

Understanding the Bible

Part 1. An Introduction

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Why the Holy Scriptures are so dear to us

The aim of this and the following booklets about the Bible is to provide the Orthodox reader with fundamental information regarding how, when and by whom the books of the Holy Scripture were written, as well as briefly explaining their contents.

The Holy Scripture is dear to the Orthodox faithful because it contains the **basis of our faith**. Despite this, one has to acknowledge that, at a time when many Christians of different denominations are ardently studying the Bible, Orthodox Christians — apart from the some exception — rarely read it, especially the Old Testament. Naturally, since thousands of years separate us from the times when the Holy Books were being written, it is difficult for the contemporary reader to transport himself into that environment. However, once the reader becomes familiar with the historical context of the era and the peculiarities of the biblical language, he will begin to appreciate its spiritual richness. The link between the Old and the New Books will become quite evident to the reader. At the same time, religious-moral questions worrying the reader and modern society as a whole, will become apparent as not problems specific of the 20th century, but a never-ending conflict between good and evil, between faith and unbelief that has always troubled the human society.

The historical pages of the Bible are also dear to us because they not only **truthfully** describe events of the past, but place them in a **correct religious perspective**. In this regard, there is no secular book — old or contemporary — that can match the Bible. This is because the appraisal of events described in the Bible had been given not by man, but by God. Therefore, in the light of God's word, mistakes or correct resolutions of moral problems by generations gone by can serve as guides in resolving contemporary problems on both personal and societal levels. By familiarizing oneself with the substance and meaning of the Holy Books, the reader will gradually develop a love for them, as repeated readings will unearth new gems of God's wisdom.

Consequently, the Holy Scripture is a **lifetime study** — not only for the youthful student but for the greatest theologian; not only for the layman or the newly converted but for the highest ecclesiastical spiritual rank and wisest man. The Lord bequeaths to Joshua, leader of the Israelites and a disciple of Moses: *“This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shall meditate therein day and night”* (Joshua 1:8); while Apostle Paul writes to his student Timothy *“And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation”* (2 Timothy 3:15).

For more than four hundred years the Bible has been the best-selling book in the world. An unknown author summed the case for the Bible many years ago when he wrote: “This book con

tains the mind of God, the state of man, the doom of sinners, the happiness of believers... Read it to be wise; believe it to be safe; and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. Christ is its grand object; our good, its design; and the glory of God its end.

Among all the books ever published, the Bible remains unique. Available in languages understood by at least 97 per cent of the world's population, the whole Bible has been published in 237 tongues, and parts of the Bible appear in more than 1250 languages and dialects. Even the blind may read Bible in Braille. The Bible is the most universally available publication in the history of mankind.

The culture of Western man is derived in large measure from the message of the Bible. Western man's views of reality, of nature and destiny of man, of marriage and the family, of organized society, of the structure of the Church, of standards personal morality, all bear the stamp of the Bible. In most Western nations civil law is based primarily upon the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament. Human personality is of supreme value, we say, because of man's having been created in the image of God, a direct teaching of Scripture. The sense of dignity and worth of man is rooted in the teaching of the Bible that man has an immortal soul with an eternal destiny. The prompting to heal the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless comes from the Biblical message that God loves the entire human race, and all men are brothers. The objective of a more perfect society for which Western man strives comes essentially from the Biblical concept of the Kingdom of God. The public philosophy of democratic societies derives from the Biblical truth that individual man is of supreme worth, and that he must be expected to place the common needs of others above his own personal desires.

Understanding of the Holy Scriptures

The holy scriptures or the Bible is a collection of books that we believe were written by the Prophets and Apostles, inspired and moved by the Holy Spirit. The word "Bible" (*ta biblia*) is a Greek word meaning "books."

In order to appreciate any book one needs to know its theme, the purpose that has guided its writing. The Bible is God's written word. It is the record of God's dealings with man. It reveals how God has acted and how man has responded. It is a book containing a library of many books, the product not of one period and place but of many minds and many ages. It is not a book of science; it is a book of religion, supreme in morals and ethics. It holds the place of highest honor and authority in the Church, for it points beyond itself to the will and the ways of God. An ancient Church Father wrote, "*God did not become words, He became flesh.*" We revere and believe in the Book, but we worship the God whom the Book makes known.

The Bible is a Book for religious faith. The God of the Bible is the God of creation. The Bible opens with the words, "*In the beginning God...*" He is the first cause, the source of all that follows. He brought form out of formlessness and light out of darkness, and finally He created life itself. Man, as he is seen in the pages of the Bible, sometimes walking with God and sometimes apart from Him, is invested by the God of the Bible with freedom of moral choice. He may do

right or he may do wrong. He lives in a universe of moral laws as inexorable as the laws of nature. To lie, to cheat, to lust is to destroy personality just as surely as to take poison is to destroy the physical body. Let a man violate the laws of the moral universe and doom awaits him. This the Bible makes clear.

