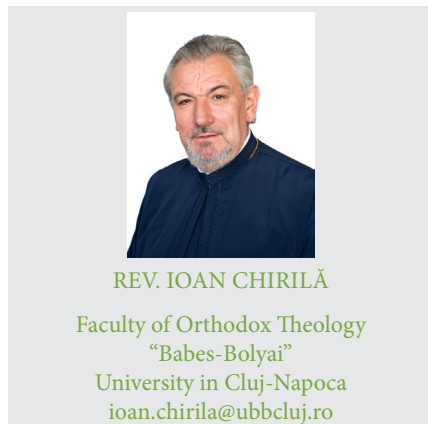


## PATRISTIC-PHILOKALIC HERMENEIA

### Abstract

Orthodox exegetes' concern with identifying a hermeneia that is specific to the Christian East is apparent, one of the reasons being the fact that, in the Orthodox Church, there is no synodal resolution specifying the relationship that biblical scholars should have with the historical-critical method, the instruments of which cannot be overlooked by the academic world. It is out of such considerations that we have sought to provide exegetes with the opportunity to familiarise themselves with a particular kind of hermeneutics, one that is specific to the Desert Fathers and especially to the Fathers of the Philokalia. Thus, what we aim for in the present study is to highlight the manner in which ascetics approached the Holy Scriptures and identify the interpretation methods and principles they employed to access the mysteries of the Holy text. Spiritual interpretation, allegory, praxis, the power of words, behavioural paradigms, and the ethical dimension are but a few of the elements we will dwell on in this research, which we would like to be an invitation to acquire more detailed knowledge of *ascetic hermeneutics*.



### Keywords

Philokalic Fathers, desert, words, praxis, ethical method

### Introduction

The main goal of our magazine ROOTS (*Romanian Orthodox Old Testament Studies*) is to promote Orthodox exegesis in the Romanian academic environment and then in the international one but in close relation to Church life. This aim is reflected in the statements of Father Professor John Breck, who, in his volume *Scripture in Tradition*, asserts that the Eastern Church has never conducted exegesis for the sake of interpretation, but for the spiritual growth of the eucharistic community:

‘Orthodox exegetes accept as integral to their calling the need to submit their reflections to the *phronêma ekklesiās*, the “mind of the Church”. This implies that the exegetes will conform their interpretation to the doctrinal and moral teachings of Holy Tradition, that they will assume their exegetical labours as a *diakonia* or service to the Church, and that they will carry them out in the interests of the Church and its mission within the world.’ (Breck 2003, 61) Thus, in the Christian East, interpretation has had a homiletic/catechetical/pastoral undertone, since the scriptural text has always been concerned with community life and the guidance of the faithful on the path to deification through the power of the Scriptures’ words.

The present research aims to put forward a practical hermeneutical guide specific to the Orthodox environment and intended to bring back the Eastern hermeneutical principles that lie at the foundation of the writings of the Fathers, particularly the Philokalic ones, the principles of the hermeneutics of the Desert Fathers – *ascetic hermeneutics*, as Professor Ioannis Karavidopoulos (Karavidopoulos 2018, 109) calls it. Our enterprise falls into the line of research promoted by Father Professor Constantin Coman through his volumes and studies proposing a niptic interpretation of the Holy Scriptures (Coman 2002; Coman 2016; Coman 2004, 26-48; Coman 2006, 181-93; Coman 2008, 328-42; Coman 2009, 31-59; Coman 2017, 13-42). We, therefore, set out to identify a few hermeneutical principles mentioned by the Fathers in the Philokalic writings. Our research area will not be limited to the 12 volumes of the Romanian Philokalia completed by Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, as we will look at ascetic texts from the Egyptian Paterikon or other synthetic works which bring Philokalic literature to our attention, such as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware’s *The Inner Kingdom* (2000), erudite researcher of ascetic literature Douglas Burton-Christie’s *The World in the Desert* (1993) or Professor Ioannis Karavidopoulos’s *The Ascetic Method of Interpreting the Scriptures* (2018).

