

### 3. THE HOLY SCRIPTURE. REFERENCES FOR AN ORTHODOX READING IN THE 3<sup>rd</sup> MILLENNIUM

#### Abstract

The study approaches the sphere of biblical hermeneutics, with the intention of underlining the utility and actuality of some patristic hermeneutical principles within an orthodox reading of the Holy Scripture nowadays. Saint Chrysostom is a prominent example for the type of lecture promoted within the orthodox environment and, implicitly, by the present study.



PAULA BUD

Faculty of Orthodox Theology  
"Babeş-Bolyai"  
University in Cluj-Napoca

#### Keywords

word, hermeneutics, communication, Scripture, pathway

#### Word and Communication

I would like to start by proposing an effective/ a possible distinction between *word* and *words*: the first, even when written without capital letter, expresses unity, whereas the latter may suggest a certain degree of scattering, a commotion of the unity, a meaning that is closer to "talk", understood from the perspective of "all the vain words" for which we are to answer in the Judgement day. What is the negative compound of this word, why does it become a motive for our punishment? Because it reflects honestly the heart, as our Saviour says: "What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them [...] but the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them." (Mt 15:11-18). And if the Word is replaced by words on the tables of our hearts, then the flesh turns into stone again and the man transforms his heart into a wall standing between him and God. At the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, we witness the explosive progress of the means of communication, and we are, paradoxically, spectators of a process of terrible isolation. Loneliness has become, for many of us, an acute feeling, in a time when the use of the word, spoken, written or broadcasted has an overwhelming place in the life of the society (Gross 2007, 7).

And if it (the word) fulfils its most profound call when it practices the exchange and is accomplished as a relationship element, capable of reception and dialogue (Gross 2007, 7), it means that a great deal of the words we speak or write today are lacking in consistency, and become too often “words”, incapable of accomplishing an authentic communication. In this context, the Word of the Scripture may become the starting point for a replacement of the word in its true nature, a state in which it becomes a means of authentic communication, a space in which man meets with God and with his neighbor (Gross 2007, 11). But this is not possible if we adopt an exclusively scientific approach of the Holy Scripture, an approach which ignores its revealed character, its importance for the Christian’s life and implicitly its resurrectional testimony. Father John Breck considers that today in the Orthodox Church we must rediscover and develop a biblical hermeneutics faithful, on one hand, to the Fathers’ spiritual approach, and relevant, on the other hand, for the modern world (Breck 1999, 47). This is why I have extracted, for the present case, several hermeneutical references from the works of Saint John Chrysostom, since his exegesis has been determined by pastoral preoccupations, placing himself permanently in the service of the Christian preaching (Breck 1999, 88). Firstly, I would like to linger on a few aspects of the word in the field of understanding characteristic for the Old Testament.

### **Creative word and name**

Being a researcher in the field of Old Testament, when I speak about word I go back, with priority, to the creation of man, there where the word “represents through itself [...] the very essence of the reality which it brings into existence” (Gross 2007, 24). In the strict reality of human existence, Descartes pointed out that the 4<sup>th</sup> cause of our mistakes may be the fact that we tie our thoughts to words which are incapable to express them completely (Gross 2007, 8). A totally different image is presented to us by the book of Genesis, in which “the thought is a paradigm, the word is the active, dynamic, acting expression of the act itself which exists in the paradigm” (Chirilă 2003, 10). The creation which is fulfilled through word proves proximity of essence between language and world, a profound and fundamental unity of the creation (Gross 2007, 24). This act of creation through word, which has as consequence the appearance on Earth of all the creatures but man is, in the opinion of the Holy Fathers, a reason to praise the Lord: “Behold, the heavens and the earth are; they proclaim that they were created [...]”. They proclaim also that they made not themselves: *therefore, we are because we have*

*been made; we were not therefore, before we were, so as to make ourselves. [...] All these praise Thee, the Creator of all. But how dost Thou make them? How, O God, didst Thou make heaven and earth? [...] in Thy Word Thou madest them.*" (St. Augustin 1985, 244-5)