But the Bible says something else. The central theme of the Bible is that since man by himself cannot lift himself, nor by his own strength keep all of the laws of God, God has acted to help him. God has entered history to save him. For the Bible is also the story of man's redemption. God "*Gave His only Son,*" because He loved man and wanted him to have the fullness of life that belongs to the perfect creation which He had purposed before time was. God did not create man and then abandon him. God entered into man's life. The life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is the central theme of the whole Biblical story, the purpose for which the Bible was written.

The Bible has one story. It is the record of God's making Himself known to man and of man's response to God's self-disclosure. The Old Testament is the story of a Covenant people in a community of faith, ancient Israel, journeying toward a new and better place in time, sometimes obedient and sometimes disobedient to God, Who was always striving to break through to show Himself in completeness. He spoke through His prophets, through saints, seers, and rulers, and through the events of history until the time had "*Fully come when everything in heaven and earth should be unified in Christ,*" (Eph. 1:10) as Paul put it, "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,*" (John 1:14) as John put it. God spoke the living Word in terms humanity could understand, "*The way, the truth, the life*" in a Person. The New Testament continues the theme with the people of the New Covenant, the new Israel of God, the Body of Christ, the Church of witnessing people journeying through history. Here is the Book of man in his pilgrimage through time and beyond time, learning to know God, to discern His will and do it, living in a community of faith, ever witnessing to the coming Kingdom, the law of which is love, and the Ruler of which will be the transcendent God at the final consummation of history.

But the major theme of the Holy Scripture is the **salvation of humanity by the Messiah**, the incarnate Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Old Testament proclaims salvation in the forms of symbols and prophecies about the Messiah and the Kingdom of Heaven. The New Testament enunciates the actual realization of our salvation through the incarnation, life and teachings of the God-Man, sealed through His death and Resurrection. Depending upon the times they were written, the Holy Writings are grouped into the New and Old Testaments. The first contain that which the Lord revealed to the world through God-inspired prophets before Christ's appearance on Earth, while the second group describes that which was taught by our Lord Savior Himself and his Apostles.

The inspiration of the Bible

We believe that the prophets and the Apostles did not write through their own human intellect but rather through **God's inspiration**. He cleansed their souls, enlightened their reasoning and revealed to them mysteries of faith and of the future, normally inaccessible to the human mind. That is why their writings are described as divinely-inspired: "*For prophecy never came by the*

will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit,” says the apostle Peter (2 Peter 1:21). The apostle Paul calls the writings as divinely-inspired in 2 Timothy 3:16. Regarding the importance of the Holy Scriptures Jesus said, *“Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled”* (Matt. 5:18).

Moses and Aaron are examples of God’s revelations to the prophets. God sent to a very reticent Moses, his brother Aaron as an intermediary. Being inarticulate, Moses’s bafflement as to how he would expound God’s will to the people was answered by the Lord: *“Thou (Moses) shalt speak unto him (Aaron) and put words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. And he shall be the spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God”* (Exodus 4:15-16).

While believing in the inspirationally divine qualities of the Bible, one must remember that it is the **Book of the Church**. According to God’s plan, people are called upon to save themselves not on an individual basis but as a society which He guides and dwells in. This society is called the Church. By historical definition, the Church is divided into the Old Testament which governed the Jewish people, and the New Testament to which the Orthodox Christians belong. The New Testament inherited the spiritual richness of the Old Testament, namely the word of God. The Church not only preserved the word of God but has retained its correct understanding. This is because, just as the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets and Apostles, He continues to live in the Church and to lead her. Consequently, the Church gives us correct guidance for the application of its written wealth: that which is more actual and important, and those passages that have retained a historical significance only but are not relevant to modern times.

Original form and languages of the Scripture

Initially, the books of the Old Testament were written in a Jewish tongue. Later books of the Babylonian era contain many Assyrian and Babylonian words and phraseologies, while “deuterocanonical” books written during the Greek reign — with the exception of the 3rd book of Ezra which is in Latin — were authored in Greek.

Books of the Holy Scripture did not leave the hands of their holy authors in the format we are seeing them now. They were initially written on parchment or on papyrus (a paper-reed that grew prolifically in Egypt and Israel) using a sharpened bamboo stick dipped in ink. In effect, what was being written were not books but papyrus or parchment scrolls that resembled long ribbons, coiled on to a wooden spool. These rolls were written on one side only. Consequently, in order to make them more manageable, instead of gluing together these papyrus or parchment ribbons into huge rolls, they were stitched into books.

The original text of these scrolls was written in bold capital letters with no spaces between the words so that one sentence resembled one word. The reader himself had to divide the sentence into words and naturally enough, occasionally made mistakes. At the same time these ancient manuscripts did not contain any commas nor full-stop or emphasis signs. As well, the ancient Jewish language did not employ vowels but only consonants.

In the 5th century, the division of sentences into words in the Holy Books was undertaken by Deacon Eulaly, of the Alexandrine Church. Slowly but surely, the Bible began to take on its current format. Because of its contemporary division into chapters and verses, the reading and locating of specific passages in the Bible is quite an easy matter.

