Before method: On coherence as the limit of Orthodox exegesis

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Abstract: This talk argues that, contrary to common expectations and assumptions, Orthodox exegesis (by which I don't mean exegesis happening in the Church, but happening as Church) frustrates any quest for procedure or method. Furthermore, although examples of this frustration abound, this paper, which proceeds theoretically (in the etymological sense of the word) and syntactically rather than experimentally and analytically, points to the conclusion that this exegesis, in its greatly varying forms— icons, hymnography, commentary, etc.—is closed off to etic approaches. Such approaches will obscure what the language in front of them wishes to do precisely to the extent to which they—by their own standards—will succeed. The only clarity to be gained from without is coherence but not method or system.

I must first admit that my talk proceeds theoretically (in the etymological sense of the word) and syntactically rather than experimentally/empirically and analytically. At a recent European symposium on early Greek hymnography, to which I was invited as a translator of that Greek (including of Byzantine liturgy), I proposed that the Byzantine liturgy—in all its complexity—exhibits a mystagogy for which I launched a term in my recent SVS book: suddeneity. The mystagogy of which I spoke is centered in the presence of Christ as time-transcending and perceives the liturgy—in him—as the *real time* of the Scriptures and of all history. This—it must be emphasized—is not a re-actualization or reenactment of the past, or, reversely, an insertion of the liturgical "I" into the past. To put it bluntly, in this experience there is no past. Just as there is no future. I suggested in that paper that the Byzantines could take such an extraordinary leap beyond quantum mechanics because they inherited it from the Scriptures themselves, from how the Scriptures themselves read (what the scholarship of the last four decades has called "inner-biblical hermeneutics") and from how the Scriptures want to be read (for which I suggest the corresponding phrase "outer-biblical hermeneutics"). I also proposed that—in consequence—what happens liturgically with the Scriptures is at the heart of this mystagogy and that this mystagogy is what allows liturgy itself to exist as the Byzantines celebrated it. I did not suggest that this liturgical embodiment of the Scriptures was accomplished intentionally, through deliberate or learned decisions. Rather, I expressed my suspicion that it was done more instinctively, as part of inherited habits of reading and writing, and that these habits were nothing else but expressions of a certain manner of being, which I deemed ascetical. The Scriptures come out of this manner of being and they elicit it in their ongoing life and the liturgy and our own life are but parts of this.

I mention this soon-to-be-published talk because I wish to argue in front of you that what I have described there to happen liturgically with the Scriptures is the best entry point into what we could possibly mean by "Orthodox exegesis"; arguably, no other aspect of the Church defines its Orthodox quality as much as its worship. *And here is the point of my talk today: this universe of "Orthodox exegesis" which our symposium is attempting to delineate (among other things) is not different from other universes in employing other methods or procedures, in having other principles of interpretation, or in being built on other theological categories and definitions, but in not having methods, procedures, categories, definitions, etc.* In practical words, from an Orthodox perspective the problem is not *what* one may learn from the

scriptures, but *the fact that one desires to learn*, or—in other words—that one, in an initial stage, stands in front of a text and then, in a subsequent stage, subjects the text to one's cognitive needs. In radical discongruity, as far as I can tell, with the Orthodox Tradition and with the overt self-descriptions of the Scriptures themselves and with their more covert outer hermeneutics, the Bible is the material—to borrow a term from quantum mechanics—of a radical "observer effect": observation turns it into something that it is not, namely, it turns it into "the observed." In other words, etic approaches can only miss their target the closer they draw to it. They fail by their very success. (By the way, it seems to me that there is a clear claim in the Orthodox Tradition that all things, including time and space themselves, are created as material of the same radical observer effect, but this is a topic for another discussion. In other words, reality goes beyond and even against empirical evidence.)