This approach is also determined by a concept known to us as the theology of contextualisation, according to which any theological enterprise is carried out in a concrete historical context (Karavidopoulos 2018, 115). One must read it in those two ways, or, in other words, take into account the two levels of addressability, a primary one and a universal – or perennial – one, which refers to how the text addresses us today. From that point of view, that which is found in Philokalic thinking and words plays a paradigmatic role, as it can make for a suitable model as to how to interpret and approach the text of the Holy Scriptures.

## **The Philokalia – from understanding to embodying the words of the Scriptures**

The Philokalic texts have always enjoyed a privileged status within Church life. Their formative dimension and the spiritual perspectives established by the Philokalic Fathers have conferred upon these writings the quality of *vade mecums* of deification. In Metropolitan Kallistos Ware's view, the Philokalia is meant to second the reading of scriptural texts to prove in the correct application of revealed truths, both in the life of Christian communities and in that of each and every believer, every layperson: "The testimony of the Scriptures should never be isolated from the continuing witness of the spirit in the life of the Church, [which witness is expressed through, emphasis added] the works of the Fathers (Ware 2000, 9), and, above all, the Philokalia." (Ware 2000, 147) If Philokalic texts are construed as the pinnacle of patristic writings, then they deserve to be granted increased importance in view of deciphering given which we should interpret and understand the Holy Scriptures.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware has drawn our attention to the fact that, when speaking of our approach or the dedication of our existence to the words of the Scriptures, we should go through three steps, or, more exactly, three levels of action also specified within Philokalic thinking: proceed from the stage of soul cleansing towards that of enlightenment and then further on to the stage of *theosis* per se (Ware 2000, 141). The first stage can be assigned to the concept of active life, while the other two pertain to the contemplative life. The Metropolitan stresses the fact that the stages that concern contemplative life are not reserved for monks or ascetics, but for all believers who are part of the Church of Christ. Thus, the path to meeting Our Saviour and to deification is not reserved for spiritual elites, nor is it an individual one, but a community one (Ware 2000, 144). Whenever we attempt to meet the words of the Scriptures, the three stages have to be synchronous, they must be completed not in succession, but simultaneously. Under such circumstances, the focus will be on the logotic charge of the words, words endowed with power, or on that Christological centrality of the Eastern way of reading the Holy Scriptures which we need to seize.

Unfortunately, for too many exegetes, be they old or contemporary, the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures is limited to gathering and ordering pieces of information or to incessantly searching for the meanings of the obscurest texts. Such an enterprise is fraught with endless analyses and debates. Such an approach overlooks a few fundamental aspects of scriptural research: the aim of reading and

studying the Holy Scriptures is to meet Christ and the reading of the revealed text is intended to lead to prayer and the actual embodiment of the words read. Metropolitan Kallistos thus stresses the fact that: 'The real purpose of Bible study is to feed our love for Christ, to kindle our hearts into prayer, and to provide us with guidance in our personal life.' (Ware 2000, 148) In other words, the study of the Bible needs to lead us to a live dialogue with the Word of God in a state of prayer, without which one cannot acquire *the mind of Christ* – the criterion that any hermeneutical demand in the Christian East gravitates towards. This ultimate criterion constantly revolves around the manner in which the message of the Holy Scriptures is explained and understood in the Holy Tradition (Florovsky 1975, 22-5; Florovsky 1972, 11; Chirilă 2017: 47).

The Christological reading of the Old Testament needs to be founded on the principle uttered by Our Lord Himself when speaking to his disciples on the way ('beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about Himself in all the Scriptures.' – Lk 24:27) (Breck 2003, 70). This fundamental principle of Christological reading begins with a nominal value of the text, while also identifying the deep meaning, the mystical dimension through which the text operates to this day, and the way in which it engages me, today's reader. Then, this kind of reading goes on to propose the assumption of the mystical nature of the interpretation concerned with the spiritual meaning of scriptural realities. The historical narration refers to a concrete period in time which can be accessed today through its spiritual-symbolic content. However, the mystical content of the text presenting to us a concrete way of interaction between the created and the Uncreated places us – if we recall the three steps mentioned earlier – in the realm of contemplation and in the actual sphere of *theosis*.

