

Scripture, the Gospel and Orthodoxy - Fr. John Behr

Retrieved on 4/23/2016 from English edition of Pravoslavie

<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/7163.htm>

The relationship between Scripture, the Gospel and Orthodoxy is a huge topic, but is indisputably important. In fact, speaking accurately about these topics is perhaps the most important task for Christians today. As "Scripture" and "Gospel" are seemingly more obvious in their meaning, it is with "orthodox" that I will begin. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* has two entries under "orthodox".^[1] First, "The Orthodox Church," which it describes as a family of Churches, situated mainly in Eastern Europe, each member Church being independent in its internal administration, but all sharing in the same faith, in communion with one another, and all acknowledging the honorary primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople. This is a fairly bald, though not inaccurate, description, which is followed by a couple of pages describing the history of these Churches. The second entry, "Orthodoxy," is much more interesting and provocative, derived from the word's etymology: "Right belief, as contrasted with heresy." However, the *Dictionary* only devotes a few lines to this topic, moving on to point out that the word is used especially of the Eastern Churches which since ancient times have been collectively described as "the holy, orthodox, catholic, apostolic Church" to distinguish them from other separated Eastern Churches. Not giving much prominence to the more important meaning of "right belief," it deprives the term of significance for the Church, which claims to be orthodox. It is with the meaning of "orthodox" as "right belief," however, that I am going to be concerned here. If one cannot defend the principle of orthodoxy, as right belief, in Christianity (that which the orthodox Churches claim for themselves), then the other issues, concerning ecclesial self-designation and relationship to other ecclesial bodies, become arbitrary and meaningless. But what is this "orthodoxy" as right belief? Where does it come from?

The classical picture, as it was presented for instance by the book of Acts and Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, of an originally pure orthodoxy, manifest in exemplary Christian communities, from which various heresies developed and split off, has become increasingly difficult to maintain, especially since the work of Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934) – and rightly so. The earliest Christian writings that we have, the letters of Paul, are addressed to Churches that are already falling away from the Gospel, which he had delivered to them. Walter Bauer, after examining all the various first and second century material, concluded that orthodoxy itself only appeared at the end of the second century, emerging victorious out of a conflict with other traditions, and that in some locations what came to be the orthodox position was originally in the minority. For instance, the group in Edessa that would become the orthodox Christians were originally called the

“Palutians,” after their leader Palutus, as the term “Christian” was already in use by another, larger group. Such a presentation has become the standard presupposition for almost all academic discussion: that in the earliest years there were a diversity of equally legitimate expressions of Christianity, and that what became the Orthodox position was attained by various processes of exclusion and demonization. In this way, orthodoxy becomes an arbitrary imposition, dictated by a male, monarchical, power-driven episcopate suppressing all alternative voices, or however else history might be rewritten.

As they are usually employed, the typical defenses of “orthodoxy,” such as apostolic Scripture, succession, and tradition, if we are to be honest, do not really withstand such criticism. It was difficult to appeal to the apostolicity of certain writings in the first couple of centuries, for in this period there were many writings claiming apostolic authorship; what we know as the canonical New Testament was itself drawn up through processes of exclusion. Claims to apostolic succession were similarly ineffectual; in a number of places, including Rome, monepiscopacy (the principle of one bishop to one city, or geographical area, in an apostolic succession) did not really establish itself until the end of the second century or even the early decades of the third.^[2] Besides, the Gnostics also claimed direct links with the apostles. Moreover, apostolic episcopal succession does not really prove anything anyway; it is possible to have apostolic succession but lack apostolic faith. Apostolic succession is rather a testimony to the historical and empirical continuity of that which Christ Himself established. As regards apostolic tradition, this is also a heritage to which many laid claim. The Gnostics, for instance, claimed to preserve various authoritative teachings and practices handed down from the apostles, traditions which, they asserted, legitimated their interpretation of the Scriptures. How does one argue that they did not?

So, must what Rodney Stark has described as the “Chaos School of the Early Church” prevail?^[3] Is there a basis for claiming anything as normative? Is there a basis for seeing subsequent theological reflection and Church life, not as an imposition from without, but as a working out of the implications contained within the basis itself? I would claim that there is, but that we have to be very clear about this; if we misunderstand what it is that constitutes orthodoxy as orthodox, then we have substituted the medium for the message – and lost both.

This basis is, quite simply, the Gospel, which was delivered by the apostles. Immediately one must state that it has never been perfectly manifested or realized within any community. It is a mistake to look back to the early Church hoping to find a lost golden age of theological or ecclesial purity – whether in the apostolic times as narrated in the book of Acts, or the early Church, as recorded by Eusebius, or the age of the Fathers or the Church Councils, or the Empire of Byzantium. Christians are strangers in this world – in any society of this world. As an anonymous second century writer states of Christians:

They dwell in their own fatherlands, but as if sojourners in them; they share all things as citizens, and suffer all things as strangers. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign country.^[4]

And this is inevitably so: our citizenship is in heaven, as the Apostle Paul puts it, and it is from there that we wait for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil 3:20). It is a mistake to look for this as something realized in the past, and since lost, a mistake to which Eastern Christians especially are tempted as they have been subjected to foreign or atheistic powers, and forced to dwell in other lands.