History of the Bible's emergence

The holy books did not come into being suddenly, in their current completeness. The time between Moses (1450 BC) and Samuel (1050 BC) can be called the formative years of the Holy Scripture. Inspired by God, Moses wrote down his revelations, laws and narrations, decreeing to the Levites who carried the ark containing God's commandments, "*Take this book of the law and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God*" (Deuteronomy 31:26). The successive holy authors continued writing their books with specific requests that they be included with the five Books of Moses, as though it was one Book. For example, in Joshua 24:26 we find "*And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law,*" i.e. in the book of Moses. Similarly with Samuel, the prophet and judge that lived at the beginning of the Kings' period, it was written that "*Samuel explained to the people the behavior of royalty, and wrote it in a book and laid it up before the Lord*" (1 Sam. 10:25) i.e. to the side of the ark where the other books of Moses were kept.

During the time between Samuel and the Babylonian bondage (589 BC), the Israelite elders and prophets acted as gatherers and guardians of the holy books of the Old Testament. In the books of Chronicles, the prophets are often mentioned as the main authors of Jewish writings. One must also observe the remarkable witness by the Judean historian, Josephus Flavius, to the practice by the ancient Jews of re-examining the text of the Holy Writings after every serious disturbance, for example after a lengthy war. This sometimes resulted in what seemed the emergence of fresh Holy Writings, which were permitted to be produced by God-inspired prophets with their knowledge of ancient events and their ability to record the history of their people with remarkable accuracy. It is worthy to note that Judean history records that their pious king Ezekiel (710 BC), together with some selected elders, produced a book containing the writings of Isaiah, Proverbs, Song of Songs and the Ecclesiastes.

The period between the Babylonian bondage and the times of the Great Synagogue during Ezra and Nehemiah (400 BC), appears as the conclusive stage of transcription of the Old Testament's "canonical" books. The main protagonist in this enormous effort was the priest Ezra, the holy teacher of God's laws (Ezra 7:12) In collaboration with the learned Nehemiah (creator of an extensive library), Ezra gathered "*Reports in the writings and commentaries of Nehemiah; and how he, founding of the library, gathered together the acts of the kings, the prophets, of David, and the epistles of the kings concerning the holy gifts*" (2 Mac. 2:13). He assiduously examined all prior God-inspired writings and published them in one arrangement, including the book of Nehemiah as well as his book, under his own name. As the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi were living in this era they, apart from undoubtedly assisting Ezra in his efforts, had their own books included in his writings. After Ezra, the Jewish people did not receive any more God-inspired prophets and consequently, all the writings that appeared from that point on, were not

included as holy books. For example, the book of Jesus Son of Sirach, while also written in the Jewish language and regarded as worthy by the Church, is not part of the holy canon.

The contents of the holy books of the Old Testament prove their ancient beginnings. The narratives in the books of Moses describe, with unmistakable clarity, the way of life in those distant days and the patriarchal structure of society. Because these descriptions correspond exactly with the ancient traditions of those people, the reader invariably feels that the author was present in those ancient times.

The responses from experts of the Jewish language confirm that the very style of the writings stamps them as being extremely ancient: months have no names but are referred to simply as numbers i.e. first, second, third etc ... month, and the books themselves carry no individual identity being designated by their opening words e.g., BERESHIT (“in the beginning” — Genesis), WE ELLEH SHE’MOT (“and these are the names” — Exodus), etc. as though to prove that as there were no other writings in existence, there was no need to specifically identify the books by name. After Moses, subsequent writings of holy fathers bear corresponding characteristics of the spirit and the people of those ancient times.

The Old Testament contains the following books:

Five books of the Prophet Moses or **Torah** (encompassing the foundation the faith of the Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Historical books: Book of Joshua, Book of Judges, Book of Ruth, 1st and 2nd Books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, 1st Book of Ezra, Book of Nehemiah & the 2nd Book of Esther.

Educational Books (having instructional contents): The Books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Book of Ecclesiastes and Book of Song of Solomon.

Prophetic books (primarily containing prophecies): one book each of prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and twelve books of the minor prophets, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

The names of the above list of holy books was taken from the translations of 70 Greek interpreters (*Septuagint*). The Jewish as well as some modern translations of the Bible have different names for some of the holy books.

Apart from this list of books of the Old Testament, the Bible contains another following nine books, regarded as “deutero-canonical”: the books of Tobias, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Jesus Son of Sirach, Second and Third books of Ezra, and three books of Maccabees. They are regarded as such because they were written **after** the list of “canonical” books had been completed by Ezra. These books were always respected by the Early Church. In fact, the Greek Bible known as the *Septuagint*, which the Apostles and the early Fathers used, does not distinguish between the “canonical” and the “deutero-canonical” books. While the Russian version of the Bible,

which follows the Early Christian tradition, contains both groups of books, some modern versions exclude the “deutero-canonical” books.