In the same way we find presented in the Book of Psalms the creative act for the praise of our Lord: "Let them praise the name of the Lord, for at His command they were created." (Psalm 148:5). But the image of the creative act presents man as a being which enjoys a special status, as "the only one of all beings made by God's hand" (St. Basil the Great 1986, 372), thus through a direct involvement of God and not through word although, paradoxically, man is the only being that has the gift of speech (Gross 2007, 15). He will be invited to end the creative act by naming the animals: "Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. so the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals." (Gn 2:19-20). Thus, man, the only being that has the gift of speech and the power of naming, is the only element for which the creative act is not tied to language and for which the denomination does not end the creative process (Gross 2007, 26). For the Jewish thinking, man is a being of language because his essential mission consists of naming, meaning, to free the language in himself, to free the word in order to translate the language of things into the human language. To name in order to pull the creative energy from the opaque substance that the divine word has put there with the purpose of finding through its language the linguistic intimacy that links the mute creation with God. Finally, through the naming of the livestock, Adam distinguishes himself from this mute universe and becomes aware of his singularity (Gross 2007, 28) as a being destined to dialogue/ to communication with God and with his neighbour within the creation.

### ***The Scripture and the book of nature***

In general, one may settle the boundaries of two stages in the communication between God and man: The Edenic dialogue and the communication after the original sin. In his state before the Edenic fall, man had the power of knowing God and good through the natural law, according to which he achieved awareness of the good he was allowed to do and the bad he had to avoid (St. John Chrysostom PG 49, 133; 55, 251). Through this, although he didn't have a written law, man could lead a life of virtue, a life according to God's wish. How? By following the inner voice of his conscience, which he

had as sole teacher (St. John Chrysostom PG 54, 471; 48, 1059). But, besides this advice, man had the communion of the reasons of the beings from which he could achieve knowledge about the unseen features of God, about His eternal power and about the divinity of His nature, consequently with the help of the creatures, as Saint Paul says in Romans 1, 20: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." Thus, God has sealed the entire creation with the possibility of feeling and acknowledging His existence and presence (Young 2000: 695). The text expresses, as such, a natural theology most likely rooted in the Jewish-Hellenistic wisdom theology (Dunn 1988, 56).

This means of knowledge is considered by Saint John Chrysostom to be more believable than that transposed in letter for the human being achieves it with the help of things and it is more trustworthy and clear (St. John Chrysostom PG 49, 105). In a time when the human being tries to claim its absolute authority on the creation, seemingly forgetting the responsibility that came with the initial gift of ruling in God's image, and working not to fulfil its purpose but to destroy it unreasonably, this re-evaluation of the book of nature is necessary for it is of great importance according to the Holy Fathers. I will include here two quotes that I consider to be relevant to this matter.

Speaking about the ways in which God revealed Himself to His creation, Saint John Damascene considers first and foremost the way of natural knowledge: "God, didn't let us in complete ignorance, for the knowledge of God's existence is impregnated by Him naturally in all the people. Besides this, creation itself, its conservation and government speak about the greatness of the divine nature" (St. John Damascene 2004, 10). Saint John Chrysostom expresses very clear the fact that the Scriptures have not been given to the humankind from the very beginning, but only later on, because "It was because God was desirous of instructing the nature of man, not by letters, but by things. But what does the expression *by things* signify? It signifies by means of the Creation itself" (St. John Chrysostom 2016, 1). Therefore, according to the word of Saint Paul, not even the pagans have an excuse before God that they didn't serve Him, because although they didn't know the Gospels, they could get to know God from his creatures. Saint John explains in detail this possibility offered to the nations: "How were they able to know God, and who hath shewed? Declare this. "God", saith he, "hath shewed it unto them". In what manner? By the sending of what kind of prophet? what evangelist? what kind of teacher? if the holy Scriptures were not yet given. "The invisible things of Him",

says he, “from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal Power and Godhead, so that people are without excuse” (Rom 1:20). But what he means is just this, He hath placed His Creation in the midst, before the eyes of all men, in order that they may guess at the Creator from His works” (St. John Chrysostom 2016, 1).

Explaining a passage from the Genesis, Saint Basil the Great prays for the people to understand Him and to know God from the contemplation of the creation: “May God who, after having made such great things [...] grant you the intelligence of His truth, so that you may raise yourselves from visible things to the invisible Being, and that the grandeur and beauty of creatures may give you a just idea of the Creator – “for the visible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen ...” – thus earth, air, sky, water, day, night, all visible things, remind us of who is our Benefactor” (St. Basil the Great 1986, 109).