Nevertheless, *the* Gospel was delivered. Debates certainly raged about the correct interpretation of this Gospel – yet it was nevertheless delivered once for all. But again, a qualification has to be made: the Gospel was never fixed in a specific text: what came to be recognized as “canonical” gospels are described as “The Gospel *according to ...*,” unlike, for instance, “The Gospel of Thomas” or “The Gospel of the Hebrews.” The Gospel is not fixed in a particular text, but, as I will argue, in an interpretative relationship to the Scriptures. In the debates about what was the orthodox position, the issue of what is authoritative for this position was paramount. And in this question of authority, two particular and inseparable aspects were fundamental: what is to count as Scripture and what is the correct interpretation of that Scripture? Not only is there one common Scripture, but there is the affirmation that there is one correct way to read it – there is a correct belief. Even if it is expressed in many different ways and its articulation continues to be refined, nevertheless there is a conviction that there is *one right faith*; and this conviction that there is one right faith, one right reading of the one Scripture, is intimately tied to the confession that there is one Jesus Christ, Son of the one Father. This assertion that there is such a thing as right faith came, by the end of the second century, to be expressed in terms of the canon (rule) of faith or truth, where canon does not mean a list of beliefs one must arbitrarily subscribe to, or a list of authoritative books, but rather refers to the presupposition for reading the Scripture in order to understand it correctly – it is the canon of truth where Scripture is the body of truth.

The discussions which went on during the second century are clearly essential to the very nature and shape of the Christian faith. They are also issues which are “live” again, in today’s syncretistic modern (or postmodern) culture, a culture which offers us many different faiths and “worlds” in which to live, or from which we can take whatever elements we like to create a faith that is “right for me,” as this is the only “right” there is. If we really allow the debates of the second century, and their resolutions, to challenge us, we might have to concede that in fact we often approach Christianity with the same kind of perspective and presuppositions that undergird modern syncretism.

In particular, I am thinking of the kind of approach that treats Scripture as a *record* of the relationship between God and the human race, rather than as *constitutive* of that

relationship or as the medium of that relationship. As a record, Scripture would be understood as reporting what occurred between God and the human race in their ongoing dialogue and history, a relationship located in the supposedly “real” world. In this way of thinking, God’s work in Christ is obviously central to the history of the relationship between God and the human race – it is what is recorded in Scripture – yet, although the canon of Scripture is closed, at least in the classical perspective, our relationship with God continues, though now in and through Christ. However, if Scripture is only a record of these events, then of what relevance is it today for our relationship to God in Christ? God has done what He needed to do in Christ, and now our relationship continues, set on a new basis, but in an essentially open-ended manner. But, then, why has this record been fixed in a closed canon? Why are the so-called Gnostic/apocryphal gospels excluded? The classic criteria for determining canonicity (apostolicity, antiquity, conformity with the Church’s teaching etc) are all, ultimately, as ineffectual as the criteria for “orthodoxy” discussed above. If we continue to relate, through Christ, to God directly, without the mediation of Scripture, then our experiences of God are as valid as anything, which might be called canonical. So, are the canonical writings “canonical” simply insofar as they provide a measure (*canon*) by which to evaluate our experiences, our encounter with God, to judge whether what we have experienced is similar to that experienced by the apostles? But then why the so-called canonical apostolic writings, and not the other writings laying claim to apostolicity? And why is this important anyway?

Moreover, if we think along such lines, have we not fact reduced the stature of God to a being commensurable with ourselves? Such a God has become our dialogue partner, one whom we utilize in our own quest for meaning, transcendence or eternity, in our struggle for self-fulfillment and self-knowledge – or however we might express it. He is one whom we seek, and, having found, possess. As such He is a being commensurable with ourselves; a being, if not within our universe, then outside it but parallel to it.

But as Creator, God is not such. If He has created all, then He is radically incommensurable with everything. As St Gregory Palamas put it:

If God is nature, other things are not nature; but if every other thing is nature, He is not a nature, just as He is not a being if all other things are beings. And if He is a being, then all other things are not beings.^[5]

There is complete incommensurability between God and ourselves, and for this reason His being is usually spoken of in the East as beyond-being. Along with this continual affirmation of the transcendence of God there is also, of course, the affirmation that God *is* present and active, and, more specifically, that He is active and present *through His Word* – a Word which always entails a breath, His Spirit – and that this is the Word by whom all things were created, who spoke with Abraham and Moses, who spoke

through the Prophets, who was embodied in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, as preached by the Apostles.

If we are to take these reflections seriously, then we must also acknowledge that Scripture is not simply a record of the history of our search for God, it is rather a record of God's quest for us, or more precisely, it is *itself* this quest – God acts through His Word. We should not, over-hastily, separate the Word of God contained in the written words of Scripture and the Word of God Jesus Christ, something to which I will return.^[6] It is often said that Christianity (along with Judaism and Islam – though these are not our present concern) is a “religion of the book,” and this is usually taken in a very weak sense, that somehow, somewhere, for whatever reason, Christianity involves a book. But the challenge of the second century forces us to take it in a much stronger sense: If God acts through His Word – then that Word needs to be heard, to be read, to be understood – our relationship with God is, in a broad sense, *literary*, and as such, it requires the engagement of all of our intellectual faculties to understand and accomplish – or incarnate – God's Word. Frances Young, in her recent book *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, points out that it is no accident that what came to be orthodox or normative Christianity was “committed to a text-based version of revealed truth”.^[7] This Christianity, one might say, is an interpretative text-based religion. She further points out that it would be quite anachronistic to suppose that in antiquity God's revelation was thought of as located, not in the text of Scripture, but in the historical events behind the text, events to which we only have access by reconstructing them from the text, treating the texts as mere historical documents which provide raw historical data, subject to our own analysis.^[8]

