

**GROWING WITH THE HOLY FATHERS:  
'ABBA' (THE ELDER), 'THEŌRIA' AND 'PHRONĒMA EKKLĒSIAS',  
A 'HERMENEUTICAL SPIRAL' DERIVED FROM THE ASCETICAL  
'PRAxis' OF THE WORD**

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**ABSTRACT.** It is argued that the “return” to the “biblical” faith should find a parallel in a “Return to the Fathers”. *Early Christian thought was biblical*, and one of the lasting accomplishments of the patristic period was to forge a way of thinking which was scriptural in language and inspiration. Forgetful of this truth, the Holy Fathers have been isolated *from the Scripture* and there is therefore an imperative to seek to relate more closely the two. A particular hermeneutical perspective called *theoria* - an “inspired vision” of the Divine Truth, shaped their works. For *Holy Fathers exegesis never had a purpose in itself*; rather patristic hermeneutics directly addressed the reader's life situation. As an antidote to the chasm between modern and pre-modern exegesis we propose the advice of Christopher A. Hall: “Read the Bible holistically” with the Fathers, which if actualized, would mean that the Church would recognize that it possesses a living Truth, one that cannot be limited purely to the biblical text. Further, it is proposed that Christ Himself is to be the “hermeneutic” principle or the principle of interpretation. The Bible does not contain its own principle of interpretation Orthodoxy operates in a closed “hermeneutic circle” through *the dynamic that exists between Scripture and Tradition* (the permanent presence of God). Unlike some former approaches to biblical interpretation, many of today's scholars do not see this circular process as an obstacle to biblical exegesis, but understand it in terms of a “hermeneutical spiral” (G. Osborne), which describes the interaction between text and interpreter. The “hermeneutical spiral” takes place via the interaction of inductive and deductive research and via the movement from biblical to systematic and to homiletical theology. Finally, it is argued that the “hermeneutical bridge” between the word of Scripture and the present life of the Church as thus understood could be strengthened by *rediscovering the “hermeneutic function” of the Holy Spirit, His continuing work of inspiration* that allows the Word of God to be interpreted again, in any time and for each new generation.

**Keywords:** Asceticism and Scripture, Patristic Hermeneutic, Spiritual Authority, *Theoria*, Isaac of Nineveh

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## 1. Seeing and Saying. Reading the Scripture with the Church Fathers

Personal methodologies can easily lead us astray to the extent that we believe that we can maintain cohesion between objective and subjective readings, that is, a critical reading of God's Word, against a spiritual approach of the Bible that can easily produce an arbitrarily subjective reading.<sup>1</sup> The better alternative is by means of the rediscovery of the Holy Fathers<sup>2</sup> whose critical gift of discerning multiple layers of meaning in the biblical text makes possible a hermeneutics in which the literal and historical meaning, as the author understood it, is brought into close relation with the spiritual level of

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<sup>1</sup> The "return" to the "biblical" faith [cf. Peter Zimmerling, *Evangelische Spiritualität. Wurzeln und Zugänge*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 32; Christo Lombaard, *The Old Testament and Christian Spirituality. Theoretical and Practical Essays from a South African Perspective*, Society of Biblical Literature, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), especially this two Chapters: *Four South African Proposals for a Central Theme to "Scriptural Spirituality"* 27-53, *Exegesis and Spirituality* 71-91] should be correlated to "Return to the Fathers" [cf. Ioannis Zizioulas, "Patristic Theology in the Modern World," *Revista Ortodoxă* 24 (2010): 7]. There is a tendency to repeat Fathers almost literally what they said or wrote, we are dealing increasingly with so-called "patristic fundamentalism", something like Protestant biblical fundamentalism - we are behaving toward to the Fathers as the archaeological objects on which we are trying to conserving. That is why „we need, says Zizioulas, to 'inculturate' the Holy Fathers in our time, that is to bring in contemporary culture, contemporary to do with us. Return to the Fathers in Orthodox theology created another problem: we isolated the Holy Fathers from the Scripture and we are not trying to relate them to it. Thus, on the one hand, the Fathers are not placed in a relation with Scripture and, on the other hand, they are not linked to contemporary culture (and reflected in it). It almost threatens to suffocate patristic message, cancel the Holy Fathers and make them irrelevant. To correct this, we must take the Holy Fathers as guides. In other words, today we can't truly be Christians unless we let ourselves to be guided by the Holy Fathers. In this case, we must creatively interpret what the Fathers said for our time. So, we need creative freedom" (Zizioulas, "Patristic Theology," 7).

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Jacquin de Margerie, *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis: Greek Fathers v. 1* (Petersham, Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 2002); Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: an Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis*, trans. John A. Hughes (Edinburgh: T&T. Clark, 1994); J. van Oort and U. Wickert, eds., *Christliche Exegese zwischen Nicaea und Chalcedon* (Kampen: KokPharos, 1992); Paul Blowers, ed., *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); C. Mondésert, ed., *Le monde grec ancien et la Bible* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984); Marc Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity*, trans. Batya Stein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation. Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, *Les commentaires patristiques du Psautier (III-Ve siècles)*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 219 and 220 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studium Orientalium, 1982-1985).

meaning, which directly addresses to the reader's life situation.<sup>3</sup> Recent researches in the history of exegesis have pointed to such a direction, as The American Catholic theologian, Brian E. Daley notes: "*Patristic exegesis has become almost fashionable again. After centuries of neglect, even hostile dismissal on the part of Christian preachers and scholars of virtually every theological hue and stripe, the efforts of early Christian writers to interpret the Bible have recently been watered into life again*".<sup>4</sup>

