

How to Read Scripture

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Notes derived from Metropolitan Kallistos Ware

The Intention

“If an earthly king, our emperor,” wrote Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk (1724-83), “wrote you a letter, would you not read it with joy? Certainly, with great rejoicing and careful attention.” But what, he asks, is our attitude toward the letter that has been addressed to us by no one less than God Himself? “You have been sent a letter, not by any earthly emperor, but by the King of Heaven. And yet you almost despise such a gift, so priceless a treasure.” **To open and read this letter, Saint Tikhon adds, is to enter into a personal conversation face-to-face with the living God.** “Whenever you read the Gospel, Christ Himself is speaking to you. And while you read; you are praying and talking to Him.”

Our Attitude

Such exactly is our Orthodox attitude to the reading of Scripture. I am to see the Bible as God's personal letter sent specifically to myself. The words are not intended merely for others, far away and long ago, but they are written particularly and directly to me, here and now. **Whenever we open our Bible, we are engaging in a creative dialogue with the Savior. In listening, we also respond. "Speak, for Your servant hears," we reply to God as we read (1 Sam. 3:10); "Here am I" (Is. 6:8).**

The Orthodox View

- “The Scriptures constitute a coherent whole. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative witness to God’s revelation of Himself in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word, and in the whole history of salvation, and as such express the word of God in human language. We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church. Our approach to the Bible is one of obedience.”
- Moscow Conference (1976)

Four Key Characteristics of the Scriptural Mind

Obedient

Ecclesial

Christ-centered

Personal

1. Obedient

- The Bible, is God's "authoritative witness" of Himself, expressing "the word of God in human language." Our response to this divine word is rightly one of obedient receptivity. As we read, we wait on the Spirit. (Moscow Conference, 1976)
- We do not refer to it as "the books" in the plural, ta biblia, but we call it "the Bible," "the Book," in the singular. It is one book, one Holy Scripture, with the same message throughout—one composite and yet single story, from Genesis to Revelation.

How to be Obedient to Scripture

- Obedient receptivity to God's word means above all two things: **a sense of wonder and an attitude of listening.**
- Should we not react in the presence of the Bible with exactly the same surprise, the same feeling of joy and discovery...There are so many rooms in Scripture that we have never as yet entered. There is so much for us still to explore.

An Example

- The telephone rings, and one of the characters picks it up. “Hello,” he exclaims, “hello, hello.” His volume rises. “Who is speaking? I can’t hear you. Hello, who is speaking?” A voice at the other end says, “You are speaking.” “Ah,” he replies, “I thought the voice sounded familiar.” And he puts the receiver down.

To Actively Listen

- When we enter an Orthodox Church, we see the figure of the Mother of God with her hands raised to heaven. Such is also to be our attitude to Scripture—an attitude of openness and attentive receptivity, our hands invisibly outstretched to heaven.
- As we read our Bible, then, we are to model ourselves in this way on the Blessed Virgin Mary, for she is supremely the one who listens. At the Annunciation, listening to the angel she responds obediently, “Let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). **Had she not first listened to God’s word and received it spiritually in her heart, she would never have borne the Word of God bodily in her womb.**
- At Christ’s nativity, after the adoration of the shepherds, “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). After the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years old, “His Mother kept all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51). The vital importance of listening is also indicated in the last words attributed to the Theotokos in Holy Scripture, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. “Do whatever He tells you” (Jn 2:5), she says to the servants and to each one of us.
- **In all this the Virgin serves as a mirror and living icon of the biblical Christian. Hearing God’s word, we are to be like her: pondering, keeping all these things in our hearts, doing whatever He tells us. We are to listen in obedience while God speaks.**

2. Ecclesial

- Our approach to the Bible is not only obedient but ecclesial. **The words of Scripture, while addressed to us personally, are at the same time addressed to us as members of a community.**
- First, we receive Scripture through and in the Church. It is the Church that tells us what is Scripture. In the first three centuries of Christian history, a lengthy process of sifting and testing was needed, in order to distinguish between that which is authentically “canonical” Scripture

Interpreting Scripture

- Secondly, we interpret Scripture through and in the Church. If it is the Church that tells us what is Scripture, equally it is the Church that tells us how Scripture is to be understood. Coming upon the Ethiopian as he read the Old Testament in his chariot, Philip the Apostle asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” “How can I,” answered the Ethiopian, “unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:30, 31).

The Mind of the Church

- To discover this “mind of the Church,” where do we begin?
- A first step is to see how Scripture is used in worship. How, in particular, are biblical lessons chosen for reading at the different feasts?
- A second step is to consult the writings of the Church Fathers, especially St. John Chrysostom. How do they analyze and apply the text of Scripture? An ecclesial manner of reading the Bible is in this way both liturgical and Patristic.