In fact, this interpretative relation to a text, to Scripture, is also intrinsic to the Gospel itself. The earliest formula for proclaiming the death and resurrection of Christ – a formula, which is retained in all subsequent creeds, – is that Christ was crucified and raised “according to the Scriptures”:

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor 1:3-5)

Clearly the Scriptures that Paul is referring to here are not the four Gospels but what we know as the Old Testament. The importance of this written reference (it is repeated twice) is such that the phrase is preserved in later Creeds; we still confess that Christ died and rose according to the (same) Scriptures. What is important here is that the point of concern in this basic Christian confession is not the historicity of the events behind their reports, but that the reports are continuous with, in accordance with, Scripture; it is a textual, or more accurately an “intertextual” or interpretative confession.

Before we examine the scriptural nature of the Gospel, and the way in which it was used in the second century to vindicate both the scriptural status of the apostolic writings and the principle of orthodoxy, it is worth noting the two challenges against which it was worked out. The first is that of Marcion, a rich ship owner from the Black Sea, who arrived in Rome in the middle of the second century, donated a large sum of money to the church there, for its charitable works, which was soon after returned to him when he was excommunicated for his particular teaching. His teaching, however, found adherents, and a Marcionite church existed around the Mediterranean for several centuries. Marcion is infamous for having drawn a sharp distinction between the God of the Old Testament, on the one hand, a spiteful, vengeful and malicious god, and, on the other hand, the newly revealed God, the Father of Jesus Christ, a loving God who redeems us from the God of the Old Testament. His major written work, the *Antitheses*, was a series of juxtaposed statements from the Old Testament and the Gospel demonstrating the contrast between their depictions of the ones whom they call God. He claimed that not only had the Old Testament proclaimed another God, but, that all the apostles apart from Paul had misunderstood Jesus Christ in terms of the expected Messiah of the God of the Old Testament, and so had distorted his message – as Paul said, in Galatians, there is only one Gospel which false brethren were perverting. According to Marcion only Paul had fully understood Jesus Christ, but, even then, Marcion had to excise passages from Paul's letters (e.g. Gal 3:16-4:6, concerning Abraham's descendants). The only Gospel in which Marcion had any confidence was that of Luke, the disciple of Paul, though this again required some editorial work.

What is of particular interest in Marcion is what led him to such a position. Tertullian, writing at the beginning of the third century, gives us an indication:

The separation of the Law and Gospel is the primary and principal exploit of Marcion. ... For such are Marcion's *Antitheses*, or Contrary Oppositions, which are designed to show the conflict and disagreement of the Gospel and the law, so that from the diversity of principles between those two documents they may argue further for a diversity of gods.^[9]

That is, it is his particular *exegetical* concerns – the perceived opposition between Old Testament and Gospel – that leads him to postulate two different Gods. Today, because of many centuries of monotheism, understood from a philosophical rather than a scriptural perspective, we take it for granted that if there is a God, there is only one God and that while Scripture speaks about Him, we are also in an independent or direct relationship with Him. We believe in God before we encounter Him through Scripture, and the one we already know (or think we know) we then identify with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of Jesus Christ. And so, if, as Marcion, we felt that there was a discrepancy between what is said of God in the Old Testament and what is said in the New Testament, we would probably claim that it is one and the same God operating in two different modes, historicizing the difference, and God Himself.

But, how can we be sure that the God we think we already know, is the same one spoken of in Scripture? There are, as Paul warns us, many gods (1 Cor 8:5). Marcion's route seems to follow the opposite direction: his theology is derived from exegetical concerns: that our knowledge about God depends upon His revelation, which is mediated through Scripture, so that God is bound up with His Scripture. Such an approach is also shared by Tertullian. And, as Northrop Frye concludes in his study of the nature and workings of scriptural language, it also seems to be the approach presupposed by Scripture itself. He comments, "We could almost say that even the existence of God is an inference from the existence of the Bible: in the *beginning* was the Word".^[10] One must start with what God has in fact revealed of Himself, and hold fast to that. The Christian confession is certainly that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of Jesus Christ, is alone the one true God, who, together with His Son and His Spirit, created all things, and besides whom there is no other. But this is a confession, derived from His revelation, from His Scripture, not a metaphysical presupposition with which we approach and understand Scripture.

