

On the Interpretation of the Holy Bible, Part One

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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.