

## **On the Interpretation of the Holy Bible, Part One**

*By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

Christians initially (in the first century A.D.) knew the Holy Scriptures, consisting of the Old Testament and some widely circulated texts of the New Testament. It is worth remembering that printing was not available at that time. Consequently, the complete Bible, with both Testaments and all its books, was not accessible to everyone until the advent of the printing press (Johann Gutenberg, died 1468). From the first century, Christians were accustomed to reading excerpts from these sacred texts during worship gatherings, especially in the Divine Liturgy (the Sacrament of Thanksgiving). The structure of the liturgy from the beginning included petitions and praises, followed by readings from the Scriptures, then the sermon, and the remainder of the liturgy.

The interpretation of Scripture held great importance among Christians. The Church recognized various complementary interpretations based on the approach of the interpreters. The Church rejected an interpretation only when it conflicted with sound doctrine.

Jesus inaugurated the Christian reading of the Old Testament when He read from the book of Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"* (Luke 4:18-19, referencing Isaiah 61:1-2). He then applied this passage to Himself, declaring to His audience: *"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"* (Luke 4:21). Christians read the Old Testament in the light of Christ. This approach unlocked many prophecies found in the Old Testament about Christ, the Trinity, the salvific plan, and other matters.

From this perspective, the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture was born. Divine revelation unfolded gradually, beginning with Abraham (18th century BC) and culminating in Christ, who revealed God to us directly: *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father"* (John 14:9). Later texts clarified earlier ones, making them comprehensible. The Scriptures are taken as an integrated whole, and no part is isolated or studied independently of the others.

Let us consider some examples. Matthew the Evangelist, writing for Christians of Jewish origin, cited many Old Testament prophecies to demonstrate their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. For instance, when Joseph was perplexed about Mary's pregnancy, the angel of the Lord revealed the divine mystery to him, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: *"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means, God with us"* (Matthew 1:22-23, referencing Isaiah 7:14).

Regarding John the Baptist, the Evangelist states: *"This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight'"* (Matthew 3:3, referencing Isaiah 40:3).

In Matthew 4, it says: *"When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, He withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, He went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned'"* (Matthew 4:12-16, referencing Isaiah 9:1-2).

Finally, Christ Himself declared: *"But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled"* (Matthew 26:56). The Bible is a complete unit, with Christ as the central axis—concealed in the Old Testament and fully revealed in the New Testament.

Another example: In the creation narrative in Genesis, God speaks in the singular when creating the world (*"And God said, 'Let there be...'"*). However, when creating humanity, He speaks in the plural: *"Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness"* (Genesis 1:26). The Trinity was not fully revealed in the Old Testament but was hinted at through events such as Abraham's three visitors and Isaiah's vision of the seraphim proclaiming, *"Holy, holy, holy."* With the coming of Christ, the fullness of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—was made clear through the events of the Annunciation, Theophany and Ascension. This foundational interpretation in Orthodox theology underscores that humanity is created in the image of the Trinity—created to be communal and relational, just as the Holy Trinity.

This subject is vast and cannot be fully addressed in an article of this length. To train oneself in this interpretation, one must turn to the Old Testament readings designated by the Orthodox Church in Vespers of the Lord's feasts in particular, and of great feasts and saints in general. Liturgy is the primary school of theology par excellence. Let us consider some examples.

On the eve of the Nativity (Paramon), we read eight readings from the Old Testament. When we read, "*A shoot will come up from the stem of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him*" (Isaiah 11:1-2), we understand that the shoot is an image of Christ.

On the eve of the Elevation of the Cross (September 14), we learn that the wood that turned the bitter waters of Marah sweet is an image of the Cross, which transforms the bitterness of sin into the sweetness of grace (Exodus 15:22-16:1).

In Vespers of the Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8), we understand that the ladder Jacob saw connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending (Genesis 28:4–10), is a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary, through whom Christ united heaven and earth. Similarly, the sealed eastern gate in Ezekiel (43:27–44:4) symbolizes the Virgin Mary, through whom Christ, the Gate of Paradise, was born to open the way for us.

On Great and Holy Saturday, while catechumens are baptized, the faithful hear fifteen Old Testament readings, all of which prefigure baptism.

Through regular participation in worship, we acquire a true Orthodox understanding of Scripture, seeing the Old Testament as an integral part of God's salvific plan.