The New Testament

The Church was born on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles (Acts 2). At that time none of the books of the New Testament yet existed. In the first years of her existence, the Church had no written documents whatever, except the books of the Old Testament as indicated earlier. The events of the Gospel were related from one believer to another by word of mouth; those who came to accept the Faith heard them from the believers. This was entirely in keeping with the culture in which the Church lived, which was above all else an oral culture. Relatively few people were able to read, let alone write, and so they heard the word of God and kept it (cf. Luke 8:21; 11:28). The holy Apostle Paul insists upon the matter: “*Therefore brethren, stand fast and hold to the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word or our letter*” (2 Thess 2:15).

In due course, as the Church began to spread beyond her place of origin in Jerusalem and Galilee, communications between the local churches became necessary and letters were written. Some of these were of such great importance to understanding the Faith that they began to be read in church services, along with the Scriptures (the Old Testament). But copies existed initially only in the local churches to which they had been addressed, although in time in many others as well. As travelers moved from one place to another they carried hand-written copies of the letters for the edification of other believers. Some of these letters were written by the apostles, but there were others, written by other believers as well. Eventually, some of them came to have the character of what we now call “open letters,” addressed to the Church as a whole, rather than to any particular congregation. These are the “universal” or “catholic” or “general” epistles.

As the Church spread, it also became necessary to commit the central core of the events of Our Lord’s life and His teaching to writing, to provide a written Gospel for those who came to the Faith far from the little out-of-the-way province of the Empire in which the Lord had lived and died. So it was that the four written Gospels came into being. But this came to pass only after the Gospel had been proclaimed and passed from one believer to another by word of mouth, by tradition (“handing-on”) for many years. It is readily apparent upon comparison that no one of the written Gospels contains the entire story. Just as important, perhaps more so, as one would assume, had he no prejudice to the contrary, all four of them together yet are less than the totality of the Tradition of which they are a part. As the Gospel of St. John concludes: “*And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written*” (John 21:25).

To be sure, all that is essential of the Lord’s life and teaching is to be found in the Gospels — but not all that is desirable or helpful to our salvation. Neither any one nor all four of the Gospels together were written to be absolutely exhaustive and final. Were that the case, of course, we would have no need of the rest of the New Testament, nor the Old Testament, either. (There have been heretics who claimed just such outrageous foolishness).

The Revelation of St. John the Theologian (or the “Apocalypse”) and the Acts of the Apostles are of course “special cases.” The former, almost certainly the last book of the New Testament to be written, is agreed by most scholars to have been written by St. John near the end of his life, during the reign of Dometian, probably about A.D. 95 (although parts of it may perhaps have been written at an earlier date). It is the only book of the New Testament concerning which there was significant disagreement in the Church. There were parts of the Church for several centuries in which it was not accepted as part of the Scriptures (of this, more later). The Acts of the Apostles, written by the Evangelist Luke, of course could not have been completed any earlier than A.D. 63, as it refers to St. Paul’s imprisonment at Rome which continued into that year.

The canon of the New Testament

The earliest known list of books which apparently were regarded as “scripture” in the Church’s history comes from about A.D. 130 and is known as the Muratorian Canon. Portions of the work have been lost, but it is apparent that it includes the four Gospels and most of the epistles of St. Paul, as well as various other books. But doubts existed in portions of the Church concerning the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of Jude, the 2nd Epistle of Peter, the 2nd and 3rd Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse (this lasted right up to the council which finally confirmed the canon). As noted earlier, there were portions of the Church in which other books than those we now recognize as part of the New Testament were accepted as such.

It is not until A.D. 369, with St. Athanasius’s “Festal Epistle” for that year, that we can find a “table of contents” for the New Testament which corresponds exactly to that which we now accept. For 336 years the Church had been living, growing, developing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and only then would it have been possible (though not even yet with universal acceptance) to print “the Holy Bible” as we now know and accept it!

This, of course, is already four decades after the Council of Nicaea, after the Creed had been written, after the Church (as many Protestants would have it) had been finally and ultimately corrupted by St. Constantine. The formal liturgical worship of the Church was already well-defined and so similar to that of the Orthodox Church today (a fact readily established by reference to indisputable historical documents) that a believer transported in time from then to an Orthodox Church service now would find himself completely at home.

Only five years earlier than St. Athanasius’ Epistle, however, the Council of Laodicea (the canons of which were confirmed by the Sixth Ecumenical Council) promulgated a list of the books of the New Testament which was identical... except that it did not include the Apocalypse (Revelation) amongst “all the books that are to be read” (Canon 60). It was not for quite some time yet that there was truly universal agreement as to the books of the New Testament, and it was yet to be another thousand years before there would be a single book identical in contents to what we now call the Bible.

Other books?

The picture we have, then, is that of a body of Church literature growing throughout the first 70 years of the Church’s life. Some of these books were originally known in only one or a few local

churches; others more rapidly gained a widespread audience. What was considered “scripture” in a particular local church was that which was read at the Church services, along with the books of the law and the prophets, and the Psalms, from the Old Testament. But we have not yet touched upon the fact that in this rich climate — of the oral Tradition of the Church and the new books which spoke of salvation — there were also other books, quite a number of them, in fact. Some of them were written even during the time in which the books of the New Testament came to be; others were written within the same time-frame, but shortly later.

