



THE BASICS OF THE ORTHODOX FAITH

Church Fathers and Theologians about the Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition

On Holy Scripture

St. Irenaeus wrote, “If anyone reads the Scripture carefully, they will find some word, some hidden treasure in the field, which is Christ.”

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What makes the Old Testament Scriptures valuable to the Church? The fact that a) they teach belief in the one, true God, and the fulfillment of God's commandments and b) they speak about the Saviour. Christ Himself points this out. Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life and they are they which testify of Me, He said to the Jewish scribes. In the parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Saviour puts these words about the Rich Man's brothers into the mouth of Abraham: They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. "Moses" means the first five books of the Old Testament; "the prophets" — the last sixteen books. Speaking with His disciples, the Saviour mentioned the Psalter in addition to these books: ... all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning Me. After the Mystical Supper, when they chanted a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives, says the Evangelist Matthew. This refers to the chanting of psalms. The Saviour's words and examples are sufficient to make the Church esteem these books — the Law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms — to make her preserve them and learn from them.

According to the account in the Acts of the Apostles, when the Apostle Philip met one of Queen Candace's eunuchs on the road and saw the book of the Prophet Isaiah in his hands, he asked the eunuch, Understandest thou what thou readest? He replied, How can I, except some man should guide me? (Acts 8:30-31). Philip instructed him in the Christian understanding of what he had been reading, with the result that this reading from the Old Testament was followed immediately, there on the road itself, by the eunuch's baptism. As the Apostle interpreted in the light of the Christian faith what the eunuch had been reading so we also must approach reading the Old Testament from the standpoint of the Christian Faith. It needs to be understood in a New Testament way, in the light which proceeds from the Church. For this purpose the Church offers us the patristic commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, preferring that we should assimilate the contents of the sacred books through them. It is necessary to bear in mind that the Old Testament is the shadow of good things to come (Heb. 10:1). If the reader forgets this, he may not receive the edification he should, as the Apostle Paul warns. Concerning the Jews he writes that even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their hearts: with them it remaineth untaken away in the reading of the Old Testament, that is to say, they are not spiritually enlightened unto faith. Nevertheless, when they shall turn to the Lord, the Apostle concludes his thought, the veil shall be taken away (2 Cor. 3:14-16). So we must also read these books from a Christian point of view. This means to read them while remembering the Lord's words: ... They [the Scriptures] are they which testify of Me. They require not simply reading, but searching. In them are contained the preparation for the coming of Christ, promises, prophecies, and types or antitypes of Christ. It is according to this principle that the Old Testament readings are chosen for use in church services. Furthermore, if the Church offers us moral edification in them, she chooses such passages as are written, as it were, in the light of the Gospel, which speak, for example, of the "eternal life" of the righteous ones, of "righteousness according to faith," and of Grace. If we Christians approach the books of the Old Testament in this light, then we find in them an enormous wealth of edification. Even as drops of dew on plants shine with all the colors of the rainbow when the sunlight falls on them, even as twigs of trees that are covered with ice are

iridescent with the tints of color as they reflect the sun, so these scriptures reflect that which was foreordained to appear later: the events, deeds, and teaching of the Gospel. But when the sun has set, those dew drops and the icy covering on the trees will no longer caress our eyes, although they themselves remain the same as they were when the sun was shining. It is the same with the Old Testament Scriptures. Without the sunlight of the Gospel, they remain old and decaying, as the Apostle said of them, as the Church has also called them, and that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away, as the Apostle expresses it (*Heb. 8:13*). The Kingdom of the chosen people of old has come to an end, the Kingdom of Christ has come: **the law and the prophets were until John; from henceforth the Kingdom of God is proclaimed** (*Luke 16:16*).

Some thoughts

The Bible is God's written word. It is the record of God's dealings with man. It reveals how God has acted and how man has responded. It contains a library of many books, the product not of one period and place but of many minds and ages. It is not a book of science; it is a book of religion, supreme in morals and ethics.

The Bible is a Book for religious faith. The God of the Bible is the God of creation. The Bible opens with the words, "In the beginning God...." He is the first cause, the source of all that follows. He brought form out of formlessness and light out of darkness, and finally, He created life itself. Man, as seen in the pages of the Bible, sometimes walking with God and sometimes apart from Him, is invested by the God of the Bible with freedom of moral choice.

