

Orthodox Bible Study: The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete

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During the course of the year in the Orthodox Church, the entire New Testament in the Bible is appointed and read daily (minus the Book of Revelation, which is too easily misinterpreted by the immature). Similarly, portions of the Old Testament are appointed and read at various feasts, particularly prophetic passages pertaining to the Savior Jesus Christ. During the forty days of the season of Lent, the Books of Genesis, Proverbs and Isaiah are read in their entirety. Brief experience of an Orthodox service will reveal that the words of the prayers and hymns are composed mostly of Holy Scripture, the majority of phrases directly from the Psalms.

So Orthodox Christians study the Bible all the time, in a distinctive Orthodox manner. In order to properly understand the Bible, the Orthodox receive it in a liturgical, or ecclesiastical, context. “The [baptized] continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine, and in the communion, the breaking of bread, and in the prayers” (Acts 2:42). “The

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church of the living God [is] the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). “I found it necessary to write to you (i.e., this very letter included in the New Testament) exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The Body of believers assembled in worship (i.e., liturgical service) around and under its Head, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:22; 3:9-10; 4:4-6, 15; etc.¹), is the framework in which the words of the Bible make sense according to the purpose for which they are given.

¹ “Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church (Gk., *ekklēsia*, that is, “assembly”) of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16). The *church* is, by definition of Christ and the apostles, the *assembly* of baptized Christians for Divine Liturgy and Holy Communion (see Matt. 16:18; 18:17-20; Lk. 22:19-20, 29-30; Acts 2:41-47; 13:1-3 [v. 2, lit., “as they served the liturgy to the Lord]; 1 Cor. 11:17-26; Heb. 8:1-6 [lit., v. 2: “Liturgist,” and v. 6: “liturgy”]; 10:19-25; 12:22-24).

During Lent the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete demonstrates the true sense of Biblical content as given by Christ to His people, the Church. As such, the Great Canon serves as a true guide for Orthodox Bible study naturally placed within the Church's arrangement of prayers and services of worship to God. In the Great Canon of some 250 stanzas or verses, Bishop Andrew of Crete (d. 740) references example after example from the Scriptures showing their ultimate meaning leading people away from sin and death to forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ Jesus the Savior.

For the Orthodox, the Bible, or Holy Scriptures, is a living testament to the grace of God operative in the lives of the faithful, and the Church, the Body of the faithful, is the place where this grace of God is fully realized. The Bible is not an inert record of

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deeds in the past; the Bible is a description of deeds being worked in the present. The Bible is not a document to be dissected using principles of Biblical interpretation, like an archeologist trying to discover the contents of an ancient text, or a coroner performing an autopsy on a corpse. Rather, the Bible is a comprehensive scan revealing the inner workings of the human person exposing illness (evil, sinful passions) to achieve wholeness (salvation) with God in His kingdom.

Consider how the Great Canon begins. "Where shall I begin to mourn the deeds of my wretched life? What can I offer as first-fruits of repentance? In Your compassion, O Christ, forgive my sins. Come, my wretched soul, and confess your sins in the flesh to the Creator of all. From this moment forsake your former foolishness and offer to God tears of repentance." Then the Great Canon adduces example after example beginning with Adam, Eve, Cain, etc. E.g., "Having rivaled the first-created Adam by my transgression, I realize that I am stripped naked of God and of the everlasting kingdom and bliss through my sins" (Ode 1).

Bible study should never be simply the pursuit of information. Such an approach reduces Bible study to grammar, syntax, style, textual criticism, comparative religion, and other academic disciplines, that is, a thing to be manipulated according to human knowledge.

Acknowledging Biblical information as literal (e.g., Adam did exist as the first man), Orthodox Bible study always looks to the deeper sense of that information as it relates to the spiritual condition which is common to our human history, past, present, and future. The Orthodox understand Biblical persons, places, and things to reveal three deeper senses pertaining to life from and with God. One, the Bible reveals both by positive and negative examples the manner of living according to God's design (the moral sense). Two, the Bible reveals how one thing in its essential characteristics is a pattern or model of something else (the figurative sense). Three, the Bible reveals how things on earth are intended to convey heavenly realities (the elevated sense). These senses co-exist and overlap in the words of the Bible.²

All the Biblical words have true meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in the lives of all the faithful made new in Jesus Christ. The process of repentance wherein persons are made new in Christ is the key to Orthodox Bible study exemplified in the Great Canon. "Repent (lit., *be repentant*), for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," is the initial command from Christ (Matt. 4:17). The faculty of spiritual perception – the mind (Gk., *nous*)³ – must be changed from Satan to the Lord, from darkness to light, from vice to

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² St. John Cassian, *The Conferences* 14.8: "And so the history (literal sense) embraces the knowledge of things past and visible...But to allegory (figurative sense) belongs what follows, for what actually happened is said to have prefigured the form of some mystery...But the anagogical (elevated) sense rises from spiritual mysteries even to still more sublime and sacred secrets of heaven...The tropological sense is the moral explanation which has to do with improvement of life and practical teaching."

³ See 1 Cor. 2:10-16. The Greek word *metanoia* usually translated into English as *repentance* literally means "a change of mind/perception."

virtue, from death to life, from the world to the kingdom of the heavenly Father (2 Cor. 3:12-18; Eph. 4:17-24). Repentance is the process of moral renewal (purification), transfiguration into the image of Christ (illumination), and longing for the incorruptible divine life above (glorification, perfection), otherwise known as faith, hope, and love. Through repentance, persons “see” the meaning of the Bible as its words are actualized in their own thoughts, words, and deeds by the power of Christ according to the keeping of His commandments.⁴

“I have reminded you, O my soul, from the Books of Moses how the world was created, and from accounts throughout the Old Covenant, have shown examples of both the righteous and the unrighteous. But of these you have imitated the latter rather than the former, and have sinned against your God.

“The Law has no power over you, O my soul. You have made the Gospel fruitless, scorned the Scriptures and reaped yourself no value from the Prophets or the writings of the Just. Your wounds have increased and you have no physician to heal you.

“Therefore, O my soul, I will remind you of examples from the New Covenant to lead you to contrition. Imitate the righteous and shun the way of sinners that through prayer, fasting, purity, and reverence you may obtain the mercy of Christ.” (Great Canon, Ode 9)

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“The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; a good understanding is in all who practice it” (Ps. 110:10; Prov. 1:7). “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole man” (Eccl. 12:13). Our Lord said, “Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in

⁴ St. Gregory the Theologian [Nazianzus], *Oration 27.3*: “Not to everyone, my friends, does it belong to philosophize about God, not to everyone...because it is permitted only to those who have been examined, and are passed masters in meditation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified...It is when we are free from all external defilement or disturbance, and when that which rules within us is not confused with vexatious or erring images.” St. Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law*, 85: “Understand the words of Holy Scripture by putting them into practice, and do not fill yourself with conceit by expatiating on theoretical ideas.”

the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:27-28). “A servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (Jn. 13:16-17). “O my righteous Judge and Savior, have mercy on me! Deliver me from eternal fire and the sentence of condemnation which I so justly deserve. Grant that by repentance and increase of virtue, I may obtain forgiveness before it is too late” (Great Canon, Ode 8).

Ultimately Orthodox Bible study leads to godliness (also known as piety⁵), a state of constant reverence born of the fear of God who is the Master of our very existence. “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11-12). This godliness leads to Christ Jesus; indeed, Christ is the source of it, “who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear⁶” (Heb. 5:7).

The Great Canon expresses this goal by punctuating accounts from the Bible with the life of Saint Mary of Egypt (d. 522). Remarkably Saint Mary knew and quoted the Bible without ever having read it once in her lifetime showing she is the pre-eminent student of the Bible, the living Word of God, because she enacted the very life of Christ.

“Grant me that illuminating grace from Divine Providence, O Mary, that escaping the darkness of passions I may fervently sing of your blessed conversion. In submitting to the laws of Christ, you renounced all uncontrollable lust and drew near to Him, piously adopting every virtue” (Ode 1). “You abandoned your life of sin, O Mary, and eagerly

⁵ The Greek word is *evsebeia* (Lat., *pietas*), literally, “good-reverence.”

⁶ Gk., *evlabeia*, “caution, awe.”

ran to Christ, following His path through a pathless wilderness. And in purity and love you fulfilled His commandments” (Ode 2). “O blessed Mary, with unmatched fervor you longed to venerate the Tree of Life until your desire was granted. Help us now to be made worthy of attaining the heavenly glory” (Ode 5). “O Mary, a constant stream of tears fell from your eyes, extinguishing the flames of lust while setting your soul afire with the love of God. Grant me, your servant, this grace of tears” (Ode 6). “O Mary, you overcame the flesh and lived as though bodiless, crossing the river Jordan unhampered by your body. Your wondrous life is an amazement to the ranks both of angels and men” (Ode 9).

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Saint Mary’s forty-seven year-long journey to godliness began and ended at the same place, receiving the very Body and Blood of Christ from the Divine Liturgy of God’s holy Church. “For, since the time I communicated in the temple of the Forerunner (i.e., John the Baptist) before crossing the Jordan even to this day I have not approached the Holy Mysteries (Holy Communion). And I thirst for them with irrepressible love and longing, and therefore I ask and implore you (the Elder Zosimas) to grant me my wish, bring me the lifegiving Mysteries at the very hour when our Lord made His disciples partake of His Divine Supper.”⁷ After receiving Communion the next year, Saint Mary fell asleep in the Lord.

As stated before, the Biblical message can only be properly understood within the liturgical context of the Church. “The Church has been given Your life-creating side as a chalice (an allusion to Holy Communion), O our Savior, from which to drink both deliverance and knowledge – which we understand as images of the two Covenants, both Old and New” (Great Canon, Ode 4). Godliness is born in the waters of Holy Baptism,

⁷ From *The Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, by St. Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (550-638).

nourished at the Lord's Table, and exercised in repentance as prescribed in the practices of fasting, prayer, purity, and reverence until it reaches the end of this earthly life and the anticipated coming of Christ in glory with all His saints on the Last Day.

Thus every Ode of the Great Canon concludes with a doxology to God the Holy Trinity and a praise of the Virgin Mary who gave birth to God in the flesh, our Savior Jesus Christ. Orthodox Bible study must always be about restored communion with the one true God, our Creator, in Jesus Christ, through the co-operation of the faithful of whom the Theotokos, Virgin Mary, is the supreme example of devotion for all of God's holy people.

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The Orthodox study the Bible not to discover a meaning hitherto unknown. The Church has known the meaning of the Bible from its beginning as explained by Christ Jesus (Jn. 5:39) and delivered by His apostles and prophets (2 Pet. 1:20-21; 3:15-16). The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete provides yet another voice in harmony with the rest of the Church's teaching as to the reason for Orthodox Bible study: application of the new life in Jesus Christ to the lives of the faithful in their struggle against sin and death to become communicants of the divine life, the everlasting kingdom of the Father, by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Orthodox Bible study is therefore primarily a function of the worship of God giving praise to Him for revealing Himself to us and redeeming us for this very purpose. The Bible's place is in the Church, in the hearts and mouths and actions of its people, thanking and imitating its Teacher and High Priest, God the Word, for His great mercy.