

IOAN CHIRILĂ - THE BIBLICAL SCHOLAR RAISED IN THE LIGHT OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

Rev. Professor Ioan Chirilă is an Old Testament biblical scholar who assumes and interprets the Holy Scripture in full harmony with the Church Fathers. The patristic tradition, in which Father Professor is reflected, creates the appropriate framework for understanding and penetrating the mystery of the revealed word, giving the Christian exegete the opportunity to know God as He is. Rev. Ioan Chirilă is part of this interpretative direction and understands that any exegetical act must have as its finality an encounter with the divine Logos, to whom the Scriptures bear witness (Jn 5:39).

This goal can be easily perceived in his writings, which totals 17 volumes as an author and more than 300 studies and specialized articles, which is why we can consider him a current reference point for the Eastern Orthodox interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

The sixtieth anniversary of his life and thirty years of academic activity is an opportune occasion for a brief incursion into the biography and writings of Rev. Ioan Chirilă. We intend to outline the theological profile of the first full professor of the Old Testament department of the Cluj academic institution, founded almost 100 years ago.

Rev. Ioan Chirilă was born in 1962 in Măgoaja, a village in Cluj county. He attended the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Cluj-Napoca (1980-1983) and graduated from the Theological Institute of University Degree in Sibiu (1984-1988). He enrolled in the doctoral courses of the same institution and in 1999 he received his PhD in theology, specializing in the Old Testament, with the thesis: “The Book of the Prophet Hosea, introduction, translation, commentary and theology of the book”. At the same time, he attended the PhD course in Modern Universal History at the Faculty of History and Philosophy of the “Babeș-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca (1991-1996), where he researched a topic that dealt with the Romanian-Jewish



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cultural-church relations in Transylvania during the 18th-19th centuries. At the same time, he studied Hebrew at the Institute of Assyriology and Babylonian Studies of the University of Budapest (1992-1993) and carried out an intensive research internship in Israel at the University of Tel Aviv, the Goldstein-Goren Institute, at the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem, at the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem and at the Archives of Zionism (1994-1995). Subsequently, he followed further research periods in Greece and Israel. This extensive academic training gave Rev. Ioan Chirilă the necessary skills to specialise in Old Testament study and theology, hermeneutics and scriptural exegesis, Jewish literature, Judaism, biblical archaeology and biblical Hebrew language, interreligious dialogue, science-religion dialogue, ethics, bioethics, discourse ethics and modern history.

Rev. Ioan Chirilă's integration into theological education was achieved in 1988, after graduating from the bachelor's level, when Archbishop Teofil appointed him pedagogue, confessor and later professor at the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Cluj-Napoca. After the re-establishment of the Theological Institute (1990), he became a teaching spiritual assistant (1990-1992), and from 1992 he became a teaching assistant in the same institution which, by integrating into the structures of the "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, changed its name to the Faculty of Orthodox Theology. Later, Rev. Chirilă held the position of lecturer (1995), assistant professor (2000) and then professor (2004) in Old Testament, Biblical Archaeology and Hebrew Language. His teaching career was completed in 2007 when he became a PhD supervisor in the Old Testament. At the same time as his work in the faculty, Rev. Chirilă was an assistant professor at the Goren Goldstein Centre for Judaic Studies, the University of Bucharest (where he taught Biblical Archaeology at master level – 1999-2002) and at the Institute of Judaistics M. Carmilly, "Babes-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca (where he taught History of the Hebrew Language, Biblical Hebrew Language and History of Hebrew Literature at the undergraduate level – 1999-2004). He has also been a *visiting professor* at the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Cluj-Napoca since 2007.

On the administrative level, Rev. Ioan Chirilă served as Director of the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Cluj-Napoca from 1995-1998 and held the position of Chancellor of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Cluj-Napoca for two terms (1996-2004). In 2004, Metropolitan Bartholomew granted him the blessing to occupy the position of Dean of the same faculty, which he would lead for two terms (2004-2012). Subsequently, Rev. Professor was elected by the Senate of the University

“Babeș-Bolyai” as President of the Senate, a position he held from 2012 to 2020, also for two terms.

As far as his theological work is concerned, we can say that it is characterized by two fundamental aspects: constancy and epectasy. The first of these concerns the perseverance with which Rev. Chirilă tackles the fundamental themes of Eastern theology, which can be seen from his first volume *Homo-Deus* (1997) to the last *Roots of Eternity* (2022). The knowledge of the living God, the incarnation of the Word, resting in the Holy Spirit, anthropology, the pneumatology of creation, sacred time and space, the Eucharist, love, truth, freedom and unity are just some of the themes of which the Professor constantly returns to reaffirm their central importance in Orthodox Biblical Theology. The other fundamental aspect of his theology concerns the upward movement in the act of knowledge, growth in virtue and the continual aspiration towards deification. Rev. Ioan Chirilă urges us through his writings to approach the spring of life, to taste the living water, and to sink into the unfathomable depths of divinity until we never thirst again.

Regarding the approach to the scriptural text, the Professor proposes several requirements which place the exegete in the Eastern tradition of interpretation. The first requirement concerns the inspired character of the sacred text. Without this criterion, Scripture is desacralized and deprived of its divine character. In this way, the revealed text becomes the object of a critical analysis that often disregards the Church and Tradition. Scripture is an essential point of reference within Tradition, which validates all that the Church Fathers have affirmed. Therefore, denying the inspired character of the Holy Scripture leads to an unnatural separation of the three fundamental pillars of our faith.

Another basic criterion that marks Rev. Ioan Chirilă's vision of the sacred text is the unity of Scripture. The Professor unconditionally supports the inseparable link between the two Testaments, which he sees fully realized especially in liturgical hymnography. The latter, he points out, could in time become a hermeneutical landmark because of the confessional character with which it affirms the teachings of the faith.

The holistic approach to interpretation is another fundamental criterion that the Rev. Professor applies in his exegeses. In this sense, he does not reject the critical method of interpreting the Holy Scripture. On the contrary, he uses the critical instrument without hesitation when his academic research involves/requests it. However, Rev. Ioan Chirilă has reservations about the results of the historical-critical school

when they cast doubt on the inspired character of the Holy Scripture. He also considers inappropriate the tendency of some interpreters to “idolize” the method of work specific to this school of interpretation. In other words, the Rev. Professor uses critical tools with discernment but considers them insufficient to penetrate the mystery of the sacred text.

Also, with a view to a comprehensive interpretation, Rev. Ioan Chirilă often appeals to Jewish exegesis. His openness to the Jewish interpretive tradition is primarily because the Jews are the primary recipients of the revealed text. An honest exegete who wishes to understand the Old Testament in its entirety cannot disregard the view that this tradition (which resembles the patristic tradition) has of the theological content of the revealed message. Reading the two volumes in which the Professor exploits the exegesis of Philo of Alexandria (*Fragmentarium exegetic filonian I* - 2002 and *II* - 2003) is enlightening for understanding how we can relate to the Jewish tradition.

The patristic tradition is one of the strengths of the interpretative act performed by Rev. Ioan Chirilă. In his opinion, the exegete who assumes the Eastern method of interpretation must be in communion of thought with the Fathers of the Church. The interpretation that the former carries out must be in the same spirit as the latter. However, this unity of thought does not imply a rigid repetition of texts, but the assumption of content in a dynamic perspective. In other words, today’s exegete must assume the method of interpretation and the mind of the Fathers to be able to be concretely part of the dynamics of the Tradition. Rev. Ioan Chirilă often stresses that it is the Holy Fathers who offer us the possibility of fully understanding the scriptural text. They do not remain locked in the historical dimension of the sacred text but transfer it to a spiritual dimension in which each one can find himself in the message revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. The Church Fathers offer us the paradigm of relating to Holy Scripture whereby what is “past for history is present, in a mysterious way, in spiritual meaning” for each of us, as St Maximus the Confessor, one of the Church Fathers whom the Professor is very fond of, points out in his responses to Thalassium. Acquiring *the mind of the Church Fathers*, i.e., assuming their way of thinking, brings with it the premise of the mystical union of our soul with the Word of God. Therefore, the finality of the exegetical act is always oriented by the Church Fathers towards our encounter with Christ. In this sense, if the interpretation of a scriptural text does not lead us to Christ, then we cannot claim to have understood much.

The last requirement that we have chosen to highlight the method of interpretation that Rev. Ioan Chirilă promotes in his writings (see *The Holy Scripture*

– *The Word of Words* – 2010) is the incarnation of the word. In his opinion, it is not enough to decipher the mystery of the scriptural word, but it is necessary to live it, to experience it. The word of God must become incarnate in us, be alive and working until we come to affirm, like the Apostle Paul, that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us (Gal 2:20).

The above justifies us to believe that Rev. Professor Ioan Chirilă is a reference exegete for Eastern Christianity and implicitly a current landmark for Old Testament Biblical Theology in Romania and why not for the whole Orthodoxy?

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This volume brings together the scholarly contributions of several professors of theology who teach the Old and New Testaments in academic settings. Their consistent contribution adds to our joy and gives Rev. Ioan Chirilă the opportunity to realise how valued he is.