

CHAPTER SIX

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: A HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVE

6.1 Introduction

It is true that once established, biblical studies in Russian Orthodoxy “formed its personal ways and developed its personal fundamental principles.”¹ Indeed, there are many fundamental and interrelated principles in the Orthodox tradition that can be described only as “personal”. Yet these many principles correlate and correspond so closely with common principles of biblical interpretation, that in their basic nature they form a fundamental part of “Russian Orthodox Hermeneutics.” These principles will be defined in the following sections according to their significance as reflected in the works of Orthodox biblical scholars - to a lesser or greater degree, from the somewhat highly individualistic to the more mainstream. Both the general hermeneutical tendencies of Orthodox biblical interpretation and the more specific principles of interpretation that have been established within the overall historical development of biblical studies within the Orthodox Church will be discussed.

This chapter will summarize and interpret the fundamental principles and main features peculiar to Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation, using as a basis the attestation to these principles in the foregoing study above. The arguments that follow seek to clearly delineate the essential elements of Orthodox hermeneutics as revealed in: (1) the history of biblical interpretation within the Russian Orthodox Church from the Kiev period of its history (X-XIII cc.) to the *Synodal Period* (1721-1917); (2) the hermeneutical implications of Orthodox anthropology; and (3) Bogdashevskii’s model for approaching the understanding of the New Testament. In some cases evidence for important parallels to be found in modern Orthodox scholarship (of the Eastern Orthodox Church) of more key traditional principles will be cited in footnotes.

¹ *Men*, 272-274.

6.2 The Hermeneutical Principles

6.2.1 The Patristic Feature

Without doubt, the nature and character of Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation and exegesis is deeply influenced by patristic exegesis. The patristic concept of interpretation is agreed to be “the first and the most important principle” of Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation.² In the already cited *Hermeneutics* by Pavel Savvaitov, the emphasis on the writings of the Greek Church Fathers indicates that until relatively modern times patristic literature was “almost the single consideration of Orthodox Church teachers in the study of the Bible.”³ This emphasis, of course, says much about Orthodoxy’s understanding of its identity as something very closely tied with the Church’s past.

This orientation of the Church to its patristic exegetical heritage is dictated by the following factors:

(1) The patristic writings and their interpretative methodology indisputably support the authority and significance of the Bible as the communicated Word of God to the Church and society.⁴

(2) The works of the Church Fathers pertaining to biblical exposition and interpretation establish and maintain the most important guidelines for Orthodox tradition, teaching and dogma. The grand theological achievement of the Church Fathers is, of course, one of the main arguments of the Russian Orthodox Church for the validity of the patristic heritage. It is patristic literature, for example, that provides the Orthodox Church with the framework for the theological understanding of the sacraments.⁵

(3) The patristic approaches to Scripture and the practice of “typological”, “allegorical,” and “spiritual” exegesis is highly appealing to Russian Orthodox exegetes.

² *Men’*, 272.

³ See P. I. Savvaitov, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (SPb.: 1859), 119; Mitr. Mikhail also sees the unique distinction of the Russian Orthodox interpreters in their love for the patristic heritage. Cf. *Mikhail (Luzin)*, 125.

⁴ As early as 1866 Sol’skii gives an overview of the role of Patristic exegesis and evaluates it as the exemplary model for biblical interpretation within the Russian Orthodox Church. See S. Sol’skii, “A brief outline of the history of sacred bibliology and exegesis,” *TKDA* (1866) 10: 157-190; 11: 305-320.

⁵ Cf. Antonii, *Dogmatic Theology* (SPb.: 1862), 10-11; Fr. Grigorii, “Svaiashchennoe Predanie ne nizhe Sviashchennogo Pisaniia,” [“The Holy Tradition is not beneath the Holy Scripture,”] *Dushepoleznoe Chtenie* III (1914): 94-97; Illarion (Troitskii), *Sviashchennoe Pisanie i Tserkov’* [The Holy Scripture and the Church] (M.: 1914).

(4) The Church Fathers establish a pattern of Bible interpretation in which a *Christocentric* emphasis and the idea of an unbroken and organic unity between the Old and New Testaments are closely interrelated.⁶

(5) The Patristics historically serves as the basis for the Orthodox identity.

The interpretative legacy of the Church Fathers, which was historically matured and preserved in the dogma of the Orthodox Church and which gave life to the message of the Scripture for the Church and society, established the patterns of Bible interpretation that subsequently directed the biblical scholars of Russian Orthodoxy to a theologising interpretation. Such interpretation goes directly to the theological essence of the biblical texts and allows the Church to establish its theological concepts. The faithfulness to patristic theology, argues the Orthodox theologian and historian Lev Karsavin (1882-1952), does not limit free investigation of the Bible; it is rather a rich source of inspiration for biblical interpretation.⁷

6.2.2 The Relationships Between Scripture, Church and Dogma

If a unique distinction and feature of Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation is its “faithfulness to the spirit of the Church,”⁸ it means that the interpretation of the Bible is fundamentally *ecclesiastical*. All inquiries, either of a scientific or an exegetical kind, then, presuppose that Scripture and Church could not be separated or opposed to each other. Every biblical passage that the interpreter attempts to understand must be placed within the context of the Church. Scripture finds its true understanding in the Church,⁹ for the Church does not speak from out of itself, but from the Holy Spirit. The Church “cannot be wrong, it does not falsify, but is the same as divine Scripture - always sinless and significant.”¹⁰ In this mode of thought, the Church’s reality supersedes that of Scripture (since it is the reason

⁶ Esp., in the above cited work of I. Korsunskii, *A New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament* (M.: 1885).