Setting up the problem

Now, let me unpack this argument before I support it with some evidence. Critical scholarship is not a neutral and universally-human endeavor. It is not an instrument that, in just the right circumstances, one would pick up naturally. As much as it wishes to pass over its locatedness, its claimed "objectivity" or "universality" is nothing else but dependence on presuppositions which are gained in early modernity and which modernity itself imagines to be universal. Furthermore, as much as critical approaches to the Bible may give a sense that they are a mere instrument or at most an action, and as much as they resonate with our own (post-)modern sensibilities, they in fact amount to a worldview and ultimately to a particular humanity. I would venture to suggest that this particular way of being human is best defined as "psychologism." I take this term from the apostle Paul's ψυχικός (see 1 Cor 2:14) but I use it with the added sense it gained in modern philosophy, namely, that human experiences express the realities of, and are understood through the insights of social sciences—history, anthropology, economics, sociology, sociology, etc.[1] To put it plainly, in biblical criticism—even when the reader does theology (which for him is a human endeavor, only in a slightly different cognitive field than the social sciences and humanities) and as much as he is thus in quest for God—he is inescapably and ominously bound by his humanity, a humanity that sees itself produced and defined by civilisational advancements; as it also sees the authors of the Bible. In my opinion this psychologism is true of both the old criticism and the new, post-modern one. Even though the new criticism has come to discard the archaeological and disengaged methods of its past, it still approaches the scriptural texts with the same human confined to its own skin. The only difference is that, in these newest methods, biblical criticism is no longer concealing but laying bare its struggling soul, sometimes all the way down to its psychoses.

This evaluation of biblical criticism overall is historical before it is cutting/surgical and has been elucidated in abundant studies: biblical criticism comes out of early modernity with positions intersecting in one central tenet—the Bible is fundamentally a book of the past scrutable by the cognitive empiricism of the social sciences toward verifiable propositions (which may be tied to theology or not).[2] Allow me to

[1] See Ethan D. Smith, *The Crucified Lord of Glory: Apophatic Theology as Transformational Mysticism* (Dayton: Cherubim Press, 2021), 40–45.

[2] As much as biblical criticism can work only through methods (which it must constantly adjust in order to bring out the historically clearest presentation of the text as pursued by its human), it is ultimately not interested in the how's but the what's. This seems to be the primary reason for which it doesn't question methodology itself, the very use of method, but only its particular useful form.

emphasize: without reducing biblical criticism to a skeletal caricature of itself, this ontology determines biblical criticism thoroughly and in all its methods or approaches, to this present day, as it has been abundantly shown. (Here it is important to point out that this very core does not align with history as the Bible itself does it.)

From an observational distance one cannot escape a sense that the endeavor can be disappointing if not altogether disengaging to all approaches but mere intellectual curiosity (not to say even counterintuitive): the approach places and keeps at a distance precisely what it pursues. There is also a classical tragedy in its theological endeavors: the inescapably human scours through the heaps of history for pieces of God. I say "heaps of history" because biblical criticism can only find that which it has prepared itself to find; therefore, the more it gives the Scriptures attention and relevance in its searching hands, the more it turns them into the ash and dust of humanity. And this is its fundamental problem: just like the touch of king Midas turned all living things and his own daughter into gold, biblical criticism, even when it searches for God (this, again, being nothing else than an expression of its own self), by its probing nature turns the Scriptures into a corpse.

The three texts

And this leads me to the essential question I think we must ask (of the Bible) in order to pursue my proposal about Orthodox exegesis: how does the Bible itself want to be taken (as Bible)? Or to rephrase this by means of contrast, are the biblical authors and the readers these authors elicit the humanity definable and observable by the tools of social sciences and pursuing theology as a human endeavor? I am of the opinion that the answer is a resounding "NO." Indeed, growing evidence suggests that we would be sorely mistaken if we thought that the Scriptures solicit acceptance of ideas, or adoption of beliefs and practices, rather than embodiment of its life relinquished to their speaker-hearer.

To this point I will give you only three examples: one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, and one from a hymn. I am choosing these texts because I have already explored them at length somewhere else and therefore, should a more in-depth look be desired, it is readily available.