The second challenge is that provided by Valentinus, a native of Egypt, who, his disciples claimed, had been taught by Theodas, a pupil of St Paul. He also ended up in Rome, some time in the middle of the second century, where, according to Tertullian, he had hopes of being elected bishop "on account of his intellectual force and eloquence".^[11] It seems that when he was passed over, his teaching became more idiosyncratic, such that he was thereafter counted as one of the leaders of that modern construct "gnosticism".^[12] What is particularly interesting about Valentinus is that he does not feel the need to close a body of fixed authoritative writings, as did Marcion, but rather continues to reuse, imaginatively and creatively, texts and images from the Old Testament in much the same way that the New Testament, especially Revelation, had done, so producing his own works, such as the *Gospel of Truth*, a work which echoes much of Scripture (Old Testament and New Testament) yet is not at all tied to the text of Scripture.^[13] For Valentinus, the things spoken of in Scripture are expressions of the truth that is most authentically perceived in the heart, and as such, they are truths also seen in other places, in the writings of the philosophers and elsewhere, enabling Valentinus to draw diverse sources into his amalgam. As Valentinus puts it:

Many of the things written in publicly available books [i.e. Classical Greek literature] are found in the writings of God's church [Christian literature]. For this shared matter is the utterances that come from the heart, the law that is written on the heart.^[14]

The encounter with God takes place in the interiority of the heart, and it is this experience which comes to expression in diverse writings. This alone, according to Valentinus, is the origin of all truth, knowledge and wisdom. As David Dawson comments:

Valentinus relies on his own heart's visionary experience. There alone is the true origin of the wisdom that others routinely attribute to authoritative texts. ... One does not need to go to derivative sources, for the truth originally lies in the very interior of one's being.^[15]

One has direct access to truth itself, that which has inspired what is true in various writings. Having such direct access to wisdom, Valentinus no longer recognizes any distinction between Scripture and commentary, between source and interpretation. Rather, he reconfigures the language and images of Scripture in the light of his experience, and the results are themselves new compositions: "The visionary possesses those insights from which the shared wisdom of classical and Christian literature is derived; he or she is enabled not merely to comment (like Philo or Clement) ... but to create (... like Philo's Moses or Clement's *logos*)".^[16] The goal for the Gnostics was to attain the gift of gnosis, the higher knowledge, which enables them to draw the truth out of various ancient writings and redeploy them in new myths. The important point here is, as Frances Young puts it, that "Gnostic doctrine is revelatory, rather than traditional, textual or rational".^[17] What is of importance is my experience of God, around which I then reconfigure whatever I find in Scripture and elsewhere, to produce my own myth. Not only is there no canon for the Gnostic (either as right belief, or as a body of literature), but Scripture itself is both de-sacralized and superseded by the Gnostic's own experience and new literary creation, and so there is no interpretative engagement with Scripture.

Alongside such positions, we also, of course, have writers who espoused what was explicitly acknowledged, by the end of the second century, to be orthodox – figures such as St Ignatius, who was led under guard from Asia to Rome to be martyred at the beginning of the century, St Justin Martyr, a Christian teacher also in Rome in the middle of the second century, and later St Irenaeus of Lyons, a bishop in Gaul, the arch-enemy of the chaos theorists. In their own ways, these all maintained a text-interpretative framework for revelation, the point that Christ is preached by the apostles as having been crucified and risen "according to the Scriptures". So, what sense does it make to say that Christ is proclaimed "according to the Scriptures"? What is the relationship between Christ and the Scriptures?

To understand this, we need to recall the place and function of literature in the ancient world – and especially the idea of *mimesis* or emulation. To be cultured in the ancient world, to have acquired a *paideia*, meant to be versed in the classics. The classics provided not only models of sublime style and speech, but also supplied moral exemplars, encouraged virtue and piety, and provided the material in which to learn to think and on which to hone one's critical skills.^[18] In a word it meant providing a context, or we might say, a "world" in terms of which one understood oneself and the events of one's life. The same also goes for the Scripture of Israel.^[19] Throughout its history, the writers of Israel used images and figures of earlier events and figures to

understand, explicate and describe the events and figures at hand. For example, Noah, in Gen 9:1-9, is blessed to preside over a renewed world which is described in the vocabulary and imagery of Gen 1:26-31: Noah is presented in terms which make him a new Adam, establishing a typological relation between them. And what has been established with Noah, then becomes a paradigm for understanding subsequent events. So, for instance, after referring to the overflowing wrath which resulted in Israel being forsaken, in exile, Isaiah adds the following oracle:

“For this is like the days of Noah to me; as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you. For though the mountains may move and the hills be displaced, my graciousness will not depart from you, nor shall my covenant of peace be disrupted. Thus says the Lord your consoler” (Is 54:9-10).

The description of the divine wrath of the flood followed by the covenant of natural order established with Noah is used to explain the divine wrath of the exile which will give way to eternal covenant of divine grace. And so, again, a typology is created between the two episodes.

A similar typology is created by Isaiah between Abraham and the post-exilic situation of Israel. Isaiah encourages the despair of the people, and urges them to “recall Abraham your forefather, and Sarah who bore you; for he was one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him numerous” (Is 51:2). The people are promised national renewal however small the remnant is, if only they imitate the patriarchal action and return to their ancestral land: Abraham is a “type” both of the required action and of the promised outcome. And again, this invocation of Abraham as a type for the new exodus seems to be based upon an earlier typology already at work in the description of Abraham, this time between Abraham and the original exodus. Gen 12 describes how Abram was forced to leave Canaan, when the land was struck by famine, and migrate to Egypt. When Pharaoh made amorous advances towards Sarai, believing her to be Abram’s sister, the Lord brought a plague against Pharaoh and his household, prompting Pharaoh to send the patriarch away from his land. The typological parallelism is clear: Abraham is described as foreshadowing in his life the destiny of his descendants.