⁷ This view is seen throughout his monograph L. P. Karsavin, *Sviatye Ottsy i Uchitelia Tserkvi* [Sts. Fathers and Teachers of the Church] (Paris: 1926).

⁸ *Mikhail (Luzin)*, 125.

⁹ Cf. Pavel Evdokimov, “An Eastern Orthodox Bible Study,” *Student World* XLII/12 (1949): 154. In the words of a modern Orthodox biblical scholar “The Church is the proper locus for interpretation....” Cf. John Breck, “Orthodoxy and the Bible Today,” in *The Legacy of St. Vladimir*, ed. John Breck and others, (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1990), 144.

¹⁰ Antonii, *Dogmatic Theology* (SPb.: 1862), 12.

for the Scripture's existence) and must, therefore, be the final authority in Bible interpretation. The main supportive argument here for the Church as *a priori* in the reading of the Bible is the argument that the Church existed before many books of the Bible (the entire New Testament) were authored and that these books were written "for an already existing Church".¹¹ Scripture had its origin in being the book for God's people; and, for the Orthodox, it was meant to be read in the Church among the people of God.

The outstanding Orthodox writer and theologian Fr. John Meyendorff, in emphasizing the connection of the interpreter to the Orthodox Church says, "The Church has received the Scripture and acknowledges in it the Truth, fixed in its limits for all time and interprets this corpus of writings with the help of the Spirit."¹² Hence, the Scripture was given to the Church as to its interpretative community. In this sense, then, the Church preserves the truth that the Apostles received from Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In fact, for Russian Orthodoxy, the Church is "the preserver of God-revealed truth."¹³

The belief that truth is inseparable from the life of the sacramental community also provides the basis for the Orthodox understanding of the apostolic succession of bishops. Consecrated by their peers and occupying the "place of Christ" at the Eucharistic meal around which the church gathers, bishops are the guardians and witnesses of a tradition that goes back, uninterrupted, to the apostles and which now unites local churches within the community of faith. This unity of the Church is not imaginary, but a true and substantial unity, such as is the unity inherent within the many members of a living body. Since the Church, then, is the organism and the place where God's words are heard, it must be the arbiter of how those words are to be understood. "In order to understand the Bible it is necessary to go to the Church, because the Bible came to the Church and always remained there; the Church, therefore, is the best interpreter of the spirit and meaning of the Bible."¹⁴ It is important here, of course, to remember that in the mind of the Russian Orthodox Church the Church is not limited to the formal body of believers (the congregation) or to a corpus of priests. It is the corporate body of all believers, and as such, is not some firmly definable entity.

Throughout the history of biblical interpretation within the Russian Orthodox Church, the majority of exegetes have been led by the conviction that the Church is not

¹¹ Cf. Illarion (Troitskii), *The Holy Scripture and the Church* (M.: 1914), 16-18.

¹² John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*, Trans. from French by John Chaplin (USA: Pantheon Books, 1962), 7.

¹³ Fr. Grigorii, "The Holy Tradition is not beneath the Holy Scripture," *Dushepoleznoe Chtenie* III (1914): 94.

¹⁴ V. Rybinskii, "O Biblii," ["About the Bible,"] *TKDA* 3 (1902): 382.

only an external authority set up to preside over the Scripture, but also the appointed keeper and guardian of that divine truth which has been deposited and stored in the Bible. In interpreting the Bible, these exegetes have rigidly adhered to the Church Fathers' argument of *refula fidei* (rule of faith). The assumptions that the authority of the Scripture rests upon the judgment of the Church and that the Church, for its part, is accountable to the Scriptures' inspired testimony have always been common among Orthodox interpreters. For them, Scripture has always belonged to the Church. It is only within the Orthodox Church, within the community of a rightly held faith, that Scripture can be adequately understood and correctly interpreted, and whatever is opposed to dogmatic truth and the *phronema ecclesias* (the mind of the Church) must be set aside.¹⁵ The books and studies of Russian Orthodox interpretators reveal the principle of the *ecclesiasticae intelligentiae auctoritas* (the authority of ecclesiastical understanding), that in the Orthodox determination is an important key to unlocking the meaning of the biblical texts. Nikol'skii speaks for them all: "(I)n the first place there is no need for us to search for scientific methods ..., for in our Church we have, as in a treasury, all the authentic foundations for interpreting the Word of God."¹⁶

6.2.3 Church Tradition

If the above tenet, i.e., "the authority of ecclesiastical understanding", is taken to be interpretive custom, then the next principle of Orthodox biblical interpretation is closely connected to it. This principle deals with the role of Church Tradition.¹⁷

In the Orthodox tradition the authority of Scripture is thought to be mediated through the lives of the saints. Thus Orthodox exegetes must look to those who have most nearly learned the Word of God by exemplifying its teachings through their lives. Church tradition, then, does not derive from what has been officially canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church, but rather from: (1) a consciousness of all departed fathers and mothers

¹⁵ This is obvious, for example, in Evdokimov's judgment when he says, "any idea of the brothers of the Lord as the children of Joseph and Mary contradicts the dogma of the virginity of Mary and must be considered as false." See in "An Eastern Orthodox Bible Study," *Student World* XLII/12 (1949): 154.