Thus, the actual interpretation or understanding of the message of the words of the Scriptures is achieved not only at an intellectual level, but in the doer's concrete actions. Thus, we aim towards an exegesis and actual *praxis* that Philokalic interpretation provides. When we interpret the scriptural text and notice that it determines or triggers a concrete action, a *praxis*, an *orthopraxis*, we must discern that which the above-mentioned theologians tell us, namely that there is also an ethical dimension or relationship that a scriptural text that has been understood generates within the one who feels the words, the Scriptures, the grace imparted by the Logos. That is why, upon entering the patristic-Philokalic space, we will notice the abundant presence of the scriptural text. There are Fathers who appear to write the texts of the Scriptures in a natural succession, without taking into account the canonical aspect of

the books of the Scriptures, combining them, as what they seek to bring about is the very return or repositioning of human nature within the actual flow of life in the Word of God, for 'He is life and all-life (*svezivot*), since only Life [that comes] through HIM is life. Wherever He is not – Saint Justin Popovich goes on to say – life turns into death, because He is the only one Who makes life true life. Apostasy towards Him, Who is Life, always ends in mortality and death. That is why it is solely in Him, Who is the Logos and Reason of life, that lie the only possible rational grounds for human life within the categories of time and space.' (Popovich 2013, 123-4)

This repositioning of man within the flow of life is actually, as shown to us by the Philokalic Fathers, a liturgical one. The entire act of deification is carried out through this Liturgy, understood not only as a service but as an integral community enterprise of each of us, as part of a conscious attempt to redefine our personal existence in relation to the Creator by triggering a reordering of existence or a re-reading of the whole existence in a theological dimension. This manner of reading shows us that the scriptural text is addressed to man in his entirety, in his integrity. Consequently, it should not operate exclusively at a rational or intellectual level but needs to be understood and bring about a reorganisation or repositioning of the image of humanity within the natural and within its liturgical, doxological and mystical relationship with the Creator.

### **'The Hermeneutics of the (Fathers of the) Desert' – Interpretation Methods and Principles**

The Holy Scriptures have exerted a fundamental influence on the ascetic life of the Fathers who carried out their spiritual labour during the first centuries of Christianity in the Egyptian desert in particular. The scriptural texts concerning the spiritual perfection of believers have served as concrete sources of inspiration for the desert ascetic movement. They outlined the daily life of hermits, offering them the possibility to come nearer to God, understand the purpose of their lives, find solutions in times of spiritual crisis or anxiety and gradually advance on the path to sainthood. The Scriptures played a decisive role both in public gatherings and in cell ordinance, where they were read, listened to, learned, assumed and embodied. That is why, when novices requested words of guidance from experienced elders, the latter used the texts of the Scriptures to teach them the path to perfection (Burton-Christie 1993, 117).

The authority and centrality of the Scriptures in the everyday life of the Fathers of the Desert are obvious. It marked the elders' way of life and constituted the

reference guide for novices pursuing perfection. When asked by some brothers what they should do to attain salvation, Avva Anthony told them: 'Have you heard the Scriptures? That is enough.' (*Egyptian Paterikon* 1997) In other words, the Scriptures, in their various forms within monastic communities of the desert (as either written texts or oral practices – such as memorising, and reciting) taught everyone how to achieve salvation. That is also the reason why Avva Gelasios, possessor of a complete parchment manuscript of the Holy Scriptures, placed this Bible at the disposal of all brothers so that anyone who wished to benefit from it should be able to enter the church it was kept in and read it (*Egyptian Paterikon* 1997). Such examples are hardly singular, as many elders used to recommend biblical readings for the strengthening of the soul. For example, Saint Epiphanius of Salamis claimed that nothing protects a man from sin better than reading the Holy Scriptures and that not knowing Them is cause for great danger (*Egyptian Paterikon* 1997). Aside from reading the Scriptures, the Fathers have equally placed significant emphasis on reciting/meditating on the revealed words. They were convinced that uttering and repeating scriptural texts like prayers imparted a special power intended to aid them in their spiritual struggle (Burton-Christie 1993, 122). As for meditation, which, to the Fathers, was more of an oral phenomenon with potential psychological significations, we can observe that, in ascetic practice, it entailed a deep assumption and internalisation of the words of God.

Thus, the hermit's reading and reciting of, as well as a meditation on the scriptural text protected him from various temptations, brought about better understanding among brothers, cured him of his physical and spiritual ailments, offered him the possibility to progress in his spiritual life, enhanced his discernment, helped him discern spirits and experience the power of words, experience the mystery of words liturgically, and united his mind with his heart (Burton-Christie 1993, 113).

Given these realities, it is necessary to reflect upon the way in which the Scriptures were assumed and interpreted by the Fathers of the Desert in order to provide today's exegete with the chance to approach a kind of hermeneutics that Eastern spirituality has promoted in the ascetic environment in particular.

D. Burton-Christie identified in the writings of the Desert Fathers three methods of interpreting the Holy Scriptures, which, albeit distinct, were harmoniously interlaced across their numerous common elements. They are as follows:

- *the paradigmatic method* focused on the scriptural models offered as points of reference to ascetics;
- *the allegorical method*, concerned with seeking the spiritual



meanings and truths of faith in the scriptural texts; and ■ *the ethical method*, which used the Scriptures as guidelines for an authentic way of life. The author notes that these methods are not specific exclusively to the Desert Fathers, as they were constantly applied in early Christianity, in some form or other. In other words, ascetics do not have a significant contribution to the hermeneutical act. However, the manner in which they apply the above-mentioned interpretation methods and the way in which they problematise the authentic way of life in relation to the demands recorded in the Scriptures are elements of novelty and capture our interest (Burton-Christie 1993, 166).

In the absence of any normative literature other than the Holy Scriptures, the Desert Fathers entrusted the guidance of their ascetic enterprise to the paradigmatic models and episodes in both the Old and the New Testament. Consequently, they identified biblical models which fit ascetic needs, trials, or demands, understood them and assumed them to the point of identifying with them. Avva Philimon claimed that there was a special bond between him and King David marked by the reading of the Psalms. He confessed that ‘God has imprinted the power of the psalms in my humble soul in the same way as in the Prophet David and I cannot part with the sweetness of the manifold visions in them.’ (Ava Filimon 1948, 167) Hence we deduce that, aside from the connection built between the scriptural model and the person assuming it, such a level of identification requires detailed knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. The paradigmatic method often involved a literal interpretation of the scriptural texts. The Desert Fathers mirrored the behaviour of biblical models closely, trying to reach the same height of virtue. Resorting to such models in their spiritual life offered the certainty of salvation. When asked by a monk if, following ascetic struggles, there is the hope of salvation, Avva John the Persian answered: ‘I believe I will inherit the heavenly Jerusalem which is enrolled in heaven (Heb 12: 22-23). For the one who made the promise is faithful (Heb 10:23). And why should I not believe it? I have been hospitable like Abraham, gentle like Moses, holy like Aaron, patient like Job, humble like David, hermit like John, mournful like Jeremiah, a teacher like Paul, faithful like Peter, and wise like Solomon. And, like the rebel, I believe that He who has gifted these to me out of His goodness will gift me the Kingdom as well.’ [*Egyptian Paterikon* 1997, Avva Ioan Persul (John the Persian)]. We can see here the way in which Avva John the Persian associated these virtues with the biblical models that perfected them.

The Alexandrian environment and the allegorical method of interpretation influenced the manner in which the Desert Fathers related to the holy text. Even though

there were fervent opponents of Origenism among the hermits, the latter did not forego allegory, as this method is not necessarily synonymous with Origen's hermeneutics, but had a long history, which started long before it. Thus, in order to make the Old Testament in particular alive and manifest in their daily lives, they employed the allegorical method.

The ethical method of approaching the revealed text has been the most prolific one. The moral dimension of the Holy Scriptures has been the one to draw the hermits' attention the most, as they understood that the correct application of the content of the biblical texts would bring them close to holiness. It is due to this fact that the Scriptures have generated various practices and attitudes with an impact on posterity. The great elders' way of life, influenced by the revealed message of the Scriptures, would become paradigmatic for disciples seeking to be like their spiritual fathers (Burton-Christie 1993, 171).

Greek theologian Ioannis Karavidopoulos highlights several particularities of the manner in which the Philokalic Fathers approached and interpreted the scriptural text. He identifies four fundamental principles or approaches that characterise the hermeneutics of these ascetics: ■ the correct and factual application of the content of the Scriptures taking precedence over the theoretical study of the Scriptures; ■ opting for a spiritual interpretation rather than a literal or historical one; ■ reinterpreting certain texts after having removed them from their primary context; and ■ seeking the enlightenment of the Spirit for a complete understanding of the revealed text (Karavidopoulos 2018, 117).

To the Desert Fathers, the understanding of the contents of the Holy Scriptures through practice was of capital importance. Once the text had been read/heard, it needed to be understood and immediately internalised into practice. D. Burton-Christie construes this principle as the *hermeneutics of practice* (Burton-Christie 1993, 160), whereby interpretation is directed towards the embodiment of the words, which is the actual goal of the Holy Scriptures (Jones 2003, 145). In the absence of an ascetic life lived in purity and of the willingness to listen to and dialogue with the Word, it is impossible to embody the revealed text. The Fathers of the Philokalia understood that interpretation has no other role than that of making it possible to embody the words of the Scriptures (Chirilă 2017, 55). A concrete example illustrating this perspective is provided by the famous Avva Pambos, about whom Socrates Scholasticus tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History* (PG 67,513AB) that, at the beginning of his hermit life, he want-



ed to learn the Psalms of David from a monk famous for his knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. Having heard him recite the first verse of Psalm 38 (“I said “I will take heed to my ways, that I offend not with my tongue””), the elder stopped listening to the words that followed and went off to fulfil the content of the psalm. After a while, the two met again and the monk who was to teach him the Psalter asked him why he had not come to see him again. Avva Pambos replied that he had not yet put the text into actual practice. 19 years later, another monk who knew of the elder’s reply asked him if he had learned the said verse. Old Pambos said that he had just got into the habit of doing in practice that which David spoke of in that line. Palladius would testify that, even though Avva Pambos was a simple man, God had given him such wisdom that many people used to come to him to learn from his vast understanding of the divine Scriptures that God had bestowed upon him (*Egyptian Paterikon* 1997). Such wisdom as to the Scriptures cannot be acquired without a concrete rooting in the embodiment of the scriptural words.

The content of the Scriptures is not confined to its historical boundaries. The Philokalic Fathers understood this and that is why they did not go out of their way to comprehend the historical circumstances in which the biblical events took place (Karavidopoulos 2018, 115). To them, what prevailed was another interpretive dimension that personalised the text, meaning that it adapted it to the concrete needs of each believer. Otherwise put, the Fathers focused their attention on the spiritual meaning of the text, seeking to build a vivid connection between the Scriptures and man’s soul. Upon being asked by Thalassius about the moment preceding the Holy Supper, when two of the disciples went into the city to meet a man carrying a pitcher of water (Mk 14:13), Saint Maximus the Confessor answered thus: “The Scriptures remain silent as to the name of the man to whom our Saviour sent the two disciples to prepare the Passover, as well as to the name of the city they were sent into. The first thought that comes to mind is that what is meant by the *city* is this perceivable world and *man* stands for the general nature of humans. That is what they are sent out to, as disciples of God and of the Word, as forerunners and preparers of the mysterious feast that God will hold together with human nature, the first and the New Testament. The first cleanse human nature of every impurity through practical philosophy (applied wisdom), and the other elevates the mind, through knowledge or through the mysterious guidance of contemplation, from the material to spiritual sights that are akin to it. That is proven by the fact that the disciples who were sent out are Peter and John. For Peter symbolises

action and John contemplation.’ (St. Maximus the Confessor 2005, 47) We note that Saint Maximus directs all of the text’s details towards a spiritual understanding of the event, thus pointing Thalassius towards a personal approach to the text. The latter’s concern with the name of the man with the pitcher or with the identity of the master of the house where the supper took place, albeit important for the systematic understanding of the historical content of the event, are channelled towards an understanding aimed at the mystery of a man who, through the two Testaments, is elevated from the material towards the spiritual.

The removal of certain texts from their primary context and their reinterpretation by the Fathers indicate both an incessant quest for the spiritual meaning of the scriptural texts and their freedom in relating to and approaching the Holy Scriptures in novel ways. Such an enterprise involving the detachment of a scriptural passage from its intelligible context and its interpretation in accordance with the spiritual experience of the interpreter is highly contrasting with the exegetic direction of current biblical studies influenced by the historical-critical method (Karavidopoulos 2018, 115). Nevertheless, this interpretive view can be understood if we take into consideration the way in which they experienced faith in practice and their unmediated connection to God’s Spirit. The following example is taken from the same responses given to Thalassius by Saint Maximus. When asked to explain the mystery of the circumcision performed by Zipporah, the wife of Moses, on her son, when God’s angel sought to kill the one sent by God into Egypt (Ex 4:24), Saint Maximus suggests to Thalassius to leave aside the history of that event, as it has been fulfilled, and raise his mind’s eye towards a spiritual signification, for the Scriptures always place spiritual meanings above narrated ones, which is easily noticeable by those with healthy spiritual vision. This biblical event is projected by Saint Maximus into a spiritual dimension aimed at the permanent ascension into virtue and he addresses a prayer to God asking him that ‘with every trespassing, He should not cease to send to us, as he sent the angel, a reason to threaten us within our conscience with the death brought about by error, so that, coming into ourselves, we should learn to cut off, through innate wisdom like a non-circumcision, the impurity of passions that has stuck onto us along the path of life due to our carelessness.’ (St. Maximus the Confessor 2005, 81)

The enlightenment of the Holy Spirit is a hermeneutical requirement in the absence of which the scriptural text cannot be understood in its depth, nor can it become manifest in the life of the believer. Working together with Him under

Whose guidance the entire Scriptures were written is essential for the acquisition of freedom of interpretation that can broaden the meaning of the scriptural texts and clarify the mystery of the revealed content. When writing about humility, Saint John of the Ladder states that it is an unspeakable wealth, for it is said: *'Learn from Me; so, not from an angel, nor from man or books, but from Me (Mt 11:29), namely from My abiding in you, enlightening you and working within you; because I am gentle and humble of heart and of thought and mind; and you will find rest for your souls from wars and relief from thoughts.'* (St. John of the Ladder 1980, 298) We notice how the saint enriches the meaning of the scriptural text with his insertions. This demonstrates a profound understanding of the theological message of God's words and, implicitly, his desire to make the significance of the biblical text as comprehensive as possible.

### Conclusions

The hermeneutics of the Philokalic Fathers enables us to rediscover a method of interpretation specific to the Christian East, in which peace, applied assumption and purity of heart become prerequisites for the full understanding of the Holy Scriptures. Such hermeneutics, having been overlooked for a long time, yet revived through the commendable initiative of Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite, who put together a compilation of Philokalic texts, and through an interest in hesychastic practices, mainly focused on uninterrupted prayer, could reopen a relevant chapter in the history of Scriptural exegesis.

To the Philokalic Fathers, the framework for asserting the importance of the Holy Scriptures is of a liturgical nature. It entails an ascetic's inter-subjective approach to the words in view of attaining awareness of the fact that, as Exodus 3:14 tells us, God is eternally present everywhere. Knowing God means permanently experiencing His presence and understanding that He is always before us.

Philokalic hermeneutics grants special attention to the power of uttered words. Thus, the words of the Scriptures were mostly repeated in order to consolidate their theological content inside the soul of the person uttering them. Otherwise put, ascetics often experienced the spiritual phenomenon whereby biblical words materialised the reality they depicted. This practice enabled ascetics to utter words – often inspired by the Scriptures – that were endowed with extraordinary power, which moved the will of those receiving them to assume their content in practice.

The ethical method of interpretation was the main hermeneutic rule applied by ascetics to the Holy Scriptures. Such a method was mainly brought about by the practical nature of their relationship with the revealed text. To the Philokalic Fathers, the Scriptures contained the necessary coordinates for their spiritual fulfilment. The holy text met their spiritual needs, which is why careful knowledge of the Scriptures coincided with knowing them. Hence, all that was left for them to do was read/listen, understand, assume and embody the words of God.

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