This process, re-employing images to understand and explain the present in terms of the past, and so to describe the past as anticipating the present, which is evident throughout the Scriptures continues in the New Testament, and its presentation of Christ “according to the Scriptures.” For instance, Christ’s Passion is described in terms of being the true and primary Pascha (now etymologized as “Passion”), of which the Exodus Pascha is but a type; Christ is the true Lamb of God. Or, according to another typology, in Jn 2:14: “Just as Moses raised the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, so that those who believe in Him may have eternal life.” This refers

back to Num 21, where the Israelites were complaining to Moses that it was folly to remain in the desert – the wisdom of the world arguing that it is preferable to go back to Egypt. God then struck the people with the deadly bites of serpents, and at the same time provided a remedy, the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole: by looking upon the serpent, the people regained life. Paul also appeals to this concatenation of images, when he points out to those in his Corinthian community who were seduced by wisdom, that the folly of God (Christ lifted on the Cross, as the bronze snake lifted on the pole) overcomes the wisdom of the world, and, as such, Christ is the true wisdom and power of God. In another vein, but using the same scriptural, literary or inter-textual technique, Matthew describes Christ as a new Moses, going up a mountain to deliver the law, while Paul describes Christ as the new Adam, correcting the mistakes of the first Adam, whom Paul explicitly describes as being “a type of the One to come” (Rom 5:14).

This is not to imply that the Gospel itself is, as Ricoeur claimed, simply “a rereading of an ancient Scripture”.^[20] The proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ is not straightforwardly derivable from Scripture. Rather, the death and resurrection of Christ acts as a catalyst, which then enables a subsequent rereading of the Scriptures (the Old Testament), providing the terms and images, the context, within which the apostles made sense of what happened, and with which they explained it and preached it, so justifying the claim that Christ died and rose “according to the Scriptures”. And this is indeed what we find in the Gospels, where, in the Evangelists’ descriptions of Christ and His activity, there is constant allusion to scriptural imagery, most explicitly in John, when Christ states: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me” (Jn 5:46). Alternatively, in Matthew the same intertextuality is found in terms of prophecy-fulfilment structuring the narrative, while in Luke it appears as the hermeneutic, the principle of interpretation, taught by the risen Christ, enlightening his disciples: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Lk 24:27, cf. Lk 24:44-49). This literary enlightening of the disciples is paralleled in John when Christ breathes on his disciples the Holy Spirit, the one he had promised, who would remind them of all things concerning Christ, leading them into all truth (cf. Jn 20:22; 14:26); Word and Spirit, as indicated earlier, can never be separated, and both are at work in the task of interpretation.

The writers of the second century were sensitive to the intertextual relationship between Scripture and the Gospel: not only does Scripture speak of Christ, but everything that is said in the apostolic writings is found already in Scripture. For instance, Justin Martyr asserts categorically:

In these books, then, of the prophets, we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming, born of a virgin, growing up to man’s estate, and healing every disease and every sickness and raising the dead, and being hated and unrecognized, and crucified and

dying, and rising again and ascending into heaven, and being and being-called the Son of God, and certain persons being sent by Him to every race of men proclaiming these things, and men from among the Gentiles, rather [than the Jews] believing in Him.^[21]

The point of importance for Justin is clearly *not* the “historical Christ,” in our modern sense of the word “history,” but rather to demonstrate the scriptural texture of what is said of Christ, and the scriptural texture of Christ Himself, the Word of God.

There is a two-fold process at work in the relationship between Scripture and the Gospel. On the one hand, the earliest Christian attempts to explain Christ are largely exegetical in character: what is said of Christ is rooted in the details of Scripture. Yet, on the other hand, it is God’s work in Christ that gives the form and direction to this exegesis. It is in this sense that Christ, as is often said, is the key to Scripture – He is the latent sense of that which was written, the Word in the words.

One of the most interesting examples of how the relationship between Christ, the Gospel and Scripture was understood is found in Ignatius. When he passed through Philadelphia on his way to Rome, Ignatius exhorted the Philadelphians to do everything according to Jesus Christ. Some of the Christians there stated that “If I do not find [it] in the archives, I do not believe [it to be] in the Gospel.” That is, they would only accept the proclamation about Christ insofar as it accorded with the “archives,” that is, with what has already been authoritatively written, Scripture. Ignatius simply replied that “it is written,” referring not to written apostolic texts, but to the claim that the proclamation about Christ was indeed according to the Scripture. When he later wrote a letter to the Philadelphians, Ignatius picks up this debate and attempts to clarify his position:

For me the archives are Jesus Christ, the inviolable archives are His cross and death and His resurrection and the faith which is through Him – in these I desire to be justified by your prayers. The priests are noble, but greater is the High Priest, entrusted with the Holy of Holies, who alone is entrusted with the secret things of God, since He is the door of the Father, through which enter Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the prophets and the apostles and the Church – all these, into the unity of God. But the Gospel has something distinctive: the advent of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, His passion and the resurrection: for the beloved prophets made their announcement with Him in view, but the Gospel is the completion of incorruption.^[22]

For Ignatius, Jesus Christ is the sole locus of God’s revelation; He is the “mouth which cannot lie, by which the Father has spoken truly” (*Romans*, 8.2). As such, all the prophets looked to Him and spoke of Him; as he says elsewhere, “they lived according to Jesus Christ” and “were inspired by His grace” to proclaim “that there is only one God, who has manifested Himself through Jesus Christ His Son, Who is His Word proceeding from silence” (*Magnesians*, 8.2). Jesus Christ, His passion and resurrection,

alone is salvific. Hence it is only through this door that the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, and all those who have harkened to their call, enter to the Father. For Ignatius, the archives when understood correctly speak of Jesus Christ, more, they *are* Jesus Christ, in the sense that He is the embodiment of Scripture – the Word made flesh.