Some of these “other books” may indeed have been written by the apostles themselves (e.g., the Epistle of Barnabas; the Apostolic Constitutions). Others were written by other members of the early Christian Church or by the immediate successors of the apostles in the governance of the Church (e.g., the “Shepherd” of Hermas; the epistles of St. Clement, of St. Ignatius, of St. Polycarp). Some of these books were in various parts of the Church (and some of them quite widely) regarded as “scripture,” exactly on a par with the Gospels and the other books of the New Testament as we now have it. These books, however, should not be confused with the wholly inauthentic books written later, in the second and third centuries, by various heretics, who attributed their forgeries to the apostles in an attempt to authenticate their heretical teachings — such as the “Gospel of Thomas,” the “Essene Gospel of Peace” and various others.

One thing is inescapable: the Bible is a difficult book, sealed, so to speak, with seven seals (see Rev. 5:1). But the Bible is not difficult because it is written in some unknown language or in code. We may, in fact, be so bold as to suggest that the great difficulty with the Bible is its magnificent clarity and directness. For the mysteries of God are given to us in the context of the daily lives of ordinary people. It may be, in fact, that the whole story of our salvation seems just all too human — just as Jesus Christ, the Lord of all, God Incarnate, was to all appearances a very ordinary man, the son of a carpenter.

The Bible transmits to us and preserves for us the Word of God in a form which human beings can grasp. When God spoke to man, the communication had to be in a form we could hear and understand. Divine inspiration does not get rid of what is human: it transfigures what is human. We must not think that human language degrades or darkens the glory of revelation nor that it restricts the power of the Word of God. We must rather believe this: that human words can be used quite adequately to convey the Word of God to us. His Word does not become tarnished or cloudy when it is expressed in human language. We are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27; 5:1; 9:6) and the very fact of this image and likeness makes communication possible. That God speaks to us in the forms which are our own thought and speech makes our language something greater, for now the Holy Spirit enables us to speak of God.

Theology (literally “words about God”) is thus made possible through His revelation. And, yes, theology (truly defined) is our response to God who first spoke to us, whom we have heard, and of whose words we have a record, and now proclaim.

This process is never complete, for we are never perfect in our development of theology: we must keep working at it. We always go back to the very same point of beginning, God’s Word, the Holy Scriptures, which is His revelation. Through the creeds, the doctrines of the Church, the

Eucharistic liturgy and the various prayer liturgies, and other sacred signs and symbols, theology (and, indeed, true philosophy) witnesses to the meaning of that revelation.

We must also realize, however, that in one respect the Scriptures are themselves a response to God, for they are at one and the same time the Word of God and the response of humanity. The Bible is the Word of God brought to us through the faithful response of those people who wrote it and handed it down to us. Indeed, in every case in which someone wrote, by the inspiration of God, a work which became part of the Bible, the presentation carries some flavor of that person, in being a response to God it is also an interpretation of the message received from God. Thus, there is certainly a sense in which all parts of Scripture reflect the context in which the revelation was given. It would be impossible for that not to be.

Having received the revelation in the form of the Scriptures, the Church has, through her experience in the world through the centuries, found it necessary to produce explanations. These explanations, seen as a whole, form that which is the structure and pattern of beliefs which are to be found especially in the creeds and other decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, but also in the writings of the great theologians of the Church such as St. Gregory Nazianzus (called “the Theologian”), St. Basil the Great, St. John of Damascus, St. Symeon the New Theologian and others. They are also to be found in the liturgical services, especially in the hymns and prayers.

Bible translations

The Greek translation by 70 interpreters (Septuagint)

The most accurate translation of the original text of the Holy Bible writings are found in the Alexandrine version, known as the one produced by the 70 interpreters. This effort began in the year 271 BC by orders of King Ptolemy Philadelphus. Renowned for his thirst for knowledge, the king wanted to acquire the books of the Jewish law for his library, and to this end, directed his librarian Demetrius to obtain and translate these books into Greek, the most widespread language of that time. Six of the most talented representatives from each tribe of Israel were selected and were directed to Alexandria, bringing with them the exact replica of the Jewish Bible. These translators were stationed on the island of Faros, close to the capital, and concluded their task in a short period of time. It is this translation of the holy books by “the seventy” that is used by the Orthodox Church.

The Latin translation (Vulgate)

Up to the fourth century of our era, among the several Latin translations of the Bible, the version translated into Ancient Latin (the Itala) was the most popular because it was based on the original content of the 70 translators and consequently, reflected the unadulterated clarity and exceptional conformity to the holy text. However, after St. Jerome — one of the most learned fathers of the Church in the 4th Century — published his translation of the Holy Scriptures in 384 AD (based on authentic Jewish writings), the Western church slowly but surely began to forsake the original Itala version in favor of this interpretation. In the 14th Century, the Council of Trent established St. Jerome’s version as the official Holy Scripture (titled Vulgate, meaning “popular edition”) of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Slavonic translation

In the 9th century, Moravian Prince Rostislav, being displeased with the efforts of the German missionaries, requested the Greek king Michael to send him some competent instructors in the Christian faith. In response, King Michael sent two Thessalonian brothers — Saints Cyril and Methodius — accomplished scholars of the Slavonic language who had already begun the translation of the Holy Scripture while still in Greece. On the way to the Slavonic lands, the two Saints stayed for a time in Bulgaria, not only continuing their translation there but also enlightening that country with God's word. In 863 they arrived in Moravia, continuing their translation as well as their apostolic efforts in the Slavonic lands. Upon the death of St. Cyril, St. Methodius completed the translation in Pannonia, having moved there (because of civil unrest in Moravia) under the patronage of pious prince Kotsella.