¹⁶ M. N. Nikol'skii, "Our Biblical Science," *PO* 1 (1875): 188.

¹⁷ In the words of American Orthodox theologian Fr. Thomas Hopko, "the understanding of Holy Scripture must be based on tradition. ... when one undertakes to understand the Word of God from the point of view of faith and dogma, one must necessarily be in accord with the interpretation of the Church as handed down by the divinely-inspired Fathers and teachers of the Church from apostolic times." Thomas Hopko, "Bible and Church History" *The Orthodox Faith*, Vol. 3., p. 23.

in the Orthodox faith who have not only preserved the truth, but also have contributed to the stream of Orthodox tradition in which the Church stands; (2) a consciousness of all living Orthodox people who continue to carry the story and teaching of God in the world. Thus, for Orthodox exegetes, an attention to the individual church member is not only the way of preserving the truth, but also a method of theological investigation and knowledge. Here, the understanding of Scripture is possible to the extent that one holds fast to the tradition of the Church. The understanding is not given individually to the exegete, but is granted to the Church at large in the full unfolding of truth, without error. Therefore, the exegete must welcome the wisdom that lives within the tradition of the Church and is not to consider the exegetical investigation of the Bible as being a private affair that occurs outside the context of the Church as a community whose members develop and hold to shared understandings. In this respect, exegesis may be defined as a living communion with the mind and spirit of the Church, both historical and present.

The concern for continuity and tradition so very much characteristic of Russian Orthodoxy does not imply worship of the past as such, but rather a sense of identity and consistency with the original apostolic witness, as realized through the sacramental community of each local church. The Holy Spirit, bestowed upon the church at Pentecost, is seen as guiding the whole church “in all truth” (John 16:13). It is not the person or a group of individuals, but the Spirit of God dwelling in the Church, who continually preserves and ‘writes’ tradition in the Church. The power of teaching and guiding the community, of course, is bestowed on certain ministries (particularly that of the bishop of each diocese) or is manifested through certain institutions (such as councils). Nevertheless, because the Church is composed not only of bishops, or of clergy generally, but also of the entire laity as well, Russian Orthodoxy strongly affirms that the guardianship of truth is the work of the Holy Spirit among the entire “people of God”. It is this inclusive element that helps stamp Tradition with its unique features as an important interpretive principle.

Russian Orthodox hermeneutics and exegesis is grounded on the proposition that “the Apostolic and Church Tradition of the Orthodox faith is the indispensable guide in the understanding of Scripture and the ultimate warrant of right interpretation.”¹⁸ Tradition is not an independent or complementary source of faith, but the living experience of the Church in an indivisible communion with Scripture. Both scripture and tradition give rise to and express concisely and accurately theology of Orthodoxy.¹⁹

¹⁸ Florovsky, *BCT*, 77.

¹⁹Cf. Antonii, *Dogmatic Theology* (SPb.: 1862), 10-11.

For Russian Orthodoxy, true Christian teaching and faith is evident in tradition, and in this source is to be found a true interpretation of the Scripture. Since the Bible contains many ambiguous texts, it is “the tradition (that) helps discover a correct understanding of the Scripture,”²⁰ and brings clarity to what otherwise would be confusing. Tradition is important to the Orthodox because it frames and clarifies understanding of the Bible²¹, while setting the parameters within which to conduct any spiritual or scientific investigation of it..²²

6.2.4 The Nature of Revelation, Inspiration and Authority of the Bible

The Orthodox Church defines every doctrine as truth revealed by God. The Lord revealed his Truth to the apostles, prophets, bishops, and fathers of the Church, who then lived it and, as the Holy Spirit moved them and as the needs of the Church dictated, wrote it down. The all-important written sources that contain the revelation of God, and from which Orthodox Christian doctrines are constructed are: (1) the Holy Scriptures (Old and New Testaments), (2) the Church Fathers and (3) the Church Councils.

In Orthodox terminology, the formulas "The Holy Scripture" and the "The Word of God" are synonymous terms for the Bible. God is the author of Scripture, the inspired writer is the organ of the Holy Spirit, and Scripture is the Word of God. God's inspiration is one of those actions common to all three persons of the Trinity. However, within the context of the Church, inspiration is directly linked to the work of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit is involved in the formation of Scripture, the latter is of “a religious-symbolical nature, *i.e.* it has a religious reality.”²³ Moreover, the Bible is “*a religious myth in written word,*

²⁰ Fr. Grigorii, “The Holy Tradition is not beneath the Holy Scripture,” *Dushepoleznoe Chtenie* III (1914): 94.

²¹ Florovsky stresses tradition as a living operative, a hermeneutic principle for Scripture; without tradition scripture loses what otherwise would be its correct interpretation. See Florovsky's articles on the subject of scriptural interpretation in Florovsky, *BCT*. The contemporary Orthodox scholar Fr. Thomas Hopko, however, recognizes the interdependence of scripture and tradition. For Fr. Hopko, tradition can be used as the framework for Bible interpretation, but scripture also supports the merit of tradition. He says, “Tradition is recognized when founded on Scripture.... Tradition always supports itself by Scripture: it is an interpretation of Scripture.” Thomas Hopko, “Bible and Church History” *The Orthodox Faith*, Vol 3., p.18.

²² Cf. Pavel Evdokimov, “An Eastern Orthodox Bible Study,” *Student World* XLII/12 (1949): 152-154.