“He who understands His creator from the creation of the world, also knows God from the wisdom with which the world has been created. For «God’s invisible qualities since the creation of the world are visible when you think of what He has created»” (St. Basil the Great 1986, 469). Furthermore, he explains in what manner the divine wisdom is revealed in the creatures: “...the wisdom revealed in the world, almost speaking, through the visible things, that they were made by God, for not randomly shines in the creation such a sapience. For as «the heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of His hands» (Ps 18:1) – and they proclaim it without voice – «they have no speech, they use no words, no sound is heard from them» (Ps 18:3), so are some of the words of the wisdom [...]” which “proclaim silently the Lord God, for you to mount to the idea of the unique Wiseman” (St. Basil the Great 1986, 469-70). The whole world is, as seen by the Fathers, built as an environment of the meeting between man and God, so the man must contemplate what he sees in order to understand what he doesn’t see. In a poetical expression, the created world is named “the school of souls” on the way to finding the kingdom of heaven: “...for this world has not been conceived in vain, but for a useful purpose and for the great need that it brings to those who live on earth, if the world is truly a school for the souls gifted with reason and a place where you can learn the knowledge of God, being through what you see and feel in the world a guide of the mind for the contemplation of the invisible things, as the disciple says, that «the invisible qualities...» (Rom 1:20)” (St. Basil the Great 1986, 77)

God's kindness and His care for man are also manifested through the fact that He doesn't abuse of His invisible nature to remain forever unknown, but reveals Himself out of love (St. Athanasius the Great 1987, 69-70). In order to fully understand the manner in which this revelation is transmitted through the creatures, Saint Athanasius of Alexandria appeals to an analogy with the well-known sculptor Phidias, very appreciated by his contemporaries: "...it is said about the sculptor Phidias that his works were recognized as his even when he wasn't present, from the symmetry and the proportion of the parts. The same way you can recognize God, the Creator and Organizer of the world from the creation, even though you cannot see Him with the eyes of your body. For God has not abused His invisible nature – may no-one say that – in order to remain utterly unknown to the people" (St. Athanasius the Great 1987, 70).

The definition of the knowledge of which the Apostle speaks about, is the following, according to Saint Theofilact: "Some of God's qualities are unknown as His own nature is, and some are known, so as all the features that are said to be His nature: kindness, wisdom, power, divinity (meaning glory) (St. Theofilact 2005, 41-2), which Paul names here "God' invisible qualities", understood through His creatures. So God showed to the Greeks His knowledge, meaning what is said about His nature, which is invisible to the human eye, but understood by reason from the order of all things." (St. Theofilact 2005, 41-2)

Saint Theofilact identifies here five "causes" for which the creatures of the visible world have been made, amongst which there is the knowledge of God through their contemplation (St. Theofilact 2005, 43-4).

Saint John Chrysostom underlines the fact that nobody can give an answer for faithless, as long as we can all see the greatness of the nature which speaks herself about her Creator: "Did ye then not hear the heaven sending forth a voice by the sight, while the well-ordered harmony of all things spake out more clearly than a trumpet? Did ye not see the hours of night and day abiding unmoved continually, the goodly order of winter, spring, and the other seasons remaining both sure and unmoved, the tractableness of the sea amid all its turbulence and waves? All things abiding in order and by their beauty and their grandeur, preaching aloud of the Creator?" (St. John Chrysostom 2005, 11)

So this is the praise of the silent creatures, which can be understood both by those who can read and by the illiterates, by the uneducated and by the learned, by poor and by rich, by masters and by servants, by Scythians and barbarians, each person being able to find in it the knowledge about God that his soul desires (St. John Chrysostom



PG 49, 112). This type of communication, through things, is accessible to all the nations, and this is why they are a law to themselves.

Besides this means of communication, Saint John Chrysostom invokes the idea of a direct communication, through which God, “looking into people’s consciences and finding them pure, spoke to them directly, degrading Himself to their capacity of understanding” (St. John Chrysostom PG 54, 582). The direct communication is not restricted only to the Edenic period, but continues after the fall, conditioned by the purification of the heart, that is why those who become part of this communication are real examples of virtue: Noah, Abraham, Job and Moses, the Prophets. And this means of communication is superior to the written communication, Saint John asserting that this is the cause why the written communication didn’t exist in the beginning as a way of communication between God and man. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament have been arranged by God and were fixed in writing because “of the feeble nature of man” (St. John Chrysostom PG 61, 20), who couldn’t stay close to Him, through the moral natural law and through the knowledge about the divinity given to them directly or through creation. Thus, the Scripture is man’s communication with God, “the second way” (Coman 2002, 124). In order to support this assertion, I will present here several passages from the works of Saint John Chrysostom.