In 988, Russia embraced Christianity under the rule of St. Vladimir, and the Slavonic version of the Holy Bible translated by Saints Cyril and Methodius became an integral part of that faith.

Russian translation

With the passage of time, the differences between the Russian and Slavonic languages increased markedly, causing great difficulties for many in reading the Holy Scripture. As a consequence, in 1815, by order of Emperor Alexander I and with the blessing of the Russian Holy Synod, the Russian Bible Society funded the publication of the New Testament in the then modern Russian language. Of all the books of the Old Testament, only the Psalms were translated, as this book, above all others, was widely used in the Orthodox Church Services. Subsequently, during the reign of Alexander II, in 1860 a new and more accurate version of the New Testament was published, followed by the publication of the “canonical” books of the Old Testament in 1868. The following year saw the Holy Synod bless the issue of the historical books of the Old Testament, and in 1872 the wisdom books. Meanwhile, Russian translations of the holy books of the Old Testament appeared with increasing frequency in spiritual magazines so that by 1877, the complete text of the Bible was popularly available in the Russian language. However, not everyone was sympathetic with the appearance of the Russian translation, preferring the original Church-Slavonic version. Vocal supporters of the Russian version included such notable luminaries as St. Tikhon of Zadonsk, Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow and later, Bishop Theophan the Recluse, Patriarch Tikhon and many other outstanding pastors of the Russian Church.

Other translations of the Bible

In 1160, the Bible was translated into the French language by Peter Valde. The first translation into German appeared in 1460, followed by an updated version by Martin Luther in 1522-32. In the 8th century, Bede the Venerable was the first person to translate the Bible into the English language. The “King James” English version was produced in 1603 during the reign of James I, and published in 1611. Over the years, the Bible in Russia has been translated into many indigenous languages. Metropolitan Innocent translated it into the Aleutian languages, while the Academy of Kazan translated it into many others, including Tartar. The British and American Bible Societies were the most successful organizations to translate and disseminate the Bible in many languages.

To conclude of these observations, it has to be noted that every translation has its advantages as well as shortcomings. In striving to translate the text in a literal sense, the interpretation suffers through the sheer ponderous and difficult understanding of the original text. On the other hand, translations that strive to impart the general meaning of the Bible in the most understandable and acceptable format often suffer inaccuracies. The Russian Synodal translation avoids both these extremes, containing in itself and in simple language, the maximum closeness to the meanings of the original text. Of the currently available English texts, Orthodox priests prefer the “King James” version for similar reasons.

In our missionary leaflets on the Bible, we propose to publish them in the following order:

- 1 — Introduction
- 2 — Five books of Moses
- 3 — Historical books of the Old Testament
- 4 — Books of wisdom of the Old Testament
- 5 — Books of prophets of the Old Testament
- 6 — The 4 Gospels
- 7 — The Acts and the Epistles
- 8 — Epistles of Apostle Paul
- 9 — Revelations of St. John (Apocalypse).

Conclusion

Thus the Bible came to be what it is, came into existence, only in the context of the living, dynamic Church of Christ, which had its origin at Pentecost (although its antetype, of course, was to be found in the Chosen People whose history led to the incarnation of the Son of God). It was the life of the Church throughout the first seventy or so years of her existence which, guided by the Holy Spirit, gave rise to the written texts which in due course were to comprise the New Testament. And it was the continuing life of the Church for more than another three hundred years which was required to refine and define the exact contents of the Scriptures.

Thus, it is pointless and misleading and even dangerous to discuss the Scriptures apart from the life of the Church. If the Scriptures as we know them could only come into existence through the action of the Holy Spirit upon and in the Church over a period hundreds of years, then obviously the rest of the experience of the Church during those same centuries (and subsequent ones as well) is of vital importance to their understanding.

And what is this “Church?” It is the same Church which was founded by Our Lord, governed by the Apostles in the earliest decades, later guided and shepherded by their successors, the bishops. It is the same Church which suffered intermittent persecution for three hundred years, which finally attained freedom under the reign of St. Constantine, which by the guidance of the Holy Spirit defined the meaning of the Scriptures as it confronted the perpetrators of the various heresies. It is the same Church which in the holy Councils wrote the Nicene Creed, summarizing the very essence of the Faith and the Scriptures, which in these same Councils wrote the Canons which are the guidelines even to this day for its life.

This is the same Church which teaches us to venerate the saints and their relics. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Church learned how to celebrate the holy Liturgy, the Lord's Supper, with dignity and splendor, long before the time at which we can identify a final agreement concerning the contents of the Bible.