²³ S. Bulgakov, *The Unfading Light* (M.: Put', 1917; repr. M.: Respublica, 1994), 85.

continually shedding its divine light.”²⁴ Consequently, this light can not be seen by those who approach the Bible solely on a scientific basis, but is revealed only to those who come to the Scripture from a religious perspective.

For the Orthodox, then, the Bible is the collection of books found in the Old and New Testaments, “originally written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and therefore described as God-breathed.”²⁵ The word ‘God-breathed’ (Ru.: - *Bogovdukhnovennos’ t*) is a major metaphor, used in Orthodox writings to describe the divine status of the Bible and its foremost significance. It means that the Bible has its origin in God himself and that the Bible is God’s word, communicated to the Church by his Spirit. It therefore may be said that the Bible possesses an inherent authority - “it is the main source of the Church’s teaching; and, a living, fundamental understanding of the dogmas is impossible without a complete knowledge”²⁶ of its content. For Orthodox exegetes and theologians, the concept of ‘God-breathed’ is also important in approaching the Bible for interpretative purposes. Bulgakov argues in this regard, that

There is a substantial difference in respect to the Word of God as far as science and faith are concerned, even when both are established methodologically. The fact is that if *the method of unbelief* is equated with science [i.e. scientific-critical investigation applied to the Bible] ... *the method of reverence* is characteristic to religion... science cannot see what exists for the religious... [The] depth of the meaning of the Word of God is endless and absolutely immeasurable in comparison with the depth of (mere) human books... Many times this thought is expressed in differentiation of a twofold or even threefold meaning of a Sacred Scripture: *literal* (which corresponds to the scientific investigation of the text); *allegorical* (the meaning of which is hidden, but which still can be seen by the human eye); and *hidden* or *mystical*, which is uncovered only because of a divine enlightenment. The Bible is at the same time a ordinary book, accessible to a scientific study, a monument of Jewish literature, and the Book of books, the eternal Symbol, coming to light only to faith, prayer and (holy) reverence. Individuals experienced in the spiritual life testify that the Word of God has infinite and (thus) a continually deepening meaning (to them).²⁷

The inspiration of the Holy Scripture means that “everything that the biblical writers recorded they recorded as a result of a direct quickening of the Holy Spirit; hence, being guarded from misconception, the writers received thoughts and words without violation of

²⁴ S. Bulgakov, *The Unfading Light* (M.: Put’, 1917; repr. M.: Respublica, 1994), 85.

²⁵ Antonii, *Dogmatic Theology* (SPb.: 1862), 6.

²⁶ M. N. Nikol’skii, “Our Biblical Science,” *PO* 1(1875): 186.

²⁷ S. Bulgakov, *The Unfading Light* (M.: Put’, 1917; repr. M.: Respublica, 1994), 84-85.

their natural abilities”²⁸ to arrange and express biblical material. Both the divine and human dimensions of the Bible are recognized in the Orthodox Church, but the inspiration of the Bible is not rooted in the letter; that is, inspiration is not based on, or fixed by, any given text or book (or even the entire Bible), but resides in the revelation that belongs to the Church, the revelation of the Holy Spirit who dwells in the Church.

For the Orthodox Church the Bible is not a single book, but a compilation of a number of books, written at different times, by different writers working under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God inspired the writers of the biblical books to convey His divine and saving message to man. Though revealed under conditioned historical events and within different literary forms, these books communicate God’s absolute and universal values.²⁹ These, the canonical books of the Bible, are, according to the Orthodox Church, the only books anywhere that can lay true claim to divine inspiration. They are truly the ‘Word of God’.

The revelation of God is not limited to one source - the Bible. The Orthodox Church also venerates its early leaders and relies heavily on their teachings because the Church Fathers (or Apostolic Fathers) are not just historical figures to Orthodox Christians - they are saints to whom God unveiled the Truth. This is why one of the first principles of Orthodox hermeneutics is to ascertain how the Fathers interpreted canonized Scripture, for in their understanding of Scripture is to be found divine revelation of the truth.

Beyond the writings of the Church Fathers, the Russian Orthodox Church, in its doctrinal statements and liturgical texts, strongly affirms that it holds to the original Christian faith that was common to both the East and West during the first millennium of Christian history. More particularly, the Church recognizes the authority of the ecumenical councils at which East and West were both represented. These were the councils of Nicaea I (325), Constantinople I (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (680), and Nicaea II (787). Later doctrinal affirmations by the Orthodox church—for instance, the important 14th-century definitions concerning communion with God—are seen as developments of the same original revelatory faith given to the early Church. In this way the councils held by the early Church to resolve issues when less formal dialogue failed to produce a consensus, permitted the decrees of later years to gain

²⁸ Antonii, *Dogmatic Theology* (SPb.: 1862), 6; cf. Ioann Domaskin, *Tochnoe Izlozhenie Pravoslavnoi Very [A Genuine Report of the Orthodox Faith]* (M.: 1998), 310.

²⁹ As the Word of God, the Bible “is read in all services of public worship and its passages form the basis for preaching and instruction in public worship and in private devotion and study (cf. Antonii, *Dogmatic Theology* (SPb.: 1862), 7). Therefore, throughout the history of the Church, the language of the Bible has influenced and shaped the preaching, prayers and liturgy of Orthodox Christianity.

widespread acceptance on the basis of the belief that “God’s revelatory work (continued) through the councils of the Church.”³⁰ The judgements of these councils have over the centuries exercised a powerful influence on the life and direction of the Orthodox Church.