## On the Interpretation of the Holy Bible, Part Two

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### The Spiritual Reading of the Holy Scriptures

There is a type of reading we call spiritual or personal, in which the believer reads the text of the Holy Scriptures in a meditative manner, reflecting the words upon his own life. Since *"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness"* (2 Timothy 3:16), we read the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God addressed to us personally. Believers do not approach the Bible as they would any other book. This is why the Church advises us to pray before reading, invoking the Holy Spirit to grant us the proper understanding that is beneficial for our souls.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (+1783) wrote: *"If an earthly king, an emperor, were to write you a letter, would you not read it with joy? You have received a letter—not from an earthly emperor, but from the King of Heaven! Yet you often neglect this priceless gift, this treasure beyond measure."*

He further explains that opening the Scriptures and reading them means entering into a personal, face-to-face conversation with the living God. He continues: *"When you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And as you read, you are praying and conversing with Him."*

The late metropolitan of my home archdiocese, Youhanna of Latakia, used to say: *"We should read the Bible with the same passion as a lover reads a love letter sent by his beloved."*

St. Mark the Ascetic (5th–6th century) teaches that: *"The one who is humble in his thoughts and engaged in spiritual work applies everything he reads in the Holy Scriptures to himself, not to his neighbor."* We are spiritually nourished when we read the Bible in this way, applying what we read to ourselves. Thus, the key question is not merely, *"What does this passage mean?"* but rather, *"What does it mean for me?"*

St. Tikhon reaffirms this by saying: *"Christ Himself is speaking to you."* The Holy Scriptures are a direct and intimate conversation between the Savior and the soul—Christ addresses me, and my heart responds to Him.

In this type of reading, every story in the Bible becomes a part of my personal life journey. The fall of Adam mirrors my own falls and my refusal to live according to God's will. Adam and Eve are me. When God asks Adam, *"Where are you?"* (Genesis 3:9), He is asking me, and I must answer!

Similarly, when reading the story of Christ calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41), we can see it as a representation of our soul or the Church, being tossed by the waves of trials and tribulations—and Christ as our Savior and Deliverer.

At the Nativity of Christ, we do not merely reflect on His birth in a cave, but we ask ourselves: *"How is Christ born in me today?"* Likewise, we meditate on how we are crucified with Him and how we are raised with Him. When I read Christ's words: *"Give to him who asks of you"* (Matthew 5:42), I ask myself: *"Do I do this? How can I live out this command?"*

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Elder Aemilianos of Simonopetra Monastery on Mount Athos taught that the proper way to read the Bible is to allow God to speak to us through it. He distinguishes between:

- Reading for information or knowledge, which remains at a superficial level,
- And reading to acquire the true essence of Scripture—the Holy Spirit Himself.

He describes this spiritual knowledge as: *"Entering into the life of God and expanding within it; it is the descent of God to dwell among us."*

He advises: *"Read the Scriptures, but do not forget your sins. Do not reduce the Bible to mere intellectual study, for when you do so, it ceases to be the Word of God and becomes merely a human text. The measure of your reading should be this: that it brings peace to your heart, union with God, love for your neighbor, and awareness of your own sinfulness, making you feel unworthy to stand before God."*

When we read the Bible in this way, we are enriched by reflecting on those who came before us.

Take, for example, St. Symeon the New Theologian. In one meditation, he reads the Book of Exodus in a spiritual manner, seeing:

- Egypt as a symbol of the land of sin,

- Pharaoh as a representation of Satan,
- And Moses as the guide toward salvation.

He applies these biblical figures to his own spiritual journey and writes:

*"What can I say about what I have seen in Egypt? He came down to me and found me, a poor and lowly slave, and said, 'Come, My child, and I will lead you to God.' But from the depths of my disbelief, I responded, 'What sign do You give me so that I may trust You? Can You truly deliver me from Egypt and snatch me from the grip of the tyrant Pharaoh?' I did what He commanded me. Yet Pharaoh held me tight, and his overseers forced me to labor in the mud and straw."*

In another meditation, he transforms Gospel images into a personal prayer and dialogue with God:

*"Tell me, O listener, what is the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31)? How do you imagine it? This seed is the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the garden is the heart of every person. There, a man plants the seed and hides it deep within himself, tending to it with care until it grows into a great tree, reaching toward the heavens."*

*"Now is the time for work, and the future is the time for the crown. If you are wise, I will be for you in this world the hidden pearl, the grain of wheat, the mustard seed, and the leaven that transforms your dough. I will be for you water and a dewy breeze, a protection and all-sustaining nourishment. If you acknowledge Me here, then there, you will possess Me, and I will be everything for you. But if you depart from this world without knowing My grace, you will find Me there as an unyielding Judge."*

*"O my Christ, O my God! Do not judge me! Do not condemn me, though I have dishonored You greatly. Accept me as the least of Your laborers... (Luke 15:19) Grant me to see You for all eternity!"*

May the Lord grant us the grace to read His Word in this way, that it may lead us to salvation.