

Bible Reading for Orthodox Christians III

Problems We Bring to Bible Study

Or

“A man’s got to know his limitations...”

Plan of the Series

- What is the Bible? Where'd it come from?
- Brief History of Biblical Interpretation
 - Last Week
- Today: Problems we all bring to Bible Study
- Finally (mercifully?): A modest proposal for Bible Study

Modern Hermeneutics

- Six basic periods
 - Age of the Fathers
 - Medieval Humanism
 - Reformation
 - Enlightenment
 - 19th c. Positivism
 - 20th c. “Age of Doubt”

Today

- Problems WE bring to reading Scripture:
 - Whose interpretation of Scripture is correct?
 - Not just what Bible says?
 - BUT what Bible is?
 - What internal/personal issues can hinder Bible study?

Interpreting Scripture

- To understand what the Bible says, must first conclude what the Bible is:
 - Academic: old influential collection of books
 - Needs demythologizing
 - Popular/Secular: interesting, if increasingly irrelevant collection of books whose chief utility is to attack Christianity
 - Christian: sacred & authoritative book bearing testimony to the Word of God (Orthodox)

Interpreting Scripture

- Sacred & authoritative book bearing testimony to the Word of God
 - Christians would disagree on meaning
- Two major issues inform this definition
 - Idea of divine inspiration
 - Idea of authority: on what do we base our claim?
 - Sacred?
 - Authoritative?

Divine Inspiration

- “Most” Christians accept
- But what does it mean?
 - Quranic? (“The Recitation”)
 - Is Bible really the Word of God?

Issues to Consider

- Scripture a product of synergy
 - Fusion of divine with human
 - Fusion of the Uncreated with the created
 - Fusion of beyond Reason with human reason

Issues to Consider

- Human authors describe God & His activities
 - Must describe an event (not the event itself)
 - Must use symbols (language)
 - Must use limited to describe the Infinite
- Bible: written witness to direct experience
 - Ex.: Transfiguration
 - Ex.: Moses sees God's "back parts"
- Orthodox: Bible not the Truth---but testimony

Issues to Consider

- Bible written under synergy
 - Divine: God reveals what He chooses
 - In ways we can understand
 - No DNA in the creation account
 - Human: limiting partner
 - Personality
 - Understanding/communication skills
 - Levels of inspiration
 - Historical context
 - Differing audiences/emphases

Example: Context of the Gospels

- Matthew: to the Jewish community
 - Our Lord's genealogy
 - 50 direct quotations from O.T.
 - Fulfilling the Law/Prophets
- Mark: to Rome?
 - Peter's ministry
 - Stark simplicity
 - God of power

Example: Context of the Gospels

- Luke: For the Gentiles
 - Influence of Theotokos/St. Paul
 - Humanity of Christ
 - Infancy/sweats blood/Man of prayer (11 of 15)
- John: the Theologian
 - Work signs and Word signs
 - Christ the Word/"I AM"
 - Meant for believers (Hopko)

Orthodox Understanding of Bible

- For the Orthodox, the Bible is the book of the Church, written by and for those who believe in God and constitute His People. The Four Gospels are the center of the Bible, just as Christ is the center of the Church. For this reason the Four Gospels are always enthroned on the altar in the Orthodox Church building.
 - Fr. John Matusiak on OCA website

Orthodox Understanding of Bible

- To amplify
 - Sacred and authoritative
 - Inspired by God
 - Synergistic
 - Informs the Church/understood in the Church
 - A witness to the Truth
 - Needs to be interpreted
 - Literally/Allegorically/Anagogically/Morally
 - Depending on text
 - Levels of inspiration
 - Written for different audiences/emphases
 - Should women be silent in Church? (1 Cor. 14: 33-35)

Issue of Authority

- Much in previous definition acceptable to most
- But some---not so much
 - Bible only understood thru lens of Church
 - Nature of inspiration
 - Levels of inspiration
 - Not always universally applicable
- So how can we say this?

Issue of Authority

- “God said it; I believe it; that settles it!”
 - BUT DOES IT?
- Common student problem (although not so much lately!?)
 - Bible the “default” proof

Issue of Authority

- Quran makes same claims
 - Even more sweeping
- Is Bible self-interpreting?
 - Clearly not
 - 33,000 different Christian groups
 - “All” appeal to same N.T. Canon
- Is Bible inerrant/infallible?
 - Depends on defining terms
 - Infallible document requires infallible interpretation

The Dreaded “t” word

- Everyone comes to the Bible/interprets the Bible based on a certain tradition
 - Academic
 - Popular Culture
 - Faith-based
- a way of thinking, behaving, or doing something that has been used by the people in a particular group, family, society, etc., for a long time

Faith-based Tradition

- Roman Catholic
- Orthodox
- Protestant
 - Liberal
 - Fundamentalist
 - Evangelical

What's your tradition?

- Key question that informs all Scripture reading
- Things known to group/maybe not to outsiders
 - Don't get excited at "let us complete our _____ prayer to the Lord."
 - Not put off by kissing priest's hand
- Ex.: Scriptures based on tradition
 - "...the prayers."
 - "...in the breaking of the Bread."
 - "...rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it."
 - "...no one comes to the Father except thru Me."

What's your tradition?

- Thus debate often futile
 - Perspectives from irreconcilable traditions
- The Church would only say:
 - Scripture gives and receives its meaning by community of faith
 - To understand the Apostolic witness, must be read from perspective of the Apostolic faith

Internal Impediments

- State of our hearts
- State of our spiritual life
- Danger of eisegesis: interpretation that introduces own presuppositions/agendas/biases to the text
 - A way to justify

Are there Personal Revelations?

- Certainly: Scripture one place to go to encounter God
 - Ex.: the call to the priesthood/monastic life
- But use caution
 - May not be for others
 - A stumbling block
 - Deception & self-deception
 - Test the spirits
- Seek confirmation in the life of the Church

An Accomplice to our Sinful Passions?

- Self-opinion: understand everything with my own logic
 - Every heresy was logical
- Self-justification
 - Chili dogs in Lent?
 - Who is my neighbor?
- Politics
 - Scripture becomes philosophy
 - Liberation; Racism; Pacifism, Social Justice

An Accomplice to our Sinful Passions

- Ego support
 - Abusive proof texting
- Materialism
 - Money
- Accommodationism
 - Fit faith to world
 - Politics
 - Libertinism

Next...

- How then should we read the Scriptures?