My first text of choice is Deut. 5:3. Yet, the point I wish to make about it comes into the clearest focus in view of another text, 4 Kgs. 23:3 (MT 2 Kgs. 23:3). Here is the latter in my translation attentive to the peculiarities of both the Hebrew and Greek texts. The most relevant of these are in italics:

> The king stood by the pillar and cut *the* covenant before the Lord—to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his laws with all heart and all soul, to carry out the words of *this* covenant that were inscribed upon *this* scroll. And all the people stood in *the* covenant.

The most impressive feature of this early covenant text lies in the equivalent use of the definite article "the" and demonstrative pronoun "this" in the mouth of the narrator, as it were. As Hindy Najman observed,

> Deuteronomic texts do not use such terms ["the" and "this"] from the point of view of a specified speaker—say, of Moses. Rather, they use such terms within anonymous third person descriptions of the speech and actions of Moses. That is to say, they use such terms

> *from the point of the view of the text's reader or listener*. This is of great importance, for it follows that the unity of Torah, in the special sense of the Deuteronomist, is secured through *the presence of tradition to those who read or hear the words of Torah*.[3]

I would take Najman's argument further by suggesting that this language makes the "covenant" a manner of life that, first, the scriptural author claims as his own and that, second, he also expects to be the life of his readers/hearers. Furthermore, such language serves the obvious function of a self-destruct safety feature. It is precisely this manner of writing that makes the whole text collapse, become nonsensical, in the hands of another life, including—to adopt our modern perspective—in the hands of a methodological, intellectual approach. In other words, the text is written in such ways that it can only be approached by sharing in its life, or in such ways that, without sharing its life, one cannot reach its meanings.

In light of this, Moses' emphatic negative in Deut. 5:3—my first focus text—is best understood not as a polemic against earlier covenants (such as the covenant with Abraham), as most current scholarship still sees it, but more precisely as a warning against, and prevention of any lifeless, static understandings of the covenant of the Lord with Israel. In my more literal translation, just before crossing the Jordan Moses shouts to Israel as follows:

> It was not with *our* fathers that the Lord cut *this* covenant, but with *us*, *we these* here today, all of *us* living.

This shout of Moses shocks, first and foremost, because what it says is historically untrue. Deut 1:35-40 has already made it abundantly clear that the people whom Moses is addressing here were not at Sinai, but rather the people at Sinai *were* their fathers, who by now are all dead. The Hebrew text—translated above—is slightly more striking than the Greek because it uses the personal pronoun "we" three times (as opposed to only twice in Greek) and once even accompanied by the demonstrative pronoun "these," which is missing in Greek. Yet, in both versions this text exhibits a self-understanding in which the covenant does not even have a past life. The only "real time" of the covenant, as it were, is in its appropriation in each generation, in the "living" ones, the ones who actually shout these words in their own reading of the text. The shout of Moses, with its striking use of personal and demonstrative pronouns, is supposed to make the hearer of the text realize that the truthfulness of the shout is relinquished by history—by the people who were at Sinai and who are dead by the time of this shout—to the writer and ultimately to the ever-new and "living" hearer of the text, the one who speaks the shout fresh in every generation. In other words, the text always finds its real time anew in the living speaker/hearer.[4]

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[3] Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 31-32 (her emphasis).

[4] The text acts only as an intermediary between, or rather a medium of different appropriations of the same live event, in the circular trajectory event-text-event. The text exists only in order to cease to exist. The Sinai tradition presents itself as always ultimately fulfilled in the present reader. Moreover, in this very act of giving life to the text in himself, the reader surrenders his own life. The one who writes, that which is written, the one who is talked about, and the one who reads, all these collapse into one identity, into one life; the reading is at once both the death of the text and the death of the reader, because it is precisely the end of selves.

As a side note, I would suggest that this is what Peter is appealing to in Acts 3:25-26: "*You* are the sons of the prophets and of the testament (τῆς διαθήκης) that God made with your fathers when he said to Abraham, 'And in your offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed.' God raised up his servant and sent him first to you, blessing you by turning each of you from your evil ways."

