

Bible Reading for Orthodox Christians IV

So Let's Do It!

A Modest Proposal for Bible Study

Plan of the Series

- What is the Bible? Where'd it come from?
- Brief History of Biblical Interpretation
- Problems we all bring to Bible Study
 - (Last Week)
- Today (final exam & graduation!): A modest proposal for Bible Study

Problems We Must Overcome

- Tradition
 - Not overcome it
 - But recognize/choose your tradition
- Internal problems
 - Understanding our Tradition
 - Avoiding Eisegesis
 - Influence of our sinful passions

Today

- So how should we read the Bible?
- What should we read in the Bible?

Presuppositions

- No way to avoid presuppositions in approaching the Bible...
 - ‘The Bible is God’s word....’
 - ‘Christianity : how a Jewish ethicist became God’
- Some we may intuit
 - Bible: ‘that sure is a big (too big to read) book!’
- Objectivity is a myth
 - Are presuppositions reasonable/acceptable?

Presuppositions

- If we are willing to accept the Scriptures as they have come to us
 - Then we have to be willing to understand them the way the people who canonized them did
- So what were their presuppositions?

Presuppositions---Early Church

- Strong view of the authority of Scripture
- Basic historicity of Scripture's saving events
- Interpretation based on contextual reading of part in light of the whole
- Sobriety about ability of "academic criticism" to control or define the mystery of God.
- Reader's own faith essential to interpretation
 - Commitment to doctrinal sense of Early Church
- Bible properly interpreted all about Christ

Tools in the Interpretive Tool-Kit

- The importance of dogma
 - is the established belief or doctrine which is authoritative and is not to be disputed or doubted.
 - a truth appertaining to faith or morals, revealed by God, transmitted from the Apostles in the Scriptures or by tradition, and proposed by the Church for the acceptance of the faithful
 - For Orthodox Christians, the dogmata are contained in the Nicene Creed and the canons of the seven ecumenical councils. (Orthowiki)

Examples of Dogma

- Teachings about
 - Holy Trinity
 - Incarnation
 - Resurrection
 - Many more
- Cannot interpret Scripture outside dogmatic boundaries: Non-negotiable
 - Heresy
- So one key to reading Scripture---know the Faith

So how might we read the Bible?

- Orthodox Commentaries
- Might look to methods proposed in other disciplines
 - Military History
 - Michael Howard's counsel: read in "breadth, depth, and context."

Breadth: wide enough sample

Depth: get below surface

Context: examine "fit"

Including in this our dogmatic boundaries, let's try

Interpreting Scripture

- Psalm 136 (137 in the Masoretic Text)
 - “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept...”
 - “Happy the one who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock!”
- What to make of this?
 - Fortunately, we know---abundant commentary
 - But many don’t: see the Web
 - So how might we try to handle this?

Psalm 136

- Breadth
 - Nature of psalms in general
 - Every sort of human emotion
 - This psalm a lament
 - Sung in exile
 - Sung by one enslaved
 - Sung by one who saw his life/civilization/family destroyed

Depth

- The fall of besieged cities & occupation
 - Most Americans mercifully don't understand
- Consider
 - *The Trojan Women*
 - Magdeburg
 - Civilized “Rules” of siege warfare
 - German occupation of Russia

“We killed God in Magdeburg”



The Sunflower

- *On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*
 - Simon Wiesenthal's account of incident at Lemberg concentration camp

Psalm 136

- So by going in depth
 - We can have a sense of the anger, the anguish of the psalmist
 - Asked by the murderers of his family/city/country to sing!
 - How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?
 - The lure of revenge
 - Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.
 - Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.
- By a little study we have a sense of where the psalm came from...
 - Breadth/Depth/Immediate Context

Psalm 136

- But what should we do with this?
- Need to apply our tradition/presuppositions
 - Christ is on every page of both Testaments
 - Literal interpretation simply doesn't fit with the Lord as depicted in Scripture/taught by the Church
 - *“Suffer the little children....”*
 - *“Father, forgive them....”*
 - But if literal interpretation doesn't work, what might?

Psalm 136

- Other interpretative lenses
 - Anagogical (end times)?
 - Moral?
 - Allegorical?

Psalm 136 as Allegory

- Images to allegorize (to speak to us)
 - What's Jerusalem (for us?/for me?)
 - What's Babylon?
 - What little ones ought we to smash?
 - Who/what is the rock?
- As long as we stay within the boundaries of dogma, all can be fruitful ideas to contemplate

How to do this?

- Anything in Scripture can be fruitful
- In Christianity, ***Lectio Divina*** (Latin for "Divine Reading") is a traditional Benedictine practice of scriptural reading, meditation and prayer intended to promote communion with God and to increase the knowledge of God's Word. It does not treat Scripture as texts to be studied, but as the Living Word.
- Traditionally, *Lectio Divina* has four separate steps: read; meditate; pray; contemplate. First a passage of Scripture is read, then its meaning is reflected upon. This is followed by prayer and contemplation on the Word of God.

Lectio Divina

- Begins with Origen
- Benedictine Discipline
- Can be done individually, or as a group
- Much more prominent in RC circles
- But really, the basis of our reading of the Scriptures

Met. Kallistos

- “How to read the Bible?”
 - *Orthodox Study Bible, 1757-1766/also on website*
- With Obedience
 - A Sense of wonder; Stop talking & LISTEN!
- Understand through the Church
- Understand Christ is the heart of the Bible
- Bible is PERSONAL
 - Directed to each of us individually
 - A Letter from God

So: What to read?

- Random
- Lectio continua
- Lectio semi-continua
- Lectio selecta
 - Church's Lectionary: elements of all three

So, What to Read?

- Monastic discipline
 - Start with Matthew and Acts
 - Read two chapters of Acts/Epistles/Revelation per day (with a little fudging toward the end)
 - Read one chapter from the Gospels (89 all told)
 - Read NT once a quarter
- Only drawback
 - Misses big chunks of OT

So, What to Read?

- Reading Plan for entire Bible:
 - Publishers (Thomas Nelson) have one year/two year plans available on their website.
 - Quick access: [Google Orthodox Study Bible Reading Plan](#).

In Closing

- Must know the faith
- Must know why we come to Scripture
- Must marry faith/reason/knowledge
- Must remember that God is not obligated to speak to us
- Must have faith that God will reveal Himself to us in His Scriptures as He deems best---but reveal Himself He will