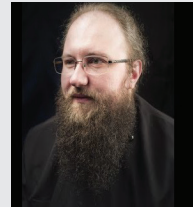


THE HOLY SCRIPTURE – SOURCE OF THE THEOGNOSIS

Abstract

In his commentary on the Philokalia, Theoklitos of the Dionysiou Monastery while explaining the Chapters about knowledge of Saint Diadochus of Photicaea, talks about three types of Vision, of ‘contemplation’ of God: the natural, the supernatural and the ecstasy. The Holy Scripture and its experience have a very important role in the so-called contemplation, vision or knowledge of God – Theognosis. But this knowledge cannot be limited to the terms which define the theognosis, it’s not only an epistemological knowledge. God’s knowledge is the work of the Holy Spirit within us, which can be accomplished during and through prayer; in the Orthodox Church the word of the Scripture is always read and interpreted within a liturgical and doxological frame, the Scripture being the true source of all the worship forms.



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The Holy Scripture – the revealed word of God

The Divine Revelation – the foundation of the knowledge of God

The Orthodox Theology defines the Divine Revelation as God's action of revealing Him-self to His creation, first through the Old Testament's prophets, where He reveals Himself by word, signs and things, then as Person, through His Son, as the Mystery of His will, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2-3). So, the aim of the Revelation is God's revelation as Person, the uncovering of His will about world, especially about the man, “the crown of creation”, in order to allow man to know His will, but also to know Him as a personal Being open to dialogue with His Word, especially with the humans.

In the Revelation, God is known as through a personal relation. The Revelation is always performed in relation to someone; it consists in a historical sequence of

meetings. Therefore, the Revelation is, in its integrity, a history; it is the historical reality from creation to the second coming of the Lord (Lossky 2006, 34). So, the revelation is a “Theo-cosmic” relationship wherein God reveals Himself to the world that He created, in which we are also included. But the paradox of this relationship is that, even if God reveals Himself to His creation, He reveals Himself as being a transcendent God. Therefore, in the immanence of His revelation, God appears as a transcendent Being. But His transcendence cannot be absolute, because God is a Personal Being and, more than that, a Tri-Personal Being. Having this transcendent dimension, the Person is opened to dialogue, but then, this dialogue makes the Person to be cognoscible (St. Maximus the Confessor 2008, 130).

Thereby, this God, the Emperor of the ages, unspoiled and unseen, hidden, unknown and incomprehensible according to His Essence (Col 1:15; 1 Tm 1:17; Jn 1:18), in His love for mankind revealed Himself and spoke to them “at many times and in various ways” (Heb 1:1), wishing “all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4).

The created world, especially the man, “crown of creation” (St. Gregory of Nyssa 1998, 20-21), had since their beginning a precise rationality. God created them with a single mind which can be seen in the axiological acknowledgment of creation, when God Himself “saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Gn 1:31). Through those words of Scripture, it is said not only that, in the beginning, the entire creation was not corrupted by evil’s blemishes whose roots are not in God, but also the fact that the entire creation was settled in a dynamic deification, which should be accomplished through man, who, in his dichotomy unifies inside him the two worlds: the material world, represented by the entire cosmos, and the spiritual one. He could perform this due to the fact that it is a rational Being and he could decipher the rationalities of the creation. This is the knowledge provided to mankind by the act of creation “in God’s image, after God’s likeness” (Gn 1:26). In order to allow the world to accomplish its aim, to fulfil its rationality, the transcendent God, in His Being, turns towards His creation as Person and reveals His will and His plans concerning the world. The man, created “in God’s image, after His likeness” is capable to receive this revelation. If the original sin overshadows God’s image in man and, through that, pervert men’s knowledge capacity, God, through His great mercy and His infinite love towards the created world, restores, through the Revelation men’s knowledge power and, through that, the primary rationality of the creation, “for God so loved the world

that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). So, God reveals Himself, due to His love for mankind, in order to allow the man to know His will and His plans regarding world and man (Popescu 2005, 42).