My second text of choice is John 10:34–36:

> [34] Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law that I said, you are gods? [35] If those to whom the word (λόγος) of God came to be, he called (εἶπεν) 'gods'—and the Scripture is incapable of being loosened—[36] you tell the word whom (ὅν) the Father sanctified and sent into the world, You blaspheme, because I said I am son of God?

Before making my point, I must decry the fact that scriptural translations are still beholden to modern grammatical conventions that deeply impede an accurate transmission of the texts. In the case of John 10:34–36, the modern convention that damages the text is the quotation marks. In the original text, Jesus can be saying both "Is it not written in your law that, 'I have said, you are gods'?" and "Is it not written in your law that I have said, 'you are gods'?" If the latter, Jesus clearly presents the divine speech in Psalm 81:6 (MT 82:6) as his own voice. One may be tempted to solve this ambiguity, but I argued in a recent publication that this ambiguity is essential to the meaning of this pericope: depending on the readiness of the hearer, at its deeper level the ambiguity reveals the "word" not only as the Scripture, but also as the voice *in* the Scriptures *and* the one whom the Father sent into the world. Furthermore, in both possible readings, Jesus uses the plural personal pronoun "you" in such a way that there is no distinction between the people who hear his voice in the gospel moment ("Is it not written in *your* law") and the people who hear his voice in the psalm ("that I said, *you* are gods?"). This sameness is reinforced in the second and third verse, in the equivalence between "those to whom" the word in the psalm came and "you" who call the word blasphemer. The absoluteness of the present tense in the clause "the Scripture is incapable of being loosened" further strengthens this sameness in complex ways that I can only leave unexplored here.

Therefore, in a deeper sense, Jesus is the one who speaks to the Jews in the pericope, the one who speaks the psalm, and the one who speaks in the psalm. The manner in which Christ references the psalm amounts to a collapse of any difference and distance between the voice *in* the psalm and the voice *to* the Jews, and also any distinction in the ones who hear the voice at either time. The inevitable conclusion is that the psalm is not pre-existing the gospel scene at all. Rather, it will be written in the past as merely the memory, or rather immortalization of the current gospel moment, which, as simultaneous with all time, undergirds eternity.[5]

Furthermore, this particular eternal moment in John 10 extends to the speakers-hearers of the gospel itself, as an unveiling of Christ in all time, including in the time of the hearers of the new Scripture—the gospel text. As John words and frames the text, the existential confrontation with divinity ultimately belongs to humanity overall. The only way in which the words of the gospel-psalm moment will "ring true" and will reveal ever deeper meanings of their complexity, as the gospel itself wishes, is if its own hearers become participants in this moment.

Finally, for this new scriptural text, just as for the aforementioned Old Testament texts, the trip from what is perceived (text and history) to what simply is (which is invariably divinity) is not metaphysical, chronological, or deductive, but physical, internal, and experiential. The gospel-psalm moment and the beyond-the-Jordan moment are tantamount to an existential crisis and their truthfulness can be arrived

[5] The elimination of the ambiguity through quotation marks as in the first possibility presented above—the possibility invariably chosen by modern English translations—"solves" the text by opting for its one superficial meaning.

at only through the surrender of the discrete and differentiating self. To put it differently and in a Christian frame, the entry point into the scriptural words is the Word crucified and resurrected who takes over the human being. The Lord's hearers *within* the gospel and hearers *through* the gospel, just as Moses' hearers within and through Deuteronomy, will arrive at what divinity is saying precisely to the extent to which they are crushed by its winning, or rather by its obliterating presence.

Now, here is my third text, hymnographic: in the Great Canon of Andrew of Crete there is the following stanza, here in my translation:

> Squandering the substance of the soul (τὴν οὐσίαν τῆς ψυχῆς) in sin, I am barren of godly virtues (ἀρετῶν εὐσεβῶν), and being famished (λιμώττων) I cry: O defrayer of mercy (ὁ ἐλέους χορηγός), outrunning to meet me (προφθάσας σύ με), take pity on me.