The central theme of the Bible is that since man by himself cannot lift himself, nor by his own strength keep all of the laws of God, God has acted to help him. God has entered history to save him. For the Bible is also the story of man's redemption. God "Gave His only Son," because He loved man and wanted him to have the fullness of life that belongs to the perfect creation which He had purposed before time was. God did not create man and then abandon him. God entered into man's life. The life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ are the central themes of the whole Biblical story, the purpose for which the Bible was written.

The Bible has one story. It is the record of God's making Himself known to man and of man's response to God's self-disclosure. The Old Testament is the story of a Covenant people in a community of faith, ancient Israel, journeying toward a new and better place in time, sometimes obedient and sometimes disobedient to God, Who was always striving to break through to show Himself in completeness. He spoke through His prophets, through saints, seers, and rulers, and the events of history until the time had "Fully come when everything in heaven and earth should be unified in Christ," (Eph. 1:10) as Paul put it, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," (John 1:14) as John put it. God spoke the living Word in terms humanity could understand, "The way, the truth, the life" in a Person. The New Testament continues the theme with the people of the New Covenant, the new Israel of God, the Body of Christ, the Church of witnessing people journeying through history. Here is the Book of man in his pilgrimage through time and beyond time, learning to know God, to discern His will and do it, living in a community of faith, ever witnessing to the coming Kingdom, the law of which is love, and the Ruler of which will be the transcendent God at the final consummation of history.

But the major theme of the Holy Scripture is the salvation of humanity by the Messiah, the incarnate Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Old Testament proclaims salvation in the forms of symbols and prophecies about the Messiah and the Kingdom of Heaven. The New Testament enunciates the actual realization of our salvation through the incarnation, life and teachings of the God-Man, sealed through His death and Resurrection. Depending upon the times they were written, the Holy Writings are grouped into the New and Old Testaments. The first contains that which the Lord revealed to the world through God-inspired prophets before Christ's appearance on Earth, while the second group describes that which was taught by our Lord Savior Himself and his Apostles.

The prophets and the Apostles did not write through their own human intellect but rather through God's inspiration. He cleansed their souls, enlightened their reasoning and revealed to them mysteries of faith and of the future, normally inaccessible to the human mind. That is why their writings are described as divinely inspired: "For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy

Spirit," says the apostle Peter (2 Peter 1:21). The apostle Paul calls the writings as divinely-inspired in 2 Timothy 3:16. Regarding the importance of the Holy Scriptures Jesus said, "Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18). Moses and Aaron are examples of God's revelations to the prophets. God sent a very reticent Moses, his brother Aaron as an intermediary. Being inarticulate, Moses's bafflement as to how he would expound God's will to the people was answered by the Lord: "Thou (Moses) shalt speak unto him (Aaron) and put words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. And he shall be the spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God" (Exodus 4:15-16).

While believing in the inspirationally divine qualities of the Bible, one must remember that it is the Book of the Church. According to God's plan, people are called upon to save themselves not on an individual basis but as a society in which He guides and dwells. This society is called the Church. By historical definition, the Church is divided into the Old Testament which governed the Jewish people, and the New Testament to which the Orthodox Christians belong. The New Testament inherited the spiritual richness of the Old Testament, namely the word of God. ***The Church not only preserved the word of God but has retained its correct understanding.*** This is because, just as the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets and Apostles, He continues to live in the Church and to lead her. Consequently, the Church gives us correct guidance for the application of its written wealth: that which is more actual and important, and those passages that have retained a historical significance only but are not relevant to modern times.

Holy Tradition

"I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2), and he

commands the Thessalonians, “*So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter*” (2 Thess. 2:15). He even goes so far as to order, “*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us*” (2 Thess. 3:6).

To make sure that the apostolic tradition would be passed down after the deaths of the apostles, Paul told Timothy, “*What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*” (2 Tim. 2:2).

Church Fathers about Holy Tradition

St. Papias

“Papias [A.D. 120], who is now mentioned by us, affirms that he received the sayings of the apostles from those who accompanied them, and he, moreover, asserts that he heard in person Aristion and the presbyter John. Accordingly, he mentions them frequently by name, and in his writings gives their traditions [concerning Jesus]. . . . [There are] other passages of his in which he relates some miraculous deeds, stating that he acquired the knowledge of them from tradition” (fragment in Eusebius, Church History 3:39 [A.D. 312]).

St. Irenaeus

“As I said before, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although she is disseminated throughout the whole world, yet guarded it, as if she occupied but one house. She likewise believes these things just as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart; and harmoniously she proclaims them and teaches them and hands them down, as if she possessed but one mouth. For, while the languages of the world are

diverse, nevertheless, the authority of the tradition is one and the same” (Against Heresies 1:10:2 [A.D. 189]).