In order to allow the man to arrive to knowledge, there were two movements: the descent of God to His creation by the act of Revelation and the ascension of man, and, through man, the ascension of the entire created universe to God through knowledge. And because the Revelation reaches its high-point in the incarnation of the Son of God, the Second Person of The Holy Trinity, and His coming into the world, which revealed us the sense of the man-kind existence “the descent of the divine Person of Christ makes possible the ascension of man in the Holy Spirit” (St. Irenaios PG 7, 1120; St. Athanasios the Great PG 25, 192b; Lossky 1998, 91). Therefore, through the Revelation of the Incarnated Son, God Himself is present in a personal way in the midst of men who, through God, became “participants to the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4). So, Christ, The Incarnated Son and The Word of God, is the end and the perfection of the Revelation.

God's revelation is the foundation of God's Knowledge. Without it, man would not be able to get in communion with God, Who would remain forever transcendent and hidden for men. Only through revelation, God reveals Himself in a personal way and He reveals His will and His plans concerning the world and man. But man could not know God if he wouldn't be gifted with the capacity of knowing by the very act of creation. That is why we often find in the writings of the Fathers the expression that man is a rational being because he was created in God's image (Nellas 2002, 62). In this sense, Saint Athanasios the Great said: “God did not create man the way He made the voiceless animals, but He made him in His image, giving him the power of His Word, therefore being an image of the Word and being logical, to dwell in the joy”. And, in another place: “It would be enough for them the grace of being in God-Word's image to know Him” (St. Athanasios the Great 1987, 92, 105).

We shall not speak here about the different types of revelation, or about the way in which it was given during history, because these are not the aims of the present study; but we have to say that the Church, both of the Old Testament and of the New Testament, which inaugurates the Kingdom of God, which will come and, at the same time, is already present through grace in the heart of creation, where the man acquires God's likeness, intends to keep and to communicate the truth of God's revelation.

The Holy Scripture, the preserver of the revealed Word of God

The Christian Orthodox doctrine considers that God's Revelation to man is included in The Holy Scripture and The Holy Tradition. In the Orthodox Church, the Holy Scripture is considered to be the God's Revelation par excellence, being the revealed word of God, transmitted through the holy writers to the mankind. It was written under the inspiration of The Holy Spirit and it occupies "a unique and absolute position between the other forms of Revelation", The Holy Scripture representing the primary source for the faith of the Church (Bria 1970, 395).

The Holy Scripture contains God's revealed word and many aspects concerning God's knowledge, things useful for our salvation, as Saint Epiphanius of Salamis (PG 33, 66) claims.

If the dynamism of God's knowledge corresponds to the eternal life, as the Saviour says: "this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3), then the knowledge of the Holy Scripture appears to be of great importance for the entire humanity, because it includes the Revealed Word of God. This word was given step by step to mankind in order to prepare man for receiving the Incarnated Word, wherein culminates and accomplishes the entire revelation. So, as Saint John Chrysostom affirms, the Scripture "is the solemn letter of God, sent on earth" (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 2002, 616).

Initially, the Divine Revelation was transmitted by spoken tradition. Then, under the in-spiration of The Holy Spirit, a part of the Tradition was recorded in The Holy Scripture. But The Holy Scripture is not only a book in which it's written what God did in order to prepare the Incarnation and through the Incarnation of His Son, but also is a book which tells us what the Incarnated and Resurrected Son of God does and will do for us until the end of the ages, in order to guide us to Resurrection. The Scriptures describe not only the action of God's descending to us through Incarnation, but also the beginning of our way to entheosis (Stăniloae 2003, 54). So, the Holy Scripture has a specially authority because it includes God's Revelation, the word addressed by Him to mankind for its salvation.