As noted above, for Russian Orthodoxy, God’s revelation of truth is not limited to the Bible. The revelation is disclosed to the whole Church of all ages; it is the Church that holds the revelation of God, and faithfully preserves and transmits it from one generation to the next. The Bible is still of *prima* status within the Church, but its divine or inspired character requires directions of both (1) a negative character, preventing (a) all irreverence and (b) the admission of any error and heresy; and (2) a positive nature, which invites the interpreter to respect (a) the definitions of the Church, (b) the patristic interpretation, and (c) the principle of faith.

6.2.5 The Christological Basis of Biblical Interpretation

The interpretation of the Bible is interrelated with the understanding of Christ, for, as Orthodox scholars point out, if credence is not given to the divinity of Christ and his supernatural deeds, the study of the Bible is violated by a massive interpretive flaw, not only in all the texts directly concerned with Jesus Christ himself, but also through the entire range of the Bible – for the fullness of the revelation of Christ is the chief and most important theme of the Bible. A brief look, then, into the Orthodox understanding of the person of Christ is helpful.

Because Orthodox Christology seeks to explain the saving work of Christ in terms of Jesus’ unique identity as both God and man, in the traditional Orthodox view it logically precedes not only soteriology (the doctrine of Christ’s saving work), but also the emphasis upon Ecclesiology. Throughout the history of the Russian Church, Ecclesiology has always been interconnected with Christology, because the belief, not only in Jesus’ incarnation and saving role, but also in his dwelling among Christians establishes the claims about who he was. Orthodox Christology, then, is the formulation of revealed propositions from both the Bible and within the Church – and adds up to the experience of the phenomenon of Jesus. He becomes the very life of the Church, and so close is his identity with the Church that it becomes his ‘body’.³¹

³⁰ Antonii, *Dogmatic Theology* (SPb.: 1862), 12.

³¹ Cf. Bishop Ioann, “Mysli ob Iisuse Khriste: Kristologicheskie razmyshleniia ob Iisuse Khriste,” [“Reflections about Jesus Christ: Christological Contemplation,”] *KhCh* 3 (1874): 517 ff.; 2 (1875): 103 ff.; 149 ff.; 2 (1876): 69 ff.

Orthodox scholars maintain that the earliest Christians gained their understanding of Christ by looking back to his earthly life as that of an eschatological prophet and servant of God and by looking forward to his coming again as the Messiah, the Son of Man (see Acts 3:13, 20-21) who had become Lord, Christ, and Son of God at his resurrection and exaltation (see Acts 2:22-24, 36).³² In the Orthodox Church, this Christ is especially expressed in the Christological liturgical hymns, which identify Him with the Divine Wisdom, or Logos. The earthly Jesus is seen as the incarnation of this Logos (see Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-3, John 1:1-18) - not an unknown God, but the same God previously encountered in creation, in human religious experience, and in Israel's salvation history.³³ In regards to his earthly incarnation the Orthodox Church follows the Council of Chalcedon, which in 451 affirmed for Mary the title of Theotokos (God-bearer),³⁴ and which defined the incarnation as an event which changed Jesus' identity into the one person of the Trinity now uniquely imbued with two natures and two wills, but who remained truly as only one in personhood.

The Orthodox view of the Christ of the New Testament is contrary to the opinion that Jesus did not explicitly teach that he was the Christ (the 'Anointed One', or Messiah); rather, the Church teaches that he gave rise to its Christological views of him through his words and works. After his death on the cross, the hopes of the disciples were vindicated by their experience of Jesus' resurrection, and they responded to what they believed God had accomplished through Jesus by formulating an understanding of who he was from the eschatological consciousness that governed the times.³⁵ More generally, according to Orthodox teaching, the New Testament is a testimony to the incarnation predicted in the Old Testament. Thus the mystery of Scripture and the mystery of Christ in his inseparable human and divine aspects must be approached both historically and spiritually, and in a balanced, integrated way.

³² See esp. M. Muretov, "Christ as the bearer of our weaknesses...", *BV* I (1900) 3: 403-450.

³³ Cf. M. Skriabin, "God is the Word... The view of John 1:1-19," *TKDA* 1874 '5, 162-188; Filaret (Gumilevskii), *John's Teaching about the Word* (Chernigov, 1869).

³⁴ In Orthodox theology, the Virgin Mary is venerated as the Mother of God. Mary's intercession is invoked because she was closer to the Saviour than anyone else and is, therefore, the representative of fallen humanity and the most prominent and holiest member of the Church. Certain Mariological developments, however, such as the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, are foreign to Russian Orthodoxy.

³⁵ Cf. Archimandrit Sergii, "Otnoshenie otechestvennoi nauki k inoslavnomu bogosloviu," ["The Position of our Theology to non-Orthodox Theology,"] *BV* III (1895), 8: 141-156; T. Butkevich, *Zhizn' Gospoda nashego Iisusa Khrista [The Life of the Lord...: Response to Negative Criticism]* (M.: 1883, 2 ed.- SPb.: 1887).

Based on these presuppositions, then, the Church assumes that the fulfillment of the Old Testament is found in the fullness of the historical revelation of Christ - the chief and main subject of Scripture and, therefore, the *beginning* - *centre* - and *end* of biblical interpretation. In both biblical revelation and biblical interpretation the living Christ personally reveals himself as the ultimate interpreter in the person of the Holy Spirit. In an important way, interpretation is not only about Christ, but it is also the fruit of the personal revelation of Christ (*i.e.* the Word) to the interpreter.

