christian life, especially in our reading of the Scriptures. In this as in all things, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

We are often exhorted to be diligent in reading the Scriptures. This is a valuable exhortation—but one that must be supplemented with another: read the Scriptures as the Fathers read them. We must open our Bibles as opening the oracles of God—reading, as it were, over the shoulders of the Fathers. Only then can we gain true and eternal benefit for our souls.

--Fr. Lawrence R. Farley