“That is why it is surely necessary to avoid them [heretics], while cherishing with the utmost diligence the things pertaining to the Church, and to lay hold of the tradition of truth. . . . What if the apostles had not in fact left writings to us? Would it not be necessary to follow the order of tradition, which was handed down to those to whom they entrusted the churches?” (ibid., 3:4:1).

“It is possible, then, for everyone in every church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the apostles which has been made known throughout the whole world. And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted bishops by the apostles and their successors to our own times—men who neither knew nor taught anything like these heretics rave about.

“But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the successions of all the churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, that church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles.

“With this church, because of its superior origin, all churches must agree—that is, all the faithful in the whole world—and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition” (ibid., 3:3:1–2).

St. Clement of Alexandria

“Well, they preserving the tradition of the blessed doctrine derived directly from the holy apostles, Peter, James, John, and Paul, the sons receiving it from the father (but few were like the fathers), came by God’s will to us also to deposit those ancestral and apostolic seeds. And well I know that they will exult; I do not mean delighted with this tribute, but solely on account of the preservation of the truth, according as they delivered it. For such a

sketch as this, will, I think, be agreeable to a soul desirous of preserving from loss the blessed tradition” (Miscellanies 1:1 [A.D. 208]).

Origen

“Although there are many who believe that they themselves hold to the teachings of Christ, there are yet some among them who think differently from their predecessors. The teaching of the Church has indeed been handed down through an order of succession from the apostles and remains in the churches even to the present time. That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition” (The Fundamental Doctrines 1:2 [A.D. 225]).

St. Cyprian of Carthage

“The Church is one, and as she is one, cannot be both within and without. For if she is with Novatian, she was not with [Pope] Cornelius. But if she was with Cornelius, who succeeded the bishop Fabian by lawful ordination, and whom, besides the honor of the priesthood the Lord glorified also with martyrdom, Novatian is not in the Church; nor can he be reckoned as a bishop, who, succeeding to no one, and despising the evangelical and apostolic tradition, sprang from himself. For he who has not been ordained in the Church can neither have nor hold to the Church in any way” (Letters 75:3 [A.D. 253]).

St. Athanasius

“Again we write, again keeping to the apostolic traditions, we remind each other when we come together for prayer; and keeping the feast in common, with one mouth we truly give thanks to the Lord” (Festal Letters 2:7 [A.D. 330]).

“But you are blessed, who by faith are in the Church, dwell upon the foundations of the faith, and have full satisfaction, even the highest degree of faith which remains among you unshaken. For it has come down to you

from apostolic tradition, and frequently accursed envy has wished to unsettle it, but has not been able” (ibid., 29).

St. Basil the Great

“Of the dogmas and messages preserved in the Church, some we possess from written teaching and others we receive from the tradition of the apostles, handed on to us in mystery. In respect to piety, both are of the same force. No one will contradict any of these, no one, at any rate, who is even moderately versed in matters ecclesiastical. Indeed, were we to try to reject unwritten customs as having no great authority, we would unwittingly injure the gospel in its vitals; or rather, we would reduce [Christian] message to a mere term” (The Holy Spirit 27:66 [A.D. 375]).

St. Augustine

“The custom [of not rebaptizing converts] . . . may be supposed to have had its origin in apostolic tradition, just as there are many things which are observed by the whole Church, and therefore are fairly held to have been enjoined by the apostles, which yet are not mentioned in their writings” (On Baptism, Against the Donatists 5:23[31] [A.D. 400]).

“But the admonition that he [Cyprian] gives us, ‘that we should go back to the fountain, that is, to apostolic tradition, and thence turn the channel of truth to our times,’ is most excellent, and should be followed without hesitation” (ibid., 5:26[37]).

“But in regard to those observances which we carefully attend and which the whole world keeps, and which derive not from Scripture but from Tradition, we are given to understand that they are recommended and ordained to be kept, either by the apostles themselves or by plenary [ecumenical] councils, the authority of which is quite vital in the Church” (Letter to Januarius [A.D. 400]).

St. John Chrysostom

“[Paul commands,] ‘Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word or by our letter’ [2 Thess. 2:15]. From this it is clear that they did not hand down everything by letter, but there is much also that was not written. Like that which was written, the unwritten too is worthy of belief. So let us regard the tradition of the Church also as worthy of belief. Is it a tradition? Seek no further” (Homilies on Second Thessalonians [A.D. 402]).