6.2.6 The Role of the Holy Spirit in Understanding the Scripture

In Orthodox theology, the *christological* aspect of the Church (the Body of Christ) cannot be separated from the *pneumatological* aspect – the guidance of the Church by the Holy Spirit.³⁶ The ecclesiastical principle behind the understanding of the Bible embraces the idea that the Holy Spirit is *the illuminating agent* that dwells in the Church. The prominent Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) argues that the illumination of the Holy Spirit is a general principle for our understanding of God and of everything that bears the mark of God's nature.³⁷

If tradition is important for Orthodoxy as the proper framework within which to understand the Bible, no less is the Holy Spirit the perfecter of the interpreter's faculties for perceiving and receiving the true meaning of Scripture. The Holy Spirit allows the reader to understand the divine truth through the imparting of a distinct kind of religious illumination. Again, however, the exegete must satisfy himself that he has not been guided in his interpretation by 'false spirits' by subjecting the outcome of his exegesis to the time-honoured criteria set by Church teaching and tradition. If the Bible becomes transparent only under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then the successful exegete may be said to be participating in the process of divine revelation within the Church. But he must ever submit himself and his skills to the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit. In Orthodox thinking, as Fr. Troitskii says,

It is prohibited to acknowledge Scripture as the one and only master for its own interpretation.... Obviously, if this were to be the case, a human mind would once again become the starting point for interpretation the Holy Scriptures; one should not rely on the human mind... Is there any other option but to rely on an inner

³⁶ Cf. V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1976), 145-149.

³⁷ See *Ibid.*, 217-235.

illumination of the Holy Spirit in reading the Holy Scriptures. *Yes, the illumination of the Holy Spirit is the best rule for interpreting the Holy Scriptures.*³⁸

Exegesis, then, is a divine-human endeavour based upon *synergy*, or cooperation between the divine Spirit and the human interpreter. Therefore, any scholar who sticks exclusively to scientific methodology, and conducts his work without reliance upon the Holy Spirit is restricted to uncovering only that meaning which lies upon the surface level of Scripture.³⁹ This reliance upon the Holy Spirit serves to underscore the complexity of biblical interpretation, combining, as it does, both natural and supernatural processes. Orthodox hermeneutics maintains that there is an understanding of the text that can be obtained through hard exegetical work that applies sound hermeneutical and exegetical principles; but it also teaches that there is a spiritual understanding that cannot be obtained through intellectual study alone. The Holy Spirit here does not necessarily discard exegetical methodology as he guides the interpreter, but true spiritual discernment into the meaning of a text is still impossible without his illumination.

6.2.7 The Actualisation of the Value of Scripture in Personal and Corporate Life

Directly and indirectly, Russian Orthodox hermeneutics affirms that when reading and interpreting biblical texts, it is never possible for the interpreter to be entirely free from preconceptions or presuppositions. The objectivity that all scholars seek is largely unreal, and in fact does not at all exist in the area of pure biblical science. Every biblical scholar is a human being who carries with him all his personal beliefs, prejudices, and experience that play an essential, even if only subtle, part in his scientific commitment to objectivity. Even if he is not conscious of his inner biases they still remain as an important factor in his choice of hypotheses. This is why, from the time of Mitr. Platon (Levshin) on, that Bible interpreters in the Orthodox tradition have always been reminded to be cautious in

³⁸“Нельзя признать единственным руководителем изъяснения Св. Писания самого Писания... Тут очевидно началом изъяснения Св. Писания опять будет ум человеческий, на который полагаться нельзя.... Остается надеяться на внутреннее озарение Свят. Духа при чтении Св. Писания? Да, *озарение от Св. Духа самое лучшее правило при изъяснении Св. Писания.*” I. Troitskii, “*Osnovaniia ucheniia pravoslavnoi Tserkvi ob istochnikakh veroucheniia,*” [“The ground rules for the teaching of the Orthodox Church on the sources of dogma,”] *The Missionary Review/Missionerskoe Obozrenie* October (1897): 645 [my italics].

³⁹ Cf. M. N. Nikol'skii, “Our Biblical Science,” *PO* 1(1875): 190.

discerning the meaning of text and not to read into it meanings which the biblical authors never intended.

Russian Orthodox scholars have always stressed that between the text and the interpreter there is a distance that not only encompasses the historical, socio-cultural and linguistic factors, but also includes an existential separation between the divine nature of the sacred texts and the human nature of the interpreter. There is the distinct need, then, to uncover the spiritual or doctrinal (theological) dimension of the text. To achieve this goal, i.e. to distinguish between the “letter” and “spirit” of the text and to formulate its correct meaning, the exegete himself must participate in the process of divine revelation by which the Holy Spirit works through the Body of Christ, the Church. In this sense the exegete must belong to the Orthodox Church for, as Archbishop Illarion (Troitskii, d. 1929) emphasizes, only “if a man believes in the Church (will) he conceivably... receive an accurate message of the Holy Scripture.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, in the tradition of Orthodox biblical interpretation, there is little room for the individuality, or self-sufficiency of the exegete. Scholars and theologians acknowledge that guidance in theology cannot be derived from the authority of any one particular expert, or from a selected group of exegetes, by reason of their liability to error. Such guidance is possible only if “it is accomplished in the harmony and agreement of all Christian pastors and teachers.”⁴¹ Therefore, the Orthodox scholar, knowing that ‘spiritual’ truth is above and beyond him, cannot begin his work by taking himself as the sole point of departure, but must work within the Orthodox community, the unity of the Orthodox worship, liturgy, scholarship, preaching, sacraments and prayer. Because “the universal spirit of the Orthodox Church preserves the interpreter of the Bible from needless individualistic mysticism and heretical misunderstanding,”⁴² the corporate element has a highly critical role to play in the interpretative context.