The connections to the parable of the prodigal son are plain, so obvious that most English translations start the entire stanza with the unfortunate addition of "like the prodigal son." It seems to me that this historiographical reading—already set up by the canon's frequent positions external to scriptural narratives—is precisely what a superficial approach is invited to see, arguably toward the obscuring of things for which one may not be ready. Nevertheless, in this stanza—at closer inspection—the speaker does not compare himself to the prodigal son at all, but offers himself as *the* subject of the parable that ceases to be a (preexisting) text. The lack of any historiographic vocabulary (such as comparisons) is striking and there is no indication whatsoever that the appropriation of the parable is meant nonliterally. Rather, the parable is taken over completely. The speaker-son utters these words just before the conclusion (the meeting with the father) which someone from a position external to the parable and the canon may anticipate based on the parable itself but which—and this is essential—the canon itself actually refuses to anticipate, keeping thus in itself the parable as the present. In other words, the parable has no other life but in the present time of the speaker-hearer of the canon. Nevertheless, the most remarkable aspect of this exegesis of the parable is that it reflects the parable itself. The parable has no fixed frame to confine it (at least superficially) to a particular audience, or to its initial audience. Like many of Christ's parables, it is spoken as ongoing or ever-new, with the capacity of infinite appropriation, as the story of the life of each of its hearers. The one who hears the parable deeply is the one who does not receive in it a lesson or an example of behavior, but encounters in it the story of his own life in its deepest vulnerability: the crushing awareness that ultimately he is not a good person and therefore must return to the home where his goodness is.

It seems clear enough that, from the vantage point of these three texts, the life or transmission of the Scriptures is not *actually* made up of original compositions and subsequent appropriations or interpretations, because such history or sequence (or history itself) exists only to the extent to which such texts place *aesthetically* (I mean this adverb in its etymological sense) what they ultimately intend to do under veils for superficial encounters. This can be presented as a dynamic: a speech that is scriptural pulls constantly toward the collapse of all distinctions between its initial composition and the moments when it is heard and spoken afresh by each living speaker-hearer. (As a side point, there are indications that this quality of the text is what ultimately gives a text away as scripture even in its canonization process.)

And it seems to me that this is the center of what can be called the hermeneutic of the Orthodox Tradition. And the substance of this hermeneutic that goes out of the biblical text itself—participative and appropriative, centered anew in each speaker-hearer—and hermeneutic that stands counter to the psychologistic premises of biblical criticism, the substance of this hermeneutic is death. This hermeneutic is not metaphysical, intellective, formal, and methodological, but rather physical, existential, ascetical, and non-procedural.[6] It is a non-procedure of the discarding of the self, of the abandonment of one's own life in order to take on the life of the King himself. Its very direction is the opposite of the direction of probing approaches: the speaker-hearer does not target the text but is targeted by it. Very much like its visual equivalent—the icon, the *text* takes the speaker-hearer in and not the *reader* the text.

This exegesis amounting to the death of the human ego has the oneness of the life of the King of Whom it is made. Yet, this oneness is not observable, definable, and replicable, neither from without, with methods and tools, nor from within, with human efforts. It is worth remembering that, in the gospel, asceticism does not amount to a quest for and conquest of God, but to the crushing of the human ego, including its logic and desires and needs.

Therefore, only by looking at this Life from without may one even speak of coherence, because one *favors* and *is* on such qualifying quests only by not crossing into the kingdom. From within, exegesis unveils itself as infinite and unmanageable, as experientially overwhelming, as a "remaking of the human heart," to use the words of the psalmist. In other words, coherence is only the limitless taking on definiteness in the eyes of perception, it is the unobservable turned into observed, the bounds perceived in the infinite which is other. Also only from without can one ask whether the within goes outside the text, or against the text (as observation may have it). The question is invalid within, beyond how one may answer it.