### ***Saint John Chrysostom, exegete of the history of salvation***

I introduced this concept of *history of salvation* because, although Saint John Chrysostom is the most representative scholar of the Exegetical School from Antioch, well known for its historical-literal exegetical method, he doesn’t conceive history as being limited to man and his powers and works, but considers it to be a “space in which God is present and works directly” (Coman 2002, 128) for the salvation of the humankind. The exegesis that he proposes is based on his spiritual experience which requires a direct implication of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of the sacred texts: “Everything that is written in the Holy Scripture [...] are «*words of the Holy Spirit*» (St. John Chrysostom PG 54, 514; 53, 65), *words of the divine grace*, which determined the author to write (St. John Chrysostom PG 49, 17-18), *words of our Lord*, spoken through the prophets’ mouth. «The prophets’ mouths are in fact God’s mouth» (St. John Chrysostom PG 56, 110) ...” (Moisescu 2003, 53). But the Spirit’s work is double: he inspires the one who writes, he illuminates the one who reads. For the latter the word of the Scripture is not necessary self-revealing, but only God’s Word, working through

the Spirit, “can open people’s minds for them to understand the Scriptures”, reminding them or illuminating those about Himself, “revealing hidden truths of the eschatological time, to His praise and to the Father’s praise” (Jn 14:26; 16:13-15) (Breck 1999, 10). In this work, man has to participate with the expression of his willingness to know, to understand, to search for the meanings of the Scripture, but this research must not be done with a “suspicious” mind, but in a humble state of mind proper to our helplessness (St. John Chrysostom PG 53, 42-43).

Speaking about the different ways of interpretation of the two exegetical schools, the Patriarch Iustin Moisescu noted the fact that the distinction was not one of substance, but of the manner of interpretation of the exegetical principles – mostly common, as a matter of fact – according to the social-cultural context. In this context, Saint John Chrysostom appears, “whose person was guarantee enough for the orthodoxy of a writing” (Moisescu 2003, 13). He is considered to be the meeting point, that of harmonization and completion of the two schools, he is the exegetical personality who fixes the fundamental rules of the biblical hermeneutics. A single example is enough to understand the equilibrium that dominates his exegesis. In his commentary to Psalms (9:4), Saint John distinguishes three types of biblical assertions: the first type which represents only symbolic figures or images, revealing a theoretical or spiritual meaning, and gives the example from Proverbs 5:18-19: *A loving doe, a graceful deer...* a second type of assertions are those which have only a literal meaning (Gn 1:1): *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*. Finally, the third category of assertions is of those which are authentically typological, in which “the divine meaning receives expression in the historical event” (Jn 3:14): “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up” (Breck 1999, 89).

A special preoccupation for Saint John Chrysostom is the unity/perfect agreement between the two Testaments (Basarab 2005, 106; Baker 2010, 36). To this respect, his fundamental observation is that “God in His great wisdom reveals dogmatic truths, establishes moral rules, according to the ability of understanding and of living of the people to whom He addresses. And if He had established the two testaments in the same time, for these people, who lead the same life, then there wouldn’t have been any formal differences between them” (St. John Chrysostom PG 51, 283). What is the basis of this unitary perception of the Scripture, visible in the entire exegetical corpus of Saint John Chrysostom? He doesn’t dissociate the Scripture from history, but considers it to be rather a “recording in special conditions of the biblical history” (Coman 2002, 144), the biblical history itself becoming



a fundament, and this because it is a unitary history, which notes the development within time of the dialogue between God and His people (Coman 2002, 144). But comparing the two laws from the point of view of the content, Saint John Chrysostom finds the Old Testament to be inferior to the New Testament; of course, not because of God, but because of the people to whom these laws have been addressed. This meaning that in the functioning of a text or of any kind of message, an important role is given to the addressee, directly involved in the understanding, bringing up-to-date and interpretation of the respective text (Eco 1996, 18). The same type of reasoning brings Saint John to conclude that there is a better way to communicate with God than the Scripture, an assertion which may surprise in the beginning, but this “better” doesn’t refer to the quality of the biblical discourse, but to its efficiency in comparison with the receiver of the message which is man (Coman 2002, 134). As we have already seen, the divine pedagogy considered education through things to be a priority, followed by the education through writings and having a descending character (Coman 2002, 135), for our weakness and helplessness.