And so we are forced, if we confront the facts with honesty and integrity, to one inescapable conclusion: it is only through the Church that we have access to the Bible at all. And it is likewise to the Church that we must turn for its understanding.

This classic riddle "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" is very much to the point here. In point of time, it should be apparent that the Church long precedes the Bible as an integral collection of books, and considerably precedes even the individual books of the New Testament. Thus, it is quite certain that the Church founded by Our Lord was not "based on the Bible." The Church created by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost had no Bible as we know it and did not have to have it to be truly the Church.

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How to read the Bible

by Archimandrite Justin Popovich

The Bible is in a sense a biography of God in this world. In it the Indescribable One has in a sense described Himself.

The Holy Scriptures of the New Testament are a biography of the incarnate God in this world. In them it is related how God, in order to reveal Himself to men, sent God the Logos, Who took on flesh and became man, and as man told men everything that God is, everything that God wants from this world and the people in it.

God the Logos revealed God's plan for the world and God's love for the world. God the Word spoke to men about God with the help of words insofar as human words can contain the uncontainable God.

All that is necessary for this world and the people in it — the Lord has stated in the Bible. In it He has given the answers to all questions. There is no question which can torment the human soul, and not find its answer, either directly or indirectly in the Bible.

Men cannot devise more questions than there are answers in the Bible. If you fail to find the answer to any of your questions in the Bible, it means that you have either posed a senseless question or did not know how to read the Bible and did not finish reading the answer in it.

What the Bible contains

In the Bible God has made known:

- 1) what the world is; where it came from; why it exists; what it is heading for; how it will end;
- 2) what man is; where he comes from; where he is going; what he is made of; what his purpose is how he will end;
- 3) what animals and plants are; what their purpose is; what they are used for;
- 4) what good is; where it comes from; what it leads to; what its purpose is; how it is attained;
- 5) what evil is; where it comes from; how it came to exist; why it exists — how it will come to an end;
- 6) what the righteous are and what sinners are; how a sinner becomes righteous and how an arrogant righteous man becomes a sinner; how a man serves God and how he serves satan; the whole path from good to evil, from God to satan;
- 7) everything — from the beginning to the end; man's entire path from the body to God, from his conception in the womb to his resurrection from the dead;
- 8) what the history of the world is, the history of heaven and earth, the history of mankind; what their path, purpose, and end are.

The beauty of the Bible

In the Bible God has said absolutely everything that was necessary to be said to men. The biography of every man — everyone without exception — is found in the Bible.

In it each of us can find himself portrayed and thoroughly described in detail; all those virtues and vices which you have and can have and cannot have.

You will find the paths on which your own soul and everyone else's journey from sin to sinlessness, and the entire path from man to God and from man to satan. You will find the means to free yourself from sin.

In short, you will find the complete history of sin and sinfulness, and the complete history of righteousness and the righteous.

If you are mournful, you will find consolation in the Bible; if you are sad, you will find joy; if you are angry — tranquility; if you are lustful — continence; if you are foolish — wisdom; if you are bad — goodness; if you are a criminal — mercy and righteousness; if you hate your fellow man — love.

In it you will find a remedy for all your vices and weak points, and nourishment for all your virtues and accomplishments.

If you are good, the Bible will teach you how to become better and best; if you are kind, it will teach you angelic tenderness; if you are intelligent, it will teach you wisdom.

If you appreciate the beauty and music of literary style, there is nothing more beautiful or more moving than what is contained in Job, Isaiah, Solomon, David, John the Theologian and the Apostle Paul. Here music — the angelic music of the eternal truth of God — is clothed in human words.

The more one reads and studies the Bible, the more he finds reasons to study it as often and as frequently as he can. According to St. John Chrysostom, it is like an aromatic root, which produces more and more aroma the more it is rubbed.

Prayerful preparation

Just as important as knowing *why* we should read the Bible is knowing *how* we should read the Bible.

The best guides for this are the holy Fathers, headed by St. John Chrysostom who, in a manner of speaking, has written a fifth Gospel.

The holy Fathers recommend serious preparation before reading and studying the Bible; but of what does this preparation consist?

First of all in prayer. Pray to the Lord to illumine your mind — so that you may understand the words of the Bible — and to fill your heart with His grace — so that you may feel the truth and life of those words.

Be aware that these are God's words, which He is speaking and saying to you personally. Prayer, together with the other virtues found in the Gospel, is the best preparation a person can have for understanding the Bible.

How We should read the Bible

Prayerfully and reverently, for in each word there is another drop of eternal truth, and all the words together make up the boundless ocean of the Eternal Truth.

The Bible is not a book, but life; because its words are spiritual life (John 6:63). Therefore its words can be comprehended if we study them with the spirit of its spirit, and with the life of its life.

It is a book that must be read with life — by putting it into practice. One should first live it, and then understand it.

Here the words of the Savior apply: "*Whoever, is willing to do it — will understand that this teaching is from God*" (John 7:17). Do it so that you may understand it. This is the fundamental rule of Orthodox exegesis.

At first one usually reads the Bible quickly, and then more and more slowly, until finally he will begin to read not even word by word, because in each word he is discovering an everlasting truth and an ineffable mystery.

Everyday read at least one chapter from the Old and the New Testament; but side by side with this put a virtue from each into practice. Practice it until it becomes a habit to you.

Let us say, for instance, that the first virtue is forgiveness of insults. Let this be your daily obligation. And along with it pray to the Lord: “O gentle Lord, grant me love towards those who insult me!”

And when you have made this virtue into a habit, each of the other virtues after it will be easier for you, and so on until the final one.

The main thing is to read the Bible as much as possible. What the mind does not understand, the heart will feel; and if neither the mind understands nor the heart feels, read it over again, because by reading it you are sowing God’s words in your soul.

And there they will not perish, but will gradually and imperceptibly pass into the nature of your soul; and there will happen to you what the Savior said about the man who “*Casts seed on the ground, and sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows, while the man does not know it*” (Mark 4:26-27).

The main thing is: sow, and it is God Who causes and allows what is sown to grow (1 Cor. 3:6). But do not rush success, lest you become like a man who sows today, but tomorrow already wants to reap.

Seed in our souls

By reading the Bible you are adding yeast to the dough of your soul and body, which gradually expands and fills the soul until it has thoroughly permeated it and makes it rise with the truth and righteousness of the Gospel.

In every instance, the Savior’s parable about the sower and the seed can be applied to every one of us. The Seed of Divine Truth is given to us in the Bible.

By reading it, we sow that seed in our own soul. It falls on the rocky and thorny ground of our soul, but a little also falls on the good soil of our heart — and bears fruit.

And when you catch sight of the fruit and taste it, the sweetness and joy will spur you to clear and plow the rocky and thorny areas of your soul and sow it with the seed of the word of God.

Do you know when a man is wise in the sight of Christ the Lord? — when he listens to His word and carries it out. The beginning of wisdom is to listen to God’s word (Matt. 7:24-25).

Every word of the Savior has the power and the might to heal both physical and spiritual ailments. *“Say the word and my servant will be healed”* (Matt. 8:8). The Savior said the word — and the centurion’s servant was healed.

Just as He once did, the Lord even now ceaselessly says His words to you, to me, and to all of us. But we must pause, and immerse ourselves in them and receive them with the centurion’s faith.

And a miracle will happen to us, and our souls will be healed just as the centurion’s servant was healed. For it is related in the Gospel that they brought many possessed people to Him, and He drove out the spirits with a word, and healed all the sick (Matt. 8:16).

He still does this today, because the Lord Jesus *“Is the same yesterday and today and forever”* (Heb. 13:8).

Beware. Those who do not listen to God’s words will be judged at the Dreadful Judgment, and it will be worse for them on the Day of Judgment than it was for Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 10:14-15).

Beware — at the Dreadful Judgment you will be asked to give an account for what you have done with the words of God, whether you have listened to them and kept them, whether you have rejoiced in them or been ashamed of them, the Lord will also be ashamed of you when He comes in the glory of His Father together with the holy angels (Mark 8:38).

There are few words of men that are not vain and idle. Thus there are few words for which we do not mind being judged (Matt. 12:36).

In order to avoid this, we must study and learn the words of God from the Bible and make them our own; for God proclaimed them to men so that they might accept them, and by means of them also accept the Truth of God itself.

Words of the Word

Great is the mystery of the word — so great that the second Person of the Holy Trinity, Christ the Lord, is called “the Word” or “the Logos” in the Bible.

God is the Word (John 1:1). All those words which come from the eternal and absolute word are full of God, Divine Truth, Eternity, and Righteousness. If you listen to them, you are listening to God. If you read them, you are reading the direct words of God.

God the Word became flesh, became man (John 1:14), and a mute, stuttering man began to proclaim the words of the eternal truth and righteousness of God.

The Grace-filled Word

In every word of the Savior there is much that is supernatural and full of grace; and this is what sheds grace on the soul of man when the word of Christ visits it.

Therefore the Holy Apostle calls the whole structure of the house of salvation: “*The word of the grace of God*” (Acts 20:32).

Like a living grace-filled power, the word of God has a wonder-working and life-giving effect on a man, so long as he hears it with faith and receives it with faith (I Thess. 2:13).

Everything is defiled by sin, but everything is cleansed by the word of God and prayer — everything — all creation from man on down to a worm (I Tim 4:5).

By the Truth which carries in itself and by the Power which it has in itself, the word of God is sharper than any sword and pierces to the point of dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). Nothing remains secret before it or for it.

The birth-giving word

Because every word of God contains the eternal Word of God — the Logos — it has the power to give birth and regenerate men. And when a man is born of the Word, he is born of the Truth.

For this reason St. James the Apostle writes to the Christians that God the Father has brought them forth “*By the word of truth*” (1:18), and St. Peter tells them that they have been “*Born anew...by the word of the living God, which abides forever*” (1 Peter 1:23).

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