3. Christ-centered

- Christ is the canon.
- He is the unifying thread, that runs through the entirety of the Bible from the first sentence to the last. Jesus meets us on every page. It all ties up because of Him. “In Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17 NRSV).
- Everywhere in the Old Testament we find signposts and waymarks pointing to the mystery of Christ and His Mother Mary. Interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New, and the New in the light of the Old—as the Church lectionary encourages us to do—we discover how the whole of Scripture finds its point of convergence in the Savior.

Orthodoxy makes extensive use of this “typological” method of interpretation, whereby “types” of Christ, signs and symbols of His work, are to be detected throughout the Old Testament.

- Melchizedek, for example, the priest-king of Salem, who offered bread and wine to Abraham (Gen. 14:18), is regarded as a “type” of Christ not only by the Fathers but equally in the New Testament itself (Heb. 5:6; 7:1-19).
- The rock that flowed with water in the wilderness of Sinai (Ex. 17:6; Num. 30:7-11) is likewise a symbol of Christ (1 Cor. 10:4).

Connecting to Christ

- It is, much more fundamentally, a sacred book, addressed to believers, to be read with faith and love. We shall not profit fully from reading the Gospels unless we are in love with Christ. “Heart speaks to heart” I enter into the living truth of Scripture only when my heart responds with love to the heart of God.
- It all ties up. In the words of Father Alexander Schmemmann, “A Christian is the one who, wherever he looks, finds everywhere Christ, and rejoices in Him.” This is true in particular of the Biblical Christian. Wherever he looks, on every page, he finds everywhere Christ.

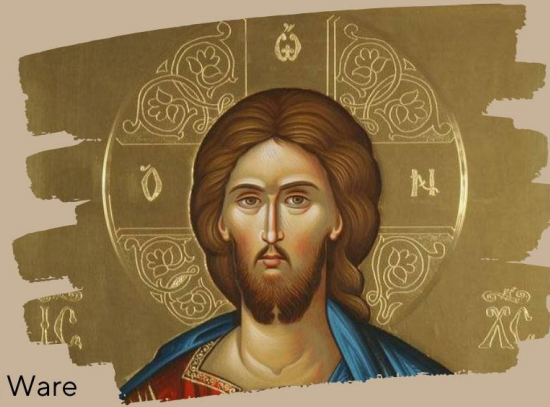
4. Personal

- We are to look throughout Scripture for a personal application. Our question is not simply “What does it mean?” but “What does it mean for me?”
- As Saint Tikhon insists, “Christ Himself is speaking to you.” Scripture is a direct, intimate dialogue between the Savior and myself-Christ addressing me and my heart responding.
- I am to see all the narratives in Scripture as part of my own personal story. The description of Adam’s fall is equally an account of something in my own experience. Who is Adam? His name means simply “man,” “human”: it is I who am Adam. It is to me that God says, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9). We often ask, “Where is God?” But the real question is the one that God puts to the Adam in each one of us: “Where are you?”

1. First, we reflect that what we have in Scripture is sacred history: the history of the world from the Creation, the history of God's chosen people, the history of God Himself incarnate in Palestine, the history of the "wonderful works" (Acts 2:11) after Pentecost.
2. Next, we observe the particularity, the specificity, of this sacred history. In the Bible we find God intervening at specific times and in particular places, entering into dialogue with individual humans.
3. Then we are to take a third step. After reliving Bible history in all its particularity, we are to apply it directly to ourselves. We are to say to ourselves, "These are not just distant places, events in the remote past. They belong to my own encounter with the Lord. The stories include me."



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How to Read the Holy Scripture

Guidance from Metropolitan Kallistos Ware

PRAYER BEFORE READING SCRIPTURE:

BAREKMOR, OPEN MY EYES O LORD, THAT I MAY SEE THE WONDROUS WORKS OF YOUR LAW. AMEN.

Reading Scripture with Obedience

- Draw near **with an attitude to listen** since it is the Word of God. Receive His guidance with hope and positivity for the future.
- Draw near **with a sense of wonder** since God has a purpose in revealing His Gospel to you. Even a passage that you have read many times will have other elements to explore.

Recognizing Christ, at the Heart of Scripture

- Christ is the **unifying thread** that runs from the first sentence of Scripture to the last. It all ties up because of Him. *"In Him all things hold together"* (Col 1:16)
- Fr Alexander Schmemmann says, "A Christian is the one who, wherever he looks, finds everywhere Christ, and rejoices in Him." The same can be done by a Christian on **every page** of Scripture.

Understanding Scripture through the Church

- The words of Scripture, while addressed to us personally, are also addressed to us **as members of a shared community**
- Scripture is the **mind of the Church** so allow the life of the Church to inform your understanding of Christ's Gospel.
- Seek the help of the Church Fathers and/or your **spiritual father** for clarity

Making Scripture Personal to Your Life

- Look through Scripture for a personal application. Our question is not, "What does it mean?" but **"What does it mean for me?"**
- Do not read as a detached and objective observer but as an **active participant daily** for Christ has **included you** in His Gospel.
- For your daily reading rule, **CONSISTENCY**
INTENSITY



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