The Gospel, in turn, contains no new word or revelation. Its distinctiveness lies in the fact that it contains, and so re-presents, what had only been announced (cf. *Philadelphians*, 5.2): the advent of Christ, His passion and resurrection. Elsewhere Ignatius exhorts us to give heed to the prophets and especially the Gospel “in which the passion has been revealed to us and the resurrection has been accomplished” (*Smyrneans*, 7.2) – in the Gospel is accomplished what had previously only been intimated. The inseparability, for Ignatius, of Christ and the Gospel is also shown clearly when he asserts elsewhere that “Jesus Christ, being now in the Father, is more plainly visible” (*Romans*, 3.2). That is, it is in the Gospel, the apostolic preaching of the crucified and risen Christ, according to the Scriptures, that we see and understand Jesus Christ, rather than through establishing what were the bare, uninterpreted historical facts.

The analysis of the relationship between Scripture, the Gospel and Christ, is furthered by Irenaeus in various ways. For instance, if what is said of Christ is rooted in the images and details of Scripture (Old Testament), such that a typological relationship is established between what is said of Christ in the New Testament and what is said in the Old Testament, then Christ can be said to be present in Scripture – hidden as a treasure in a field.

If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures this way, he will find in them the word concerning Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling. For Christ is the “treasure which was hidden in the field” [Mt 13:44], that is, in this world – for “the field is the world” [Mt 13:38] – [a treasure] hidden in the Scriptures, for He was indicated by means of types and parables, which could not be understood by men prior to the consummation of those things which had been predicted, that is, the advent of Christ. And therefore it was said to Daniel the prophet, “Shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the consummation, until many learn and knowledge abounds. For, when the dispersion shall be accomplished, they shall know all these things” [Dan 12:4, 7]. And Jeremiah also says, “In the last days they shall understand these things” [Jer 23:20]. For every prophecy, before its fulfilment, is nothing but enigmas and ambiguities to men; but when the time has arrived, and the prediction has come to pass, then it has an exact exposition. And for this reason, when at this present time the Law is read by the Jews, it is like a fable, for they do not possess the explanation of all things which pertain to the human advent of the Son of God; but when it is read by Christians, it is a treasure, hid in a field, but brought to light by the cross of Christ, and explained, both enriching the understanding of men, and showing forth the wisdom of God, and making known His dispensations with regard to man, and prefiguring the kingdom of

Christ, and preaching in anticipation the good news of the inheritance of the holy Jerusalem, and proclaiming beforehand that the man who loves God shall advance so far as even to see God, and hear His Word, and be glorified, from hearing His conversation, to such an extent, that others will not be able to behold the glory of his countenance, as was said by Daniel, "Those who understand shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and many of the righteous as the stars for ever and ever" [Dan 13:3]. In this manner, then, I have shown it to be, if anyone read the Scriptures.^[23]

The image given by Christ, of treasure hidden in the field, or the world, is used by Irenaeus to refer to Christ Himself: prior to the advent of Christ, prior more specifically to the cross, Christ is hidden as a treasure in Scripture. Christ is hidden in Scripture in prophecies and types, in the words and events of the patriarchs and prophets, which prefigure what was to happen in and through Christ in His human advent.

The patriarchs and prophets disseminated these prophecies and types throughout the world in the writings of Scripture, preparing those who read Scripture for the advent of Christ Himself. However, they are only prophecies and types; what they indicate is not yet known. And so, for those who read Scripture, without the explanation of what it is that they foreshadow, the Word they contain and the Gospel they anticipate, Scripture remains only myths and fables. But now, through the cross, the Passion of Christ, light is shed on these writings, revealing what they in fact mean and how they are thus the Word of God – the types are made clear in the Gospel. So, for Irenaeus, Jesus Christ, as preached by the apostles, the Gospel, is the One hidden in Scripture as its veiled meaning: He is the Word of God hidden in the words of Scripture, but now revealed through the Gospel of the Cross.