In concluding this section it should be noted that in the course of the history of biblical interpretation within the Russian Orthodox Church, the studies of biblical scholars have little emphasized or developed the concept of biblical interpretation as primarily a liturgical experience.⁴³ It is true that in specialized studies on liturgy the Bible has been

⁴⁰ Illarion, *Sacred Scripture and the Church* (M.: 1914), 17.

⁴¹ Antonii, *Dogmatic Theology* (SPb.: 1862), 11.

⁴² Cf. Pavel Evdokimov, “An Eastern Orthodox Bible Study,” *Student World* XLII/12 (1949): 152.

⁴³ Such emphasis, however, is reflected in modern Orthodox biblical scholarship. See John Breck, *The Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1986); Michael Prokurat, “Orthodox Interpretation of Scripture,” in *The Bible in the Churches: How*

recognized as not so much history or theology as it is ultimately a liturgical book for the Church; but it is also true, however, that given the centrality of both the Bible and worship to the Orthodox creed, that it is somewhat surprising to find, historically, a lacking in emphasis among biblical scholars and theologians upon the liturgy itself as a real worship experience of the Bible's timeless truths.⁴⁴

6.2.8 The Scope of the Historical-Grammatical Interpretation

It has been noted above that both the divine and human elements of the Bible are recognized in the Orthodox Church. Although the Holy Spirit had directly inspired the biblical authors, they nonetheless arranged and expressed biblical material in keeping with their *language-individuality-and context* situation.⁴⁵ This last notion presupposes that the study of the Bible, in part, consists of acquainting oneself with the extent to which the 'human' element of Scripture can be explained. Because Orthodox biblical interpretation spells out a method for determining the meaning of literary texts in general, it therefore acknowledges scientific interpretation as far as its value derives from the learning of the commentator, from the weight of his arguments, and from his faithful adherence to the rules of historical-grammatical exegesis. Orthodox biblical interpretation welcomes the universal rules of literary exegesis as applicable to the biblical books; yet, as noted above, the sacred character of the Bible demands the additional consideration of *ecclesiasticae intelligentiae auctoritas* (the authority of ecclesiastical understanding).

Orthodox biblical scholars have always been aware that the meaning of a text must be derived from language according to the same law which regulates the expression of thought in language. Since it has been recognized that the biblical writers: (1) used the code of their day and of their own peculiar circumstances; (2) employed language in accordance with its peculiar usages and its rules of grammar; and (3) followed in the expression of their thoughts the sequence of their logic, and in their words reflected their mental as well as physical and social conditions, the Russian Orthodox hermeneutic stresses that if the interpreter wishes to fully understand the writer, he must be guided by the following quasi-

Various Christians Interpret the Scriptures. Ed. by Kenneth Hagen. 2nd ed. (Milwaukee Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1994), 59-99.

⁴⁴ See esp., Konstantin Nikol'skii, *Rukovodstvo k Izucheniiu Bogoslužhenia v Pravoslavnoi Tzerkvi* [*Guide for study the Orthodox Liturgy*] (SPb.: 1901).

⁴⁵ Cf. Antonii, *Dogmatic Theology* (SPb.: 1862), 6; S. Bulgakov, *Pravoslavie* [*The Orthodoxy*] (Paris, 1947), 63.

criteria for determining the author's meaning: his language, his train of thought or context, and his psychological and historical condition at the time of writing.⁴⁶ Hence, one of the more important principles of Orthodox hermeneutics can be formulated as follows: find the sense of a book by way of its language (grammatically - philologically), and by way of the writer's mental and external condition (psychologically and historically). Expressing the same truth negatively, it could be said that any meaning of a passage which does not agree with its grammar, its context, and the internal and external conditions of its author, cannot be accepted as the true sense. Of course, in the case of Scripture, the fact of its divine character and of its authentic interpretation by the Church must be added to the designated criteria of interpretation as of no lesser significance; hence, any meaning not in keeping with the spirit of the Church's interpretation and tradition cannot be the true sense of Scripture. It is only the joining of the later with the previous which gives birth to true Orthodox Bible interpretation without destroying both the rational and doctrinal character of the interpretation.

In literary interpretation in general, a grammatical and philological knowledge of the language in which the work is written, an acquaintance with the laws of logic and rhetoric, and a familiarity with the data of psychology and the facts of history are all presupposed. In the case of the Scriptures, the scientific interpreter must be well-grounded in the so-called Biblical language; he must be well-versed in Biblical history, archaeology, and geography; he should know the various Orthodox dogmas bearing on the Bible; and finally he must be instructed in Patrology, ecclesiastical history, and Biblical literature. Before entering on the explanation of any particular book of Scripture, the commentator must also be versed in the dogmatic, moral, philosophical, and scientific questions connected with his particular area of study.

Orthodox Bible interpretation, by reason of the very human character of the Bible, demands a historical-grammatical interpretation. So the commentator must ever keep in mind the significance of the literary dimension of its sacred and Scriptural language, and strive for the sense of its literary element, which is determined by the subject matter of the writing, by its occasion and purpose, by the grammatical and logical context, and by parallel passages. The historical setting of the book and its author too have to be given due attention.