That active word of God reveals the sense of the created world, especially the sense of man, and accepting it, man can get to know the will of God, to know God on a personal level, God Who pours His abundance of the divine life upon those who believe and receive (Mk 16:15) His word. There is no doubt regarding the divine content of The Holy Scripture. The divine authority of the Old Testament was accepted first by Jesus

Christ, Who said: “the Scripture cannot be broken” (Jn 10:35). The Old Testament is necessary because it is an integral part of the Revelation, announcing through content the salvation brought by Lord Jesus Christ. That is why, the lack of knowing the Scripture might have severe consequences; Jesus Christ shows this by saying: “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Mt 22:29). Then, the authority of the Old Testament is recognized then by the writers of The New Testament, who show that the Old Testament is revealed by God, is the word of God which is accomplished through Christ; “this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets” (Acts 3:18).

If The Old Testament comprises the revealed word of God, through which He prepares man and the world for the salvation brought by His Incarnated Son, then the New Testament is the accomplishment of this word in the human-divine person of Jesus Christ.

The Christocentricity of the Holy Scripture: Christ – The Incarnated Word as Pathway to knowledge of the Holy Trinity

Saint John, the Evangelist, begins his Gospel with the annunciation of The Incarnated Logos: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:1,14). Actually, the aim of the entire New Testament is to present the Divine-Human Person of The Incarnated Word, Who opens for us the access to the divine life which irradiates from the heart of The Holy Trinity; this is possible through our trust in Him and by His knowledge: “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31). “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3).

The authors of The New Testament are constructing their writings on The Person of Jesus Christ, writing about This Life-giving Word, through whom we enter in communion with the Father. Their word is the true testimony concerning Jesus Christ, because they are writing from their vivid experience that they had with their Teacher, an experience lived near the Life-giving Word, an word transmitted to all those who were called into the eternal life: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and

testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:1-3).

The Incarnation of our Lord is the center, the sense and the aim of the world and this is stated throughout the Scripture, because “The mystery of Word’s Incarnation contains inside it the meaning of all things and types from Scripture and the wisdom of all seen and unseen creatures” (St. Maximus the Confessor 1999, 66). So, The Old Testament is accomplished in Jesus Christ. The entire Old Testament was oriented towards Christ: “The prophets were His disciples in spirit and they were waiting for Him as their Lord” (St. Ignatios 1979, 167). Also, the prophets “had announced the Gospel, they hoped for Christ and expected Him, they were rescued trusting Him, remaining in the unity of Jesus Christ as saints who should be admired and loved; they accepted the testimony of Jesus Christ and they were admitted in the gospel of our common hope” (St. Ignatios 1979, 179).

So, The Old Testament appears as a “leader to Christ” (Gal 3:24), because it predicts His coming in the world and the salvation that He brings with Him. The words of The Scripture are the imminent occasion of entering in interrelation with the authentic Person of Christ, through the work of The Holy Spirit, not only through their written form, but also through the knowledge of their content. “In the same way as the words of Torah and of the prophets, which precedes His Incarnation, and lead the souls towards Christ – said St. Maximus the Confessor – In the same way The Incarnated Word of God, ascended in glory, made Himself the predecessor of His spiritual coming, leading the souls by His own words, while accepting His illuminating and divine coming” (St. Maximus the Confessor 1999, 177).

The Christocentricity of the Holy Scripture is confessed by Lord Himself through the words: “You diligently study the Scriptures. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (Jn 5:39). The Old Testament has an important messianic character, its Christocentricity having its roots in the Law of Moses: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24:27). So, the Incarnated Word takes the central idea of The Holy Scripture, the whole Revelation being focused on Him and The Scripture, which is explained by Him. Jesus Christ is The One Who gives authority to Scriptures, because the actual Christians, while reading The Bible are searching for Him. The words of Scripture reveal

Christ as the Incarnated God, wherein the man touched the complete perfection, Christ representing the model, the aim and the access way for each human being: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6). That is why the knowledge and the experience of His words, or their “incarnation” in the lives of those who believe in Him will bring their salvation.

The knowing of Scripture in the Church – way of the knowledge of God

The Church and the Scripture

The Church is “The Body of Christ”, “the pillar and the foundation of truth”. In Church, the life of The Holy Trinity is extended through The Holy Spirit into all the ones who believe and confess the true faith in the resurrected Christ, Who sits at the right hand of God and Father, therefore elevating the human nature at the highest level of divinization and perfection. He brought the complete revelation about God because He is the end and the top of any revelation, because only in Christ God was present through humans.

