

Searching for the Orthodox Identity of the Biblical Studies

Western theology has developed in the last decades a rich theological literature which sometimes, through direct affirmations, challenges Orthodoxy to an answer or a direct testimony. For example, Orthodox theology is reported to be unclear about both Hermeneutics and Biblical Canon. In their turn, even the Orthodox theologians note that the current trends in Orthodox biblical hermeneutics and exegesis are polarized into two areas, which we might call extremes. On the one hand, there is the mirage of Western methods - especially the historical-critical, new hermeneutics, etc. - and a conformation (true, in a slightly adapted form) to Western biblical science and, on the other hand, the traditional exegesis - this one wishing to be an approach in line with Patristic theology, but largely ignoring the methods and the results of modern biblical science. We have, on the one hand, the biblical science with its set of instruments and a precise historical and philological approach, and, on the other hand, the awareness that the explanation of Scripture cannot be just the result of human effort, but there is much more needed, namely the revelation of the Logos in the mind and heart of the interpreter, the “touch” of the Spirit, so that the exegete can have access to the truths contained in the words of the divine Scriptures. Unfortunately, the first direction, continues or prolongs the so-called “Babylonian captivity” of Orthodox theology¹, while the second one lacks the “deepening” of the Word for our times, the “freshness” of the Patristic interpretation, being rather an exegesis of the Fathers’ exegesis².

¹ This saying goes back to Father George Florovsky. On the Western influence on modern Orthodox theology, see: George A. MALONEY, *A History of Orthodox Theology since 1453*, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont, Massachusetts, 1976, p. 303.

² Cf. Pr. lect. dr. Marian VILD, “Exegeza biblică ortodoxă - între știință și harismă”, in: vol. *Lucrările Simpozionului „Identitatea ortodoxă a studiilor biblice” București, 11-12 nov. 2016*, Editura Universității din București, 2017, pp. 221-222.

From the desire to discover and outline the specificity of Orthodox Bible studies, the Society of Romanian Orthodox Biblical Scholars was founded at the end of 2016, being conceived as a platform for debate and dissemination of what is found to be the scriptural identity of Orthodoxy. In the three conferences of the society (Bucharest - November 2016, Nicula - May 2017, Iași - May 2018), participants expressed their willingness to offer an Eastern testimony about the way we understand and live the truth of Revelation and about the fact that, in our vision, this testimony must always have an ecclesial character and a Christlike epiphanic relevance.

When speaking of the ecclesial character, we do so both in the spirit of Father George Florovsky and in line with the organizational and canonical specificity of the Eastern Church, according to which the documents produced by the theological committees must be assumed by the Holy Synod in order for them to be an expression of the One Tradition of the One Church. In the spirit of this tradition, the documents published at this stage are only theoretical prerequisites for what the Church will assume in its synodality. However, they reflect the current level of the proclamation of the eternal truth as it stands today in Romanian Orthodoxy. They are theological quests intended to break the cliché approach and bring the human mind back to the revealing horizon of the mind of Christ, the worldly mind in the horizon of the scriptural mind, as the Holy Fathers have illustrated.

For this reason, we believe that it is imperative to specify the very purpose of biblical studies. That is to know God and His will for humanity and all creation. This is why a number of issues become automatically secondary, such as the two classic directions of form and language study. We are inclined to exegetical and theological approaches by which we want to understand the word in itself and then to offer it to the world in its pedagogical / catechetical restorative functions that lead to living in Christ and partaking of the divine nature. This does not mean that we are disregarding the introductory questions, that we won't pay attention to language issues, either morphologically or syntactically, or that we will be indifferent to stylistic and literary issues. We will not overlook them as long as they do not distract from Christ. When they impinge on the revealed aspect and move the emphasis from the central object of Scripture, we

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reserve for ourselves the right to leave the consecrated pattern in order to remain into the margins of the One Tradition³.

In addition to this highlighting of the central purpose of theology, and especially of biblical theology, we believe that there is an exegetic continuum understood as a confession of the living faith of the Church that can not be surpassed by individual understandings, no matter how elaborate would these be. In this sense, it is necessary to make it clear that the exegetic act is not only an ecclesial act but also an act of confession and liturgical-mystical experience in the unity of Scripture, this unity being the source of understanding the unity of creation in its living connection with God, a connection accomplished in the word of the proclamation, in fulfilling the commandments, in the Liturgy of the Christian Mysteries, by which we are truly engrafted into Christ, grow and live in Christ, and through Christ in the consubstantial and inseparable Trinity. There is no unity above this unity; therefore, the introduction into the sphere or space of exegesis of the phylocalical experience and the ongoing witness through the centuries is a credible argument of our experience for and in unity, but at the same time it is that which makes us understand that in the communion of truth one can enter only through repentance. Never is my interpretation a border of human understanding, but a continual opening for the revelation of Christ through His incarnation that makes known the Father and the eternal life⁴.

The challenges of the contemporary world are an extraordinary opportunity for proclaiming the eternal truth. This opportunity, however, requires the theologians to assume full missionary responsibility for a theology that produces faith by transposing the scriptural theophany into reality.

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³ Pr. Ioan CHIRILĂ, Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA, "Prolog: Repere hermeneutice ortodoxe în studiile biblice", in: vol. Pr. Prof. Dr. Ioan CHIRILĂ, Asist. Dr. Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA (eds.), *Repere ermeneutice în tradiția biblică ortodoxă. Actele Societății Bibliștilor Ortodocși Români, Sfânta Mănăstire Nicula - 15-16 mai 2017 (vol. I)*, in: *Studii Teologice*, seria a III-a, XIII (2017) 3, p. 6.

⁴ Pr. Ioan Chirilă, Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA, "Prolog...", p. 6.