⁴⁶Perhaps it was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who first stressed a concern for the *language* circumstances in which the text was written (*grammatical interpretation*) and called for a consideration of the *character-mood-context* situation of the author as the vehicle of understanding (*psychological interpretation*). He said, "Understanding always involves two moments: to understand what is said in the context of the language with its possibilities and to understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker." Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*. Ed by H. Kimmmerle (Missuola: Scholars Press, 1977), 98.

6.2.9 The Ethical Feature

Although the exegetical heritage of the Church fathers did not offer methodologies or hermeneutical principles to advance and lead Russian Orthodox scholars to critical discussion of the problems arising from critical and historical approaches to the Bible, yet the Scriptures were embraced with a greater appreciation because the Fathers were more concerned with the theological consciousness of the Church than with the linguistic or critical-historical analysis of the Bible. For this very reason, Mitr. Platon urged interpreters “to consult and scrupulously read the best Church teachers and their interpretations.”⁴⁷ Consequently, there is now a large number of exegetical works in the Orthodox Church that are furnished with good theological arguments, but which at the same time frequently show a deficiency on the part of their authors in providing adequate support for these arguments by giving due attention to the grammatical- historical elements of the text.

The patristic exegetes modelled for the Russian Orthodox interpreters who later followed them the concern with deriving ethical ideals from the biblical texts. The Church Fathers’ task of delineating the practical and moral elements of the Bible for the Church has always been significant for Orthodox exegetes.⁴⁸ Fr. Mikhail (Luzin) aptly concludes that the emphasis on a strong ethical element of the Bible is “an achievement of Russian Orthodox exegesis.”⁴⁹

This ethical and moral orientation is perhaps also the most obvious influence of Orthodox biblical interpretation on the philosophical and theoretical constructs in Russian thought generally. The possibility of a reciprocal influence here is also conceivable, because both biblical scholars and religious philosophers in the 19th and early 20th century Russia showed a predominant interest in moral problems and considered a full discussion of them as essential to the well-being of Russian society. Zen’kovskii, who argues that anthropocentrism is an important characteristic of Russian religious philosophy, also rightly notes that this strong moral orientation, along with an intensive interest in social problems, is the most creative source for almost all Russian thinkers.⁵⁰ The ethical bias, of course,

⁴⁷ Platon (Levshin), *Collected Works* (SPb.: Soikina, 1913), 691.

⁴⁸ Among the earliest see, for example, Ioann Domaskin, *Tochnoe Izlozhenie Pravoslavnoi Very [A Genuine Report of the Orthodox Faith]* (M.: 1998).

⁴⁹ Mikhail (Luzin), 125. The literature on “the ethical element” and on the moral teaching of the Bible is vast. For our purposes it suffices to note two articles that underline the importance of biblical interpretation for the establishing of moral precepts specifically tailored to the Russian people. See P. Golubev, “Blagotvornoe vliianie Biblii na zhisn’ narodnyiu,” *RKCB* 9 (1892): 36-58; Vladimir Rybinskii, “About the Bible.” *TKDA* 3 (1902): 357-382.

derives from an interest in biblical ethics; and the role that Orthodox biblical exposition and interpretation has had in the understanding of that biblical ethics is considerable.

6.3 Conclusion

To pronounce the final word on the biblical hermeneutics of the Russian Orthodox Church is a perplexing task. Its analysis requires careful thought and continuing investigation. Yet, as this study has shown, the main hermeneutical features of the Russian Orthodox Church are clear enough that they may now be summarized as follows:

First, the characteristics of Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation and exegesis deeply reflect the influence of patristic exegesis. Thus, the principle of the authority of ecclesiastical understanding is an important key to unlocking the meaning of biblical texts. All inquiries of a scientific or exegetical kind, then, presuppose that Scripture and Church can not be separated or opposed to each other. The church is *a priori* to the reading of the Bible. The supposition of dogma is a quintessential criterion if the interpreter is to bring forward unanimity between scientific investigation of the Bible and faithfulness to the Church. In addition, Church tradition is important to Orthodox exegetes, because it frames the understanding of the Bible and so serves as a check against any deviation from Church doctrine in interpretation.

Second, it is assumed that the fulfilment of the Old Testament was found in the historical revelation of Christ - the centrepiece of all Scripture. Christ is, then, the *beginning-centre-and end* of biblical interpretation. He is *the* hermeneutical key to Scripture.

Third, interpretation of the Bible may be understood as a synthesis of human creative efforts and divine illumination imparted by the Holy Spirit who dwells within the Church. Thus, the exegete must submit himself and his skills to the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, the Orthodox scholar cannot begin his interpretive work by taking himself as the sole point of departure, but must look to the Orthodox community with its great body of teachings and tradition as the outside reference point that gives shape and direction to his exegesis.

Fifth, Orthodox hermeneutics stresses that if an interpreter wishes to fully understand the biblical writer, he must be guided by these quasi-criteria in determining the

⁵⁰ Cf. *Zen'kovskii*, vol. I, 6.

author's meaning: his language; his train of thought; the context; and his psychological and historical state at the time of writing. Thus, one might arrive upon the sense of a book by way of its language (grammatically – philologically) and by way of the writer's mental and external condition (psychologically and historically). Yet, above all, any meaning not keeping with the spirit of the Church's interpretation and tradition cannot bear the true sense of Scripture.