To help elucidate the relationship between Christ, the Gospel, and Scripture, Irenaeus employs a series of literary or rhetorical terms. One of Irenaeus' favorite terms is recapitulation. According to Quintilian, a first century Roman rhetorician, "recapitulation" is a literary technique by which a whole case, argument or narrative is summarized as an epitome, so that its overall impression can be much greater or more forceful.^[24] It is in this sense that Paul uses the term in Rom 13:9:

The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not kill," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

That is, the New Testament is a recapitulation of the Old Testament; it is not itself a new revelation, but an epitome making clear what had previously been obscure. And it is precisely in this way, and in reference to this passage, that Irenaeus explains that the apostles have provided us with a resume or epitome which recapitulates the prolixity of the law, fulfilling what had been spoken of in Isaiah 10:22-3 (quoted in Rom 9:28), "God will complete and cut short His Word in righteousness, for God will make a concise

Word in all the world".^[25] For Irenaeus, the recapitulation effected by the Word of God in His incarnation, is effected by God through the apostles and their concise word: what the apostles proclaimed about Christ is, as we have seen, made up of the texture of the Scriptures, no longer proclaimed in the obscurity of types and prophecies, but clearly and concisely, in a resume. In the Gospel, the apostolic preaching recapitulating Scripture in an epitome, the incomprehensible and invisible Word has become visible and comprehensible. The "fables" can now be seen as types and prophecies, having been brought to light, retrospectively, by the cross. The prolix word of God is summarized in the Gospel, which recapitulates the whole in a concise Word.

This is in fact what we have seen in terms of the way that the Gospel is proclaimed using the themes and images derived from Scripture through the prism of the cross, all the diverse types brought together in a single proclamation. In reverse this also implies the pre-existence of the Son of God, hidden in what had previously been types and enigmas. So, Irenaeus comments:

The Son of God did not then begin to exist (at the incarnation), but was with the Father from the beginning; but when He became incarnate, and was made man, He recapitulated in Himself the long history (*expositionem*) of human beings, and furnished us, in resume (*in compendio*), with salvation, so that what we lost in Adam – to be according to the image and likeness of God – that we might recover in Christ Jesus. (AH 3.18.1)

The Incarnation, therefore, is not an absolute beginning, but a recapitulation of the continual presence and activity of the Word. Hence it is Christ Jesus who recapitulates the long line of human history. Recapitulating in Himself this history, Jesus Christ furnishes us with salvation through a resume, an epitome, which condenses or concentrates, and so makes present, or re-presents, all the activity of the Word prior to the Incarnation. And, as we have seen, the recapitulation effected by the Word of God in His incarnation, is made by God through the apostles and their concise word: what the apostles proclaimed about Christ is made up of the texture of the Old Testament Scripture – the common second century Christocentric reading of Scripture – but no longer proclaimed in the obscurity of types and prophecies, but clearly and concisely, in a resume.

Irenaeus compares this use of Scripture to that of the Gnostics (cf. AH 1.8-10). The Gnostics, he says, on the basis of their own *hypothesis*, distort Scripture; it is, he says, as if someone were to take a beautiful mosaic of a king, dismantle the stones and rearrange them to form a picture of a dog, claiming that this was the original intention of the writer. But those, he continues, who have preserved unchanged the canon of truth which they received at baptism, will recognize this blasphemy; they will not recognize the picture, but they will recognize the stones, and will be able to rearrange them in their proper order to fit into the Body of Truth. He then goes on to specify the canon of

truth: it is faith in One God the Father, one Lord Jesus Christ and one Holy Spirit, together with mention of their salvific work. This creed-like formula is not an arbitrary imposition upon Scripture. It is rather the hypothesis, or presupposition, one must have if one to read Scripture and see the picture of the King – of Christ. This excludes other pictures – but then, quite simply, other pictures are not that of Christ. There is no depiction of Christ other than that which is “according to the Scriptures,” not, at least, if one wants to have some claim to the Christ spoken of by the apostles.

This implies, very strongly, that our relationship to God through Christ, the unique locus of God’s revelation, is not unmediated or direct; it is not enough to see the “Jesus of history” to see God, nor to imagine God as a partner in my world, one with whom I can dialogue directly, bypassing His own Word. Rather the locus of revelation, and the medium for our relationship with God, is precisely in the apostolic preaching of Him, the Gospel which refracts Scripture through the cross, the Gospel in which the Word latent in Scripture has become visible and comprehensible. The Gospel itself, as we have seen, stands in an inter-textual, interpretative relationship with Scripture. And it does so in a definitive way for us – our faith must always be apostolic. Definitive revelation comes by the apostles. As Irenaeus asserted:

We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.

...

These have all declared to us that there is one God, Creator of heaven and earth, announced by the Law and Prophets; and one Christ the Son of God (AH 3.1.1-2).

That they preached the Gospel and then wrote it down is important, for it helps to understand the Orthodox Church’s insistence on Scripture and Tradition, and the place of creedal formula within this. Irenaeus claims that the preaching of the Gospel, that upon which the Church is founded, has been preserved intact, and that this (and only this) is what constitutes the apostolic tradition. It has been maintained through a succession of bishops teaching and preaching the same Gospel. He continues a little later:

It is within the power of all, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted as bishops in the Churches, and to demonstrate the succession of these men to our own times (AH 3.3.1).