The suddeneity within history

I opened this talk with the point of my recent presentation that suddeneity—the presence of the speaker-hearer in all history in Christ—is the very reason for which there can be liturgy as we the Orthodox do it. Now I wish to propose that suddeneity is also the very foundation of the *scriptural* exegesis of the Orthodox Tradition over all, even of its more superficial historiographic interpretations. Rather, in our Orthodox Tradition history and time itself exist only as surfacings of the only reality that is Christ, as the garments of the uncontainable (to echo an image from St. Maximos), as timeless moments of the beyond-timeness. Therefore, when one does history *within* the hermeneutic *of* the Church, one still does it out of this new human self that is Christ and that contains all time and space. When the Apostle Paul says that the human who is ψυχικός cannot receive the things of the Spirit because these are only discernible spiritually (1 Cor 2:14), he makes a point that, among other things, is about how one reads and is about the entirety of the Scriptures, history and all. History is itself πνευματικός and this doesn't

[6] The current interest with "reception history," as much as it useful, may still miss this essential point: the essence of reception history itself, or that which reception history itself is made of, is not an intellectual appropriation of the scriptural text, driven by questions of method and meanings, but it is rather fundamentally ascetical. And this is the very non-historical substance of the so-called field of "reception history," which, although belonging to this ancient hermeneutic, is constantly in danger of being read through the historical premises and methods of modern hermeneutics.

mean non-literal just like the spiritual person is not fleshless. Rather, we are talking of a different sort of flesh, the flesh of Christ himself.

This reveals what is at stake in whether we look at the scriptures analytically, probatively, in whether we reach out for knowledge (even God-seeking knowledge). What is ultimately at stake is whether the reader continues to be a person that avoids psychologically the existential depth in which the very encounter with God happens and in which humanity can only be conquered and crushed. In other words, the ultimate issue is not intellective but existential, it is not even the method itself, but the humanity which procedurality engenders and sustains, a humanity which remains fundamentally outside of God just as it remains fundamentally external to the Scriptures, always on the look-in. The gathering of evidence and knowledge happens only because it is the need and life of a certain self, the self that is permanently on a quest for God in avoidance of its own crushing, a human perfectly observable, definable, and functioning by civilisational developments.

Some final thoughts

Now, at the end of my talk, it must be clear that my claims merge as follows: as much as these days the so-called "objective" approach does happen *in* the Church (because academia, too, is part of the Church), it does not work *as* Church. I am saying this not because biblical criticism is incapable of methodological adaptation or even of deeper readjustments, but precisely because it is capable. It is this very ability to adapt methodologically to both its perceived subject matter and its user, to develop methods corresponding to the tissue under examination, to relate, to splinter, it is this very adaptability that is ontologically incongruous with the exegesis of the Church which is, by contrast, unsplintered and selfless and infinite in its containment of God himself.

Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that "Orthodox scholarship" is possible. I think we can all be in agreement on what would make it "scholarly," that is, riguorosity—being well-informed, accurate, in-depth, and careful. What would make it "Orthodox" is, in my opinion, an unwavering attention to the Scriptures as they want to be paid attention, beyond time and space. This attention would make this scholarship ascetical and existential or death-based, rather than thought- and desire-based.

For reasons that should be clear by now, I am not of the opinion that the Fathers of the Church function as limits of Orthodox exegesis or even as venues, but only as preeminent holy examples and as secure, trodden paths. Orthodox scholarship need not work *through* the Fathers (because this would put the scriptural authors in awkward subservience to the Fathers), but rather *with* the Fathers and with the *Fathers* of the Fathers—that is, the scriptural authors—Orthodox scholarship would embody God.

Yet, if by "Orthodox scholarship" we mean any form of biblical criticism, or any methodological approach or procedure, for all the aforementioned reasons my answer to its possibility is a firm negative. To echo Groucho Marx, that famed paragon of argumentation, "Whatever it is, I'm against it. . . . I am opposed to it, on general principle I am opposed to it."