God's presence is getting permanent and actualized until the end of world in the Church, through the Holy Spirit, Who makes it present in an intimate way to those who believe, until the end of the ages. In Jesus Christ, The Incarnated Word and Son, God Himself spoke to the humans using human words. But His words have transforming powers for all those who are listening and are accomplishing them, because there are not simple human words, but words which are emerging from the hypostatical and all-powerful Word of Father. His words are impregnated with the creative and accomplishing presence of Word, Who, in the Divine- Human Person of Jesus Christ, expresses Himself for the salvation of each person (St. Athanasios the Great 1987).

Therefore, the truth which resides in the Church, which is the extension of Jesus Christ until the end of ages, the Word-Christ, through His Person, but also through His words, is present, alive and working till the end of time. The Church formed, since its beginnings, a unity with the revelation under its two forms (The Holy Tradition and The Holy Scripture), the Church having a primacy of time and function. The Church preceded the first writings of the New Testament, as the Judaic community took priority of the Old Testament books.

The Church has come into existence before the apparition of the New Testament books, the faithful using the spoken homilies, the vivid Tradition. In this Tradition, they

distinguished the word of God in order to be able to preach by word of mouth the Gospel of Christ. After that, by practical needs, the writings of New Testament had grown. These writings had authority, but the Church was the one who, by its divine structure and function decided which ones of the multitude of existing books are canonical, inspired, authentic and worth to present the faith and to explain it to its members. The Church, the one that recognized and proclaimed the authority of canonical writings, present them to its congregation as the word of God concerning the faith, the moral life and God's knowledge (Basarab 1980, 237).

So, the Church, the ship in which the believers are travelling towards salvation and eternal life in communion with God, and the knowledge of the Holy Trinity, held during history the designation of interpreting the words of The Scripture for everyone's understanding and to offer to all the believers the possibility to accede to God's words in order to know the Holy Trinity's Persons, for salvation and for their divinization through grace.

The Knowing of God through the Holy Scripture in Church

We saw above what was the role of the Church in accepting the Canon of the Holy Scripture and we have shown that the Church is the absolute keeper of the Bible, and also, its authorized interpreter. The Bible is explained in order to transmit the knowledge of God to the members of the Church, the biblical exegesis being made in order to form the mystical body of Christ. This is the reason which made Saint Cyril of Jerusalem to explained those who were preparing for the baptism, in his Catechesis, saying: "The Scriptures of The Old and The New Testament are teaching us the doctrines of faith. One is The God of the two Testaments, the One who told us about Christ before, in The Old Testament, showing us in the New Testament, the One Who guided us through Law and Prophets to Christ... Read the Divine Scriptures!" (St. Cyril of Jerusalem 2003, 66)

The Holy Scripture was welcomed by Church since its beginning, in its cult. In the center of the ancient Christian worship, where the Word of God spoke, read and preached, and in the Divine Eucharist. The Word was then explained in the homilies, in order to allow all the believers to access the knowledge of God through it. That is why the Holy Scripture became the main source of the homilies during the golden age of Christianity. After the Saint Apostles and their apprentices, the carriers of the divine revelation were the Fathers of the Church. They are the receivers and the keepers of the divine revelation, but they had also transmitted forward this revelation, in its genuine

form (Popa 1970, 431).

In this work of transmitting the Revelation, the Church Fathers added another work, of the same importance: the exegesis, namely to explain and to understand the Revelation from the Holy Scripture, aiming to make it more accessible and, by that, to ensure its wider circulation of it and a progress in God's knowledge (Belu 1959, 549-50). The contemporary man has access to all kind of information. Through these means he can arrive to knowledge. But the knowledge of the truth comes only through God's knowledge. That is why he should benefit by having access to the Bible and by listening and reading the words of the eternal life; the Saviour says: "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (Jn 5:24).

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