It is not that bishops, instituted by the apostles, automatically preserved the tradition of the apostles, the Gospel which the apostles delivered, but that they are bishops of the Church only to the extent that they do so, for the Church is founded upon the Gospel. More important is the fact that the content of tradition is nothing other than that which is also preserved in a written form, as Scripture – they are not two different sources. The Apostolic Tradition is not the accumulation of various customs, nor does it provide us with access to knowledge necessary for salvation which is not also contained in Scripture. It is the Gnostics, according to Irenaeus, who appeal to tradition for teachings not contained in Scripture. Tradition is, as Florovsky put it, “Scripture rightly understood,” that is, Scripture read as speaking of Christ.^[26]

The canon of truth, then, is not so much a list of obligatory beliefs, but a hypothesis or presupposition for reading Scripture *as Scripture* – to see in it the image of the King, rather than simply as a curious collection of ancient texts which might be interesting for what they say, but do not have much to do with our relationship with God. The canon, in this sense, and this is its primary sense, is equivalent to the Christocentric reading of Scripture, seeing the whole of Scripture in the light of Christ and as speaking of Christ, the Old Testament invisibly in types and enigmas, the New Testament visibly in a clear epitome. This is, in fact, how Clement of Alexandria defines the canon:

The ecclesiastical rule is the concord and harmony of the law and the prophets in the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord.^[27]

This is the primary meaning of the term canon – the interrelationship between Scripture and Gospel, proclaiming Christ. In the light of this, certain apostolic works come to be called canonical, meaning that they are of the canon. Similarly, some of the classical liturgical anaphoras are also called “canons,” as they epitomizing the whole of Scripture. Likewise those saints whose lives and teachings embody the truth are also called “canons” of faith and piety. This canon calls for continual reflection, just as do Christ’s questions “Who do you say I am?” and “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (Mt 16:15; Lk 10:26) The centuries that followed did so reflect, and used all the means at their disposal. If tradition, as I have suggested, is essentially the right interpretation of Scripture, following the same canon, then it cannot change. There are many monuments to this correct interpretation of Scripture – writings of the Fathers and saints, schools of iconography and hagiography and so on, and they all point to the same the vision of the King, or rather they are only accepted insofar as they do so point to the same vision. The Word grows, as Acts puts it (Acts 6:7), in that more and more people believe on it and reflect on it, but it remains the same Word: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever (Heb13:8). A tradition with potential for growth ultimately undermines the Gospel itself, it would leave open the possibility for further revelation, and therefore the Gospel would no longer be sure and certain. If our faith is one and the same as that of the apostles, then, as Irenaeus claimed, it is equally immune from improvement by articulate or speculative thinkers, as well as diminution by

inarticulate believers (cf. *AH* 1.10.3). We must take seriously the famous saying of Vincent of Lerins, “We must hold what has been believed everywhere, always and by all,”^[28] at least by those who have adhered to one and the same Gospel that was delivered by the apostles at the beginning. From an Orthodox perspective there is therefore no such thing as dogmatic development. What there is, of course, is ever new, more detailed and comprehensive explanations elaborated in defense of one and the same faith, responding each time to a particular context or controversy. But it is one and the same faith which has been believed from the beginning – the Gospel according to Scripture.

Fr. John Behr

^[1] F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. by E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), s.v.

^[2] P. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), argues for the emergence of monepiscopacy in the time of Victor (189-98); A. Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), places the crucial period in the first half of the third century.

^[3] R. Stark, “E Contrario,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6.2 (1998), 261.

^[4] *The Letter to Diognetus*, 5.5, ed. and trans. by K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1976).

^[5] St Gregory Palamas, “Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts,” 78, in *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, & K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

^[6] Cf. J. Behr, “The Word of God in the Second Century,” *Pro Ecclesia*.

^[7] Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57

^[8] *Ibid.* 167.

^[9] Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1.19, ed. and trans. by E. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

^[10] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 61.

[11] Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians*, 4; trans. in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

[12] On the difficulty of the category of “Gnosticism”, see Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for the dismantling of a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[13] Cf. Jacqueline A. Williams, *Biblical Interpretation in the Gnostic Gospel of Truth from Nag Hammadi*, SBL Diss. 79, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988).

[14] Fragment G, from Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.52.3-4; trans. in B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: Ancient Wisdom for the New Age* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 243; my insertions, following D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 167.

[15] Dawson, *Ibid.*

[16] Dawson, *ibid.* 168.

[17] Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 61.

[18] Cf. St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Panegyric on St Basil*, *Oration* 43.11, discussing the many benefits of education, comments that “from secular literature we have received the principles of enquiry and speculation.” Trans. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

[19] Cf. M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), esp. 350-80; J. L. Kugel and R. A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

[20] P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 51. See the comments by J. Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 70.

[21] St Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 31.7, ed. by M. Marcovich, PTS 38 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994); trans. in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

[22] St Ignatius of Antioch, *Philadelphians*, 8.2-9.3, ed. and trans. by K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1985).

[23] St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies [=AH]*, 4.26.1; ed. A. Rousseau et al, *Sources chretiennes*, 100, 152-3, 210-11, 263-4, 293-4, (Paris: Cerf, 1965-82); trans. in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

[24] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.1.1, ed. and trans. by H. E. Butler, Loeb Classical Library, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1925-30).

[25] Cf. St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 87, trans. J. Behr (New York: SVS, 1997).

[26] G. Florovsky, "The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church," in his *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Vaduz: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 75.

[27] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.15.125.3, ed. O. Stahlin, 3rd ed. rev. by L. Fruchtel, GCS 52 (Berlin: Akademie, 1960); trans. in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

[28] Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, 2, ed. R. S. Moxon (Cambridge Patristic Texts, 1915); trans. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

[John Behr](#)

12 / 12 / 2003