### **Conclusion. The Holy Scripture – a permanently new pathway**

In the Eastern theology there is no such thing as exclusively scientific biblical research, for in the Eastern exegetic discourse the ecclesial, martyrical aspect, is always a constant co-ordinate. This aspect is based on the patristic tradition, on the perseverance and the unity of the patristic hermeneutical perspective, dominated by the spiritual dimension (Coman 2002, 126). And this because within the Orthodox theological space, lingers the belief that the Scripture is a way of communication, a way of revelation, a way of repairing the communion relationship with God and not a purpose in itself. Saint John Chrysostom says that when God knew that we have gone astray, he started to send us His word through letters, for we find ourselves in a country far away. Thus, the first writings sent by God with the aim to renew the love between Him and the people, have been brought by Moses (St. John Chrysostom PG 54, 582), followed by the other sacred writings. That is why “because we have sent away that grace, let’s start a *new way* (to receive it back again)” (Coman 2002, 145). The first step on this pathway remains that of reading more from the Holy Scripture for, as Saint John says, the sacred books are similar to flavours (St. John Chrysostom PG 53, 106), and thus, through the continuous reading of the Scripture, we will always have its spiritual perfume all around us.

\*This study was published in

*Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai – Theologia Orthodoxa* 1 (2013): 15-24.

## References

Baker, David L. *Two Testaments, One Bible. The Theological Relationship Between the Old and the New Testaments*. IVP Academic, 2010.

Basarab, Mircea. *The Interpretation of the Holy Scripture in the Orthodox Church*. Cluj-Napoca: Alma Mater, 2005.

Breck, John. *The Power of the Word: In the Worshiping Church*. Bucharest: IBMO, 1999.

Chirilă, Ioan. *Philonian Exegetical Fragmentarium II. Nomothetica – Exegetical References to Decalogue*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2003.

Coman, Constantin. *The Spirit's Hermeneia. Fundamental Texts for a Spiritual Hermeneutics*. Bucharest: Byzantine Publishing House, 2002.

Dunn, James D.G. *Romans 1-8*. In WBC 38a. Dallas: Word Incorporated, 1988.

Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of the Interpretation*. Constanța: Pontica, 1996.

Gross, Benjamin. *The Adventure of Language. The Oath of the Word in the Jewish Thinking*. Bucharest: Hasefer, 2007.

Moiescu, Iustin. *The Holy Scriptures and their Interpretation in the Works of Saint John Chrysostom*. Bucharest: Bishopry of Argeș and Muscel/ Anastasia, 2003.

Saint John Chrysostom. *Homilies to Genesis*. PG 53, 42-43.

St. Athanasius. *Sermon against the Greek*. Bucharest: EIBMO, 1987.

St. Augustin. *Confessions*. Bucharest: IBMO, 1985.

St. Basil the Great. *Homilies and Sermons*. Bucharest: IBMO, 1986.

St. Basil the Great. *Homilies on Hexaemeron*. Bucharest, IBMO, 1986.

St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies in Genesis*. PG 54, 471; 48, 1059.

St. John Chrysostom. *Comentary to Isaiah*. PG 56, 110,

St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies in Genesis*. PG 54, 514,

St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans*. Bucharest, Christiana Publishing House, 2005.

St. John Chrysostom. *Homilies On the Statues*. PG 49, 17-18.

St. John Chrysostom. *Homily addressed to the People of Antioch*. On <http://www.synaxis.org/cf/volume18/ECF00018.htm>.

St. John Chrysostom. PG 49, 105.

St. John Chrysostom. PG 49, 133 and 55, 251.

St. Theofilact. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans of the praised Apostle Paul*. Bucharest, Sophia, 2005.

Young, Richard Alan. "The Knowledge of God in Romans 1:18-23: Exegetical and Theological Reflections." *JETS* 4 (2000).