He also speaks of an atheistic-modern methodology which is opposed to the patristic "pre-critical" approach: "Historical criticism, including the criticism of Biblical texts, is methodologically atheistic, even if what it studies is some form or facet of religious belief, and even if it is practiced by believers. Only "natural," inner-worldly explanations of why or how things happen, explanations that could be acceptable to believers and unbelievers alike, are taken as historically admissible. So God is not normally understood to count as an actor on the stage of history; God's providence in history, the divine inspiration of Scriptural authors and texts, even the miracles narrated in the Bible, are assumed to be private human interpretations of events, interior and non-demonstrable, rather than events or historical forces in themselves".<sup>5</sup>

Orthodox biblical interpretation has traditionally opted for a homiletic approach in preference to a purely exegetical one: The link between early Christian ascetical practices and the Fathers' non-historical mode of Scriptural interpretation prompted the 19th-century Anglican writer, John Keble, to offer an early modern defence of patristic exegesis.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Robert Louis Wilken, Professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Virginia, has sought to show that Christianity is "inescapably ritualistic," "uncompromisingly moral," and "unapologetically intellectual."

He has challenged Adolf von Harnack's idea of the "Hellenization of Christianity" that has been so influential in the interpretation of early Christian thought: "The notion that the development of early Christian thought represented a Hellenization of Christianity has outlived its usefulness". In its place, he

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004) 50-110. Chapters deal with how God is known ("Founded on the Cross of Christ"), worship and sacraments ("An Awesome and Unbloody Sacrifice"), the Holy Scriptures ("The Face of God for Now"), and the Trinity ("Seek His Face Always") through faithful thinking into the revealed Word by Origen, Justin, Augustine, Ignatius, Chrysostom, Clement, Irenaeus, or Cyril of Alexandria. But always so important to Wilken's depiction of such patristic reflection on Scripture, within the developing faith (*regula*) of the church, is that it be narratively seen and heard within the circumstances and relations in which the Fathers worked and lived.

<sup>4</sup> Brian E. Daley, S.J., "Is patristic exegesis still usable?: Reflections on early Christian interpretation of the Psalms" *Communio*, 29, 1 (2002): 185-216, here 185.

<sup>5</sup> Daley, "Patristic exegesis," 191.

<sup>6</sup> Ephraim Radner, "The Discrepancies of Two Ages. Thoughts on Keble's 'Mysticism of the Fathers,'" *The Anglican* 29, no. 2 (2000): 10-15; Cf. Daley, "Patristic exegesis," 216.

advocates a more appropriate expression, namely “Christianization of Hellenism”. Yet neither does this phrase capture the Christian originality, which affirms that life and doctrine are strictly one. Nevertheless, Wilken captures an essential point when he writes, “*But what has impressed me most is the omnipresence of the Bible in early Christian writings. Early Christian thought is biblical, and one of the lasting accomplishments of the patristic period was to forge a way of thinking, scriptural in language and inspiration, that gave to the church and to Western civilization a unified and coherent interpretation of the Bible as a whole. Needless to say, this means that any effort to mount an interpretation of the Bible that ignores its first readers is doomed to end up with a bouquet of fragments*”.<sup>7</sup>

There are numerous biblical commentaries in later Orthodox tradition as well, although they are commonly passed over today because they assume what is often called (pejoratively) a “pre-critical”<sup>8</sup> attitude to the biblical narrative. For the *Holy Fathers exegesis never had a purpose enclosed within itself*, unlike the Catholic approach.<sup>9</sup> David C. Steinmetz arguing for “*the superiority of pre-critical*

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<sup>7</sup> Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 6-7. In the Chapter 2, on Christian worship, he shows that early Christian thinkers were men of prayer who knew the person of Christ not only as a historical memory, but as a fact of experience in the liturgy, in which the events recorded in the gospels, particularly the death and Resurrection of Christ, were “made present”. The subtitle *Seeking the Face of God* is based on Psalm 105:4 in the Latin version, “Seek his face always” (*Quaerite faciem eius semper*). This verse is cited four times by Saint Augustine in his work *The Trinity*.

<sup>8</sup> After a closer examination of the makers of this early ‘inner-biblical exegesis’, M. Sæbø says: “First, a History of biblical interpretation may have an appropriate *starting-point* in its own basis, which is the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament, the Holy Scripture of Jews and Christians. Since it was within the scriptures that became the Scripture that a process of *inner, scriptural interpretation* really started, a description of the interpretation history should not ignore this early beginning although it also, for certain reasons, may be called the ‘pre-history’ of biblical interpretation”; cf., Magne Sæbø, “Church and Synagoge as the Respective Matrix of the Development of an Authoritative Bible Interpretation,” in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Vol. 1: From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300). Part 1: Antiquity*, ed. C Brekelmans, Menahem Haran and Magne Sæbo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996) 731-748, here 731. The rising Christianity ‘doubled’ the traditional Judaism in a way that caused a fundamental “shift of paradigm” (Sæbø, “Church and Synagoge,” 736). The ‘intrinsic’ cultural elements became not least at the transition the ‘inner-biblical’ interpretation to a broad ‘extra-canonical’ literary activity (ibid., 733).

<sup>9</sup> A Catholic understanding of pre-critical method gives us Thomas O’ Loughlin, “Christ and the Scriptures: the chasm between modern and pre-modern exegesis,” *The Month* 31 (1998): 475-85: “*A more adequate way to describe pre-modern exegesis, than of seeing method as characteristic, is to note what exactly the exegete wanted to find – ‘the final cause’ of search to use scholastic terms. One thread running right through patristic and medieval exegesis is that every single line in the scriptures tells us something about Christ – although to get at this one had to use an armoury of methods strategies, and skills. The common element between modern and past exegesis is that for both the meaning of the text was not always obvious and had to be uncovered using a variety of methods (many of which are far older than their modern practitioners realise); what separates them is the object that is obscure. To the modern exegete it is the meaning of a text written at a*

*exegesis*”,<sup>10</sup> has suggested an alternative hypothesis. First, he notes the limitations of the medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text (distinction between “things” and “signs” made by Augustine, or that of a double literal sense: a *literal-historical* sense and a *literal-prophetic*), which he regards as possessing undoubted defects, but even more constricting is the modern theory of a single meaning, which Steinmetz treats as simply false.

This attempt to capture the meaning that the author initially intended, from the biblical text, is viewed by *the pre-critical exegetical tradition as a decided obstacle to the correct deciphering of the true sense of text*, and the historical-critical method, on the other hand, is the key that can unlock this primitive meaning of the text. In the complex phenomenon of the meaning of a text, where the question of truth can endlessly be deferred, what is required is a hermeneutical theory capable of avoiding “*the Scylla of extreme subjectivism*”, on the one hand, and “*the Charybdis of historical positivism*”, on the other. Illustrating the theory of four senses of Scripture (Jerusalem as: city in the Middle East (literal sense) the church (allegorical), the faithful soul (tropological), and the centre of God's new creation (anagogical), Steinmetz makes reference to John Cassian: “*From the time of John Cassian, the church subscribed to a theory of the fourfold sense of Scripture. The literal sense of Scripture could and usually did nurture the three theological virtues, but when it did not, the exegete could appeal to three additional spiritual senses, each sense corresponding to one of the virtues. The allegorical sense taught about the church and what it should believe, and so it corresponded to the virtue of faith. The tropological sense taught about individuals and what they should do, and so it corresponded to the virtue of love. The anagogical sense pointed to the future and wakened expectation, and so it corresponded to the virtue of hope*”.<sup>11</sup>

Holding that ‘*pre-critical exegesis*’ is not monolith, Daniel J. Treier challenges the approach of Steinmetz, drawing attention to some of the difficulties that had to be faced in reading the Old Testament Christianly in the early Patristic exegesis.<sup>12</sup>

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*particular time in a specific culture; to the earlier exegete all the texts have as their true object the incarnate Word*” (O’ Loughlin, “Christ and the Scriptures,” 477). Notice here the summing of Augustinian understanding of revelation as a transmission of “scholastic” concepts and the idea of continuous development of the doctrine that makes the biblical exegesis to discover obscure senses, ratiating the revelation into knowledge of God fuller than in the time when it was initially offered in an obscure form.

<sup>10</sup> David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37, no. 1 (1980): 27-38.

<sup>11</sup> Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 28, 30, 38 and 40. For St. John Cassian see, also, George Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (University of Notre Dame, 2007) 107-126.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel J. Treier, “The superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis? Sic Et Non,” *Trinity Journal* 24 (2003) 77-103: “First of all, ‘pre-critical exegesis’ is no monolith. It is, rather, an unfolding story, a quest full of twists and turns, even substantial disagreements. The NT itself manifests the challenges of reading the OT Christianly” (Treier, “The superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis?,” 79).

Christopher A. Hall's phrase – "*Read the Bible holistically*" – talks about the unifying message on which the Fathers insist, that is, that "*the narrative of the Bible is a continuous*".<sup>13</sup>

In the next chapter, our aim is to show that the complementarity between the Word and the Sacraments is the only way to avoid the first symptom of crisis in the hermeneutical approach, namely, "pseudomorphosis of biblical spirit" (objectifying Scripture). Therefore, the sacramental continuity of the living Truth is a 'hermeneutic spiral' between Scripture and Tradition.

## 2. The Hermeneutic Spiral and/or "Continuous Revelation" (*theoria*)?

The exegetical vision of the Holy Fathers was one inspired by a desire for a deeper understanding of God, a vision which was called *theoria*.<sup>14</sup> Avoiding the difficulties associated with a "verbal inerrancy" approach, they held that every word of the biblical text was created through "*synergy*", a mutual effort between human author and the Holy Spirit. The ancient Christian exegesis of East and West as evidenced in the writings of the Fathers, approached the problem from a holistic point of view. The Church defined the "canon", not to compose inspired writings, because she never believed in any „continuous revelation" (as a direct inspiration to write books that communicate a biblical, additional revelation), but in the unique historical act of God: "*Tradition, says Meyendorff, is the sacramental continuity in history of the communion of saints, in a way it is the Church itself*".<sup>15</sup> Another function of holy Tradition is to make Scripture available and understandable to a changing and imperfect world.

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Reading the Scripture with the Church Fathers* (New York, InterVarsity Press: 1998): "*Read the Bible holistically*. The fathers insist that the narrative of the Bible is a continuous, deeply connected story from Genesis through Revelation. The Old Testament is not discontinuous with the New. Rather the themes presented in the Old Testament find their fulfillment in the narrative structure of the New Testament. Continuity and fulfillment characterize the entire story. Most importantly, the fathers insist that the biblical narrative reaches its culmination, its thematic climax, with the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of the Son of God. Indeed, the incarnational, soteriological and eschatological foci of the New Testament further clarify and deep the Old Testament witness itself. We will read the Bible ineffectively and incorrectly, the fathers warn, if we fail to read its individual parts in the light of its overarching, unifying message" (Hall, *Reading the Scripture*, 191).

<sup>14</sup> Modern commentators starting from the synthesis of Language, hermeneutic and Word of God, want to study more recently the way in which phenomenology of language attends in particular to the voice of Jesus as exemplified by the parable and the voice of Paul as expressed in the letter. See Robert W. Funk, "Saying and Seeing: Phenomenology of Language and the New Testament," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 3, no. 34 (1966): 197-213: "The voice of man of his linguistic nexus is the focal interest of phenomenology of language, as well as of some recent theology" (Funk, "Saying and Seeing," 197).

<sup>15</sup> John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 14.

Therefore the word *homoousios* expressed, in a language understandable in its time, a truth which Scripture presupposed. This example clearly illustrates „the Church’s awareness that she possessed a living Truth which cannot be limited simply to the biblical text. The verbal freedom which the Nicene Fathers demonstrated was not, however, an internal liberty in relation to the content of Scripture. The Orthodox Church has never proclaimed dogmas which are not direct interpretations of historical facts related in the Bible”.<sup>16</sup> This illustrates the Orthodox approach to the problem of „doctrinal development”, whose meaning consists „neither in a sort of continuous revelation, nor in making additions to Scripture, but in solving concrete problems related to the one eternal Truth”, the latter remaining essentially the same before and after the definition. These definitions are final and cannot be changed inasmuch as they express the absolute Truth of Christ, living in His Church. Since “Tradition is an expression of the permanent presence of God in the community of the New Israel”<sup>17</sup> any “new theology”, breaking with Tradition and continuity, would be meaningless.

The Holy Scriptures took shape in the matrix of the early Tradition of the Church, but without any notion that *Tradition and Scripture were to be viewed as either complementary or mutually exclusive*. Orthodoxy sees the relationship between the two in a way that can be described not by “Scripture or Tradition”, nor by “Scripture and Tradition”, but by the phrase “Holy Scripture in the Tradition of the Church”, because *Scripture is Tradition, the latter seen as a true “spiritual” reading of the Scriptures*: a reading based on the work of the Holy Spirit who is the source of inspiration in the Church.<sup>18</sup>

Given that “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3, 16), this work of inspiration involves synergy between the Holy Spirit and the man who receives divine revelation and translates it into the announcing of the gospel. Tradition can be equated with “apostolic gospel”; another description is “Church’s living memory” (S. Bulgakov).

The biblical writings can only be interpreted correctly in the light of Holy Tradition. Tradition presents the original content of Scripture, but it also contains the oral and written *paradosis*, that is, all “that is sent/transmitted “from the beginning revelation began as Christian reflection on the mystery of Christ. Christ Himself is the “hermeneutic” principle or the principle of interpretation. The Bible does not contain its own interpretation within itself.<sup>19</sup>

Orthodoxy operates in a “hermeneutic circle” expressed in an *enduring dynamic relating Scripture and Tradition*. Today’s biblical scholars do not see this circular process as an obstacle to the activity of biblical exegesis, but as an

<sup>16</sup> Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> John Breck, *Sfânta Scriptură în Tradiția Bisericii*, trans. Ioana Tămăian (Cluj-Napoca: Patmos, 2008), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Breck, *Sfânta Scriptură în Tradiția Bisericii*, 23-24.

“hermeneutic spiral” (G. Osborne), which describes the interaction between text and interpreter. According to Grant Osborne’s understanding: a. *“hermeneutical spiral” like comprehension up* (interaction between inductive and deductive) but also, b. *so-called upward spirals of application* and contextualization for Christian life today.

The movement is from biblical theology to historical theology to systematic theology to homiletics: Biblical theology integrates individual passages of Scripture into an archetypal “theology”; Historical theology studies how the Church has historically contextualized biblical theology; systematic theology draws on biblical theology in the light of historical research so as to recontextualize the Scriptures for the current generation; Both theological disciplines and that of homiletics are then employed to make use of the results of each of these stages.<sup>20</sup>

The Complementarity between the Word and Sacraments is expressed in the Road to Emmaus episode (Lk 24, 13-35), Taking the narrative as a whole, we can see that the Word must be *celebrated in order for it to be fully heard*. The conviction that God’s Word is fulfilled through liturgical celebration marks the unique character of Orthodox hermeneutics.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, (Westmont: Intervarsity Press, 1991). The „hermeneutical spiral” take place: via the interaction of inductive and deductive research and via the movement from biblical to systematic to homiletical theology. *“Biblical theology collates the partial theology of individual passages and books into an archetypal „theology” of Israel and the early church (thus integrating the Testaments). Historical theology studies the way the church throughout history has contextualized biblical theology to meet the challenges and needs of the church at various stages of its historical development. Systematic theology recontextualizes biblical theology to address current problems and to summarize theological truth for the current generation. Finally, homiletical theology (so called to stress that the sermon preparation is part of the hermeneutical task) applies the results of each of these steps to the practical needs of the Christians today”* (cf. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 14). Osborne refers to the fact of ignoring the understanding of the Early Church: *“While the hermeneutic of the early church cannot be determinative for the modern methods, since we are hardly bound to their modes of thinking, it is worthwhile to note that de earliest universally considered the biblical stories to be historical”* (Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 167). The hermeneutical circle has a pre-heideggerian sense: the issue of circularity in the process of understanding: *“the term ‘hermeneutical circle’, for the classical formulation of the hermeneutical circle got its form for the first time in Johann Gustav Droysen’s work [The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present (New York: Continuum, 1985) 119-131] and this form was repeated by others writers. It consist in the tulle that ‘the whole can be understood only through its parts, but the parts can be understood only through the whole’.*” For scholars such as Humboldt, Boeck, Palmer and Lonergan, the hermeneutical circle seems to be a vicious circle. In contrast, for some other scholars such as Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Gadamer, there is no real circularity in the process of understanding; *apud*, Mohammad Motahari, *“The Hermeneutical Circle or the Hermeneutical Spiral?” The International Journal of Humanities 2*, no. 15 (2008): 99-111, for here 100 and 103.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Pasquarello, *“Doxological Reading and Eschatological Imagination,” Liturgy. A Journal of The Liturgical Conference 2*, no. 28 (2013): 58-67;



By *preaching* the gospel and liturgical *celebration*, the believers celebrate the Liturgy through which the Word, as with the Eucharist gift, is received and given back to God as a sacrifice of praise. The only way to avoid “pseudomorphosis of biblical spirit” (objectifying Scripture) is to ensure that the Word of God be placed within its own *ecclesial and liturgical context*, where it is “updated”, internalized and assimilated. *The first symptom of crisis in the hermeneutical approach described here appears when few of today's biblical researches are seen to directly address the spiritual needs of the believers.* As John Breck notes “we contented ourselves with questioning the biblical text instead of letting the living and life-giving Word of God speak to us and call us”.<sup>22</sup> In a pre-critical culture such as that of early monastic biblical students, allegory remained very important: “*To interpret allegorically is to read expectantly, to listen to the text with a certainty that it will carry meaning for the reader. It is a hermeneutical strategy based upon not suspicion but critical trust of the text. The practice of allegorical reading requires the reader's receptivity to the text's continual ability to generate meaning in the present. Such an interpretation need not, of course, be uncritical*”.<sup>23</sup>

Hillel's second rule, *gezera shawa* ('analogy'), is abundantly illustrated by Paul's frequently recurring practice of 'pearl stringing', Midrashic exegesis characterizes the Apostle's hermeneutical procedures more than any other style. Having been trained as a Pharisee, Paul shared with the Judaism of his day many of the then current hermeneutical conventions and procedures: “*The earliest believers, following the teaching and exegetical procedures of their Master, seem to have placed the revelation of God in Jesus the Messiah 'neben dem Text,' so that both stood starkly side-by-side. Paul's treatment of the Old Testament, however, evidences not quite such a simple juxtaposition, but, rather, a more nuanced exposition of the*

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<sup>22</sup> Breck, *Sfânta Scriptură în Tradiția Bisericii*, 28-30, 33-35. As a reaction appeared after disintegrator initiative of modern biblical criticism, the new literary criticism, in a particularly way the narrative and reception theories, however, manifests a tendency towards relativism. As structuralists, they abandon the interest for the literal sense of the biblical text, stopping rather on the meaning established by the reader, the so-called “aesthetic pole”. In an attempt to determine the literal meaning, the text is drawn from the historical context in which it was produced, and “exegesis” is reduced to a modern and sophisticated form of allegorizing. Grant R. Osborne enumerates *the weaknesses of the methodology of narrative criticism*: 1. A dehistoricizing tendency; 2. Setting aside the author; 3. A denial of intended or referential meaning; 4. Reductionistic and disjunctive thinking; 5. The imposition of modern literary categories on ancient genres; 6. A preoccupation with obscure theories; 7. Ignoring the understanding of the early church; cf. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 212-216.

<sup>23</sup> Mark S. Burrows, “‘To Taste with the Heart’: Allegory, Poetics, and the Deep Reading of Scripture,” *Interpretation* (2002):168-180, here 171. See also: Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, “Scriptural Typology and Allegory in Liturgical Prayer” *Liturgy. A Journal of The Liturgical Conference* 28, no. 2 (2013): 4-13.

*Jewish scriptures within a larger context of Christological awareness... Paul in his major letters usually begins with the biblical text itself and then seeks by means of a midrashic explication to demonstrate Christological significance*".<sup>24</sup>

Due to the permanent hermeneutical work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues "to speak" to the Church through the voice of the Spirit (John 16:13). Tradition is a *living* reality in which the Spirit brings into the Church all (*panta*) that Jesus taught His disciples up to His passions and His death, but He also speaks about the fullness of truth (*aletheia pase*) which represents nothing less than the words of Christ who is resurrected, raised and glorified/praised (John 16, 13-15).

Seeking *ipsissima verba Jesus* in studies which are "*in search of the historical Jesus*" becomes a nonsense. Through the dynamic quality of the work of the Holy Spirit in the space between the text and the reader, the Bible becomes a living book, a place/medium for sharing the life-giving knowledge or *communion* with God that reveals Himself in and through it.<sup>25</sup>

We'll continue our approach by pointing that the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of Truth, is the only One who can break the "hermeneutic circle", serving as a hermeneutic 'bridge'. Thus, *theoria*, is not a method of exegesis, but rather a 'vision' of the divine truth communicated by the Holy Spirit to the Church. As a spiritual vision, *theoria* can provide us one single hermeneutical program for removing the modern divorce between biblical exegesis, systematic theology and spiritual praxis.

### **3. *Phronêma ekklesiâs* ("the Mind of the Church") is, at the Same Time, "the Mind of Scripture"**

A principle promoted by The Holy Fathers taken directly from Hebrew rabbis, is that of an exegetical reciprocity which assumes that *all Scripture is entirely inspired*. Old Testament and New Testament can be interpreted only by

<sup>24</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, "Early Church Interpretation", in *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Mondon and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007) 78-89, here 81-82; see chap.7.1 "Phenomena of biblical usage" (Longenecker, "Early Church Interpretation", 87).

<sup>25</sup> Breck, *Sfânta Scriptură în Tradiția Bisericii*, 36-38. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine draws the distinction between the mode of understanding (*modus inueniendi*) and the mode of communicating (*modus proferendi*) Scripture; cf., Michael C. McCarthy, "We Are Your Books: Augustine, the Bible, and the Practice of Authority," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 2, no. 75 (2007): 324-352, here 322. There's not such a distinction in orthodox view. The Bible, says McCarthy, is not conceived as an object of formal study: "Rather, scripture is inhabited, and Augustine's comment that "we are your books" suggests precisely the dynamism he thought scripture ought to have within his congregation as well" (McCarthy, "We Are Your Books," 333). This is what McCarthy calls "embodied exegesis".

reciprocal reference to each other, since they together form an inner and organic unity. *Only a spiritual vision, a theoria, unites, in one hermeneutical program, both typology and a certain allegorical perspective.* Typology marks the connections between parallel realities (the relationship of promise to fulfillment), while allegory involves the search for “hidden” or symbolic meaning, the latter representing a higher spiritual signification than that discerned from typology.

Allegorical exegesis does not focus upon historical events as such, but rather the deeper spiritual significance of those events. However, in reaction to radical trends towards *de-historicization* in the method as practiced at the exegetical school of Alexandria, the exegetes from the rival school in Antioch claimed that the ultimate meaning of any story or reality must be based on the event itself, that is, *in history*. The search for an inspired vision of divine truth (*theoria*) had led them to the identification not of two meanings, but of a *double meaning*: both literal (namely historical) and spiritual. However, Antiochene typology knows only a unidirectional movement, from past to future or from earth to heaven, while the typology involves a *double movement*: from past to future, certainly, but also from future to past. Thus, the antitype and archetype which are already, in a prophetic way, present in types, are present by *anticipation* (“the rock was Christ” – *the type already contains and manifests antitype*). Fathers of the Church argued that every theophany, every work of God in the Old Testament must be understood as a theophany of God the Son, rather than God the Father.<sup>26</sup>

Frances Young believes that the ancient scholars did not make a distinction between the two methods categorical and exegetical typology as such is a “modern building”: “*The modern divorce between biblical exegesis and systematic theology, or indeed between biblical exegesis and praxis, would have been unthinkable in the day of the Fathers*”.<sup>27</sup> A type contains “*a mimetic seal*” so that the antitype is

<sup>26</sup> Breck, *Sfânta Scriptură în Tradiția Bisericii*, 40-43, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: University Press, 1997) 7: “To deplore the influence of Greek philosophy or contrast the Hellenic and Hebraic approaches, as scholars have done in this century, is to do less than justice to the fascinating cultural interpenetration which took place as the Bible became the literary foundation of a new ‘totalizing discourse’”. Young, also, says: “To discern the mind of scripture did involve two things: (1) the assembly of texts pointing to the same conclusion, and (2) respect for the normal ‘earthly’ meaning of words, appropriately modified, or perhaps I should say ‘elevated’, for their theological context. The interpretation may not be literal, but in the majority of cases, it is also far from allegorical. The categories usually used to discuss patristic exegesis are inadequate to the task” (Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 35) and they learn to read properly (*kalos*) with the ‘sense’ (*dianoia*) right (ibid., p. 38). The Athanasius exegetical strategies and hermeneutical principles was “neither literal, nor typological, nor allegorical. Rather it is deductive. The deductive process involves attention to the meaning of the words, their particular biblical sense, the syntax and the context of the text in question – the basic techniques of the *grammaticus* attending to the verbal configuration of a passage... demands innovative exegesis” (Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 40).

already mirrored in “*content into*” the type. Although rooted in history, the type transcends history to the extent that it bears the “seal” of his own eschatological perfection.<sup>28</sup>

For correctly interpreting the Scriptures and understanding the profundity of the truth contained within them, the exegete must *interpret them from the inside*. In other words, Scripture prescribes a way of life - “Christ in us”, as the Apostle expresses it. Or, according to the patristic tradition, we cannot correctly interpret Scripture if we do not live according to it, that is, to live “in Christ”. To correctly understand and explain the Scriptures *from inside* requires of the interpreter asceticism and prayer in order to “*walk in truth*” (3 John 1:3), to have “*the mind of Christ*” (1 Corinthians 2:16) or to “*know the mystery of the kingdom*” (Mark 4:11). Exegesis is a function of worship, a testimony to ?? the community of faith; as such the Church is the place most fully suited to liturgical interpretation, annunciation and celebration of the Word of God. Orthodox exegetes claim the absolute necessity that in their reflections they subscribe to the “*phrônema ekklesias*”, the “thinking of the church”, based upon the conviction that the work of exegesis is *diakonia*, a service to the Church.<sup>29</sup>

How might one describe the “hermeneutical bridge” between the word of Scripture and the present life of the Church? This can be answered only by rediscovering the “hermeneutic function” of the Holy Spirit, which involves three inter-related elements: 1) historical event, 2) preaching the soteriological significance of that event, through the biblical authors, and 3) interpretation and updating of the preaching of the Church to each new generation. The Holy Spirit's work consists in loading the historical event with a typological significance and in the guidance of the prophetic, apostolic or future witnesses to a discernment of that signification in order that they might preach it and then transmit it as an element of Church's Tradition. Holy Scripture cannot be understood, therefore, *in vacuo*, apart from the illumination provided by the whole Church's tradition, because only within Church does the Holy Spirit “*update*” the Word during the Holy Liturgy, in the sacraments and in the preaching of the Holy Gospel. He does this under “his hermeneutic function”, under His *continuing work of inspiration* which allows the Word of God to be re-interpreted again and again, in every time and for every new generation.

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<sup>28</sup> Breck, *Sfânta Scriptură în Tradiția Bisericii*, 48, 51. Therefore Diodorus had to maintain that type contains a double meaning, historical and transcendent at the same time, literally and spiritually (interpretation has here priority over the event). Therefore, the type is ‘double’: grounded in historical reality where the salvation is realized, he wears and reveals eternal truth and eternal reality.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, 64, 72.

The Holy Spirit's work of inspiration is not only limited to Scripture since all authentic tradition (*paradosis*) is in some way "inspired": "Thus, we are forced, says John Breck, to distinguish two levels or degrees of inspiration: that of Scripture and that of the Tradition ... To distinguish Scripture from Tradition in terms of the Spirit's work, we could talk about revealing inspiration and about the anamnesis inspiration."<sup>30</sup>

The Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of Truth, is the only One who can break the "hermeneutic circle", serving as a "bridge" or a hermeneutic connection which updates and makes available the Word of God at every moment of the Church's life, through her liturgical preaching and ministry. Thus, *theoria*, is to be understood not so much as a method of exegesis, but rather as a "view" of the divine truth communicated by the Holy Spirit to the Church. While the Hebrew prophet received his revelatory vision in a state of ecstasy, the Christian exegete becomes an instrument of the Spirit through contemplation, an opening to God's grace both at the level of heart and mind. Exegesis, as well as preaching the Word or painting of icons, says John Breck, is in the fullest sense a "vocation" or a calling: "the closed connection between Scripture and Holy Tradition of the apostolic testimony and its interpretation can be illustrated by comparing the Tradition with the icon. The Word and the icon have four common elements. First: the event itself, representative and represented, through which Revelation is being shared to the Church. The second element is the inspirational work of the Spirit, which gives to the biblical author and to the iconographer a view (*theandria*) of eternal reality or of eternal truth which lies at the heart of events. The third element is the material expression of that truth in human language of words or in a graphic form and in color. The fourth element is the act of internalization of this truth by the believer, as it is being revealed by word or icon. It is being left entirely legal or canonical. The Word is being illuminated by icon as He is being illuminated by the Holy Tradition ... icon is actually a part of the tradition, as the biblical Word".<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, it is extremely important to add that the truth which is being communicated by the Spirit is more than information, it involves participation and communion. No formal technique, nor a systematic methodology is required to understand it. Thus, according to the ascetic tradition, Scripture and prayer enlightens each other. This means that the "prayer of the Scriptures" is not a closed circle, but rather an upward spiral. That is why we will skip from biblical exegesis to "the prayer of Scriptures", using in this endeavor the Syrian spirituality.

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<sup>30</sup> John Breck, *Puterea Cuvântului în Biserica dreptmăritoare*, trans. Monica E. Herghelegiu (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1999), 43-47, 109-110: Tradition, is the Church's own testimony about Jesus and of the meaning of life, death and resurrection. It is, however, an inspired testimony: a remembrance (*anamnesis*) and interpretation (*hermeneut*), a true lighting ("light/photismos glorious gospel of Christ," II Cor. 4:4) to incarnate the one truth revealed in the person God's Word.

<sup>31</sup> Breck, *Puterea Cuvântului*, 110-112.

#### 4. Swallowing the Scroll ('*manducation de la Parole*') – "inner reading" of Scriptures

The biblical-patristic hermeneutic principle refers therefore to the necessity of *reading the Scriptures "from inside"*.<sup>32</sup> The word should be "lived", as in biblical language "to hear" implies "to obey" (*shamea, akouô / hypakouô*), and this obedience in turn leads to a real prayer of the Word, meaning to open up to him, at the level of heart and mind. *Lectio divina* can be used to recover the contemplative reading of Scripture.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, any "individual" reading of Scripture takes place in the Church and is a ministry/service in the life of the Church. Like prayer, it strengthens our participation in the ecclesial Body. *Scripture is a fundamental environment for revelation*. The process that leads from reading and studying the biblical text to "internalization" of text through meditation, was named by the French "*la manducation de la Parole*" or "consumption" of God's Word.<sup>34</sup> The ultimate purpose in *lectio* was to reach to *illuminatio*, or even *deificatio*, that is, *theosis*, or human participation in God's life. For *lectio* to reach *contemplatio*, the inner struggle of reader must be accompanied by a ministry/ serving which is full of humility, an *operatio* or a pure *diakonia*.

<sup>32</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew and C. Stephen Evans (ed.), *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation. Vol. 4 of Scripture and Hermeneutics Series* (London: Paternoster Press, 2003), 5-12.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Christopher Gorman, "Reading with the Spirit: Scripture, Confession, and Liturgical Imagination", in *Liturgy. A Journal of The Liturgical Conference* 2, no. 28 (2013), 14-22.

<sup>34</sup> The name "manducation" comes from spiritual anthropology of Marcel Jousse, presuming an "internalization" of the Word. Joseph Morlaas, in the preface describes the foundation's methodology M. Jousse, as follows: "*acte concret où se manipule une réalité transcendante la réalité concrète de l'Enseigneur se donnant, corps et doctrine, à l'enseigné. Il marque la stabilité, l'immutabilité des éléments fondamentaux de la civilisation palestinienne depuis ses commencements jusqu'à l'avènement messianique de Iéshoua de Nazareth... c'est le fondement de la méthodologie jousienne*", cf. Marcel Jousse, *La Manducation de la Parole* (Gallimard: Paris, 1975) 17. Also he continues: "*comme une fusion cosmique dans un contexte mystique, la manducation pédagogique comporte la comunion de l'enseigneur et de l'enseigné, l'enseigneur étant nécessairement, de par les mécanismes psychophysiologiques, lui-même indissociable de son enseignement. D'où l'unité du diptyque composant le présent ouvrage: la manducation de l'enseignement et la manducation de l'Enseigneur*" (Jousse, *La Manducation*, 12). A close expression "Manducation de la Parole" by Marcel Jousse is that of Ellen Davis' "swallowing the Scroll": "*Several aspects of the figure are suggestive of the milieu in which Ezekiel called to prophesy. The first is the notion of ingestion as a means of appropriating the divine word. In an anthropological study contrasting the passive pedagogical systems of modern society with the "rhythmo-catechetical" system of the Palestinian rabbis, Jousse emphasizes the importance of memorable gesture and figures*", cf. Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy*, Bible and Literature Series, no. 21 of the Columbia Theological Seminary, Georgia (New York: Sheffied Academic Press, 1989) 52 and 62. See also: Eugene H. Peterson, "Eat This Book: The Holy Community at table with the Holy Scripture," *Theology Today* 56, no. 1 (1999): 5-17.

The process described here begins with biblical exegesis and ends with “the prayer of Scriptures”. Thus, in Western tradition, *lectio divina* involved the progressive transition from the proper reading (*lectio*) to a profound reflection on the given portion (*meditatio*) in order to achieve the goal, meaning prayer (*oratio*), a “prayer of the Scriptures”.<sup>35</sup> Allegory, as a common mode of reading the biblical text in this tradition, was never intended as a means of abstract interpretation; rather it was always grounded in spiritual practice: “*In the Western church this approach came to be known as lectio divina, the slow and meditative practice in the monasteries of a «deep reading» advocated already by St. Benedict in his Rule Such reading was the dominant means of encountering scripture as a living word from antiquity until the dawning of early modernity*”.<sup>36</sup> Monastic readers preserved the Bible's central position through the work of copying, this labor merely providing “*the dry bones upon which they enlivened the text through a spirituality of reading*”.<sup>37</sup>

Eastern Fathers nowhere present accounts of any systematic technique for reading Scripture. In story of the Transfiguration, the “*bleached clothes [of Christ] are a symbol of the words of Scripture, which became bright, clear, pure and understandable without any enigmatic implication and symbolic shadow and they revealed their reason within themselves and covered by them, as they came to the smooth and straight knowledge from God and were freed from passion to the world and the flesh*.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Breck, *Sfânta Scriptură în Tradiția Bisericii*, 107.

<sup>36</sup> Mark S. Burrows, “‘To Taste with the Heart’ Allegory, Poetics, and the Deep Reading of Scripture”, *Interpretation* 56, no. 2 (2002): 168-180, here 170. A meditative reading and prayer of God's Word was practiced in Judaism. *Nehemiah* describes the post-exilic setting of the Liturgy of the Word, while reciting a week “Book of the Law of Moses”, accompanied by homiletic interpretation of the seventh day of the year. Then Qumran community law stipulates that a third of the night to be devoted to reading from the Torah and prayer. Origen we find the first reference at exactly spiritual reading as such (*theia anagnosis*).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-171.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Marion Blowers, “Exegesis of Scripture,” in *Oxford Handbook to Maximus the Confessor*, ed. Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 253-273; P.M. Blowers, “A Psalm ‘Unto the End’: Eschatology and Anthropology in Maximus the Confessor's Commentary on Psalm 59,” in *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms*, ed. Brian Daley and Paul Kolbet (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 257-283; Blowers, “Eastern Orthodox Interpretation,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 1, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 241-249. Blowers, “Patristic Interpretation,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 81-89. In the studies based on the exegetical method of St. Maximus, Blowers examines three Incarnations of the Logos: in creation, in Scripture and in the body taken from Virgin Mary. Christ incarnates Himself in the Scriptures as the eternal Logos, and Christ Himself reveals a deeper meaning, and symbolic eschatological Scripture, “symbols of its mysteries”. Christ is his “hermeneutical principle” since it is both the content of Scripture and her interpreter.

Father John Breck gives some indication of the significance of the meditative reading of Scripture and its relationship to the prayer of the Holy Eastern Fathers:

1) Liturgy is the context in which God's Word is being expressed. Thus, there is no such thing as a strictly "personal" reading, for receiving the Word of God is always an ecclesial act. *Phronêma ekklesiâs* or "thought of the Church" is at the same time "thought of the Scripture". As Frances M. Young says "*discerning the unitive 'mind' (dianoia) of scripture was seen as essential to reaching a proper interpretation*";<sup>39</sup>

2) There is an intimate relation between the holistic reading of Scripture and contemplative prayer. By opening the heart to the mystery of the divine presence, a presence which is both hidden and revealed in the Scriptures, we read and internalize the Word of God in order to *pray to God with "his own words"*,

3) The movement which occurs from *lectio* to *oratio*, from a meditative reading of the Scriptures to a personal communion with God through the "prayer of the Scriptures" is a gift, an *epiklesis* of the Spirit;

4) Saint Maximus, together with the whole ascetic tradition, strongly emphasizes that meditative spiritual reading of Scripture helps us to pursue an inner pilgrimage and this, in turn, leads us both towards glorification and, at the same time, to an *update* of the Scriptures;

5) according to the ascetic tradition, Scripture and prayer *enlighten each other*. This means that the "prayer of the Scriptures" is not a closed circle, but rather an *upward spiral*,<sup>40</sup>

In the hermeneutics employed by the Fathers, "the Prayer of the Scriptures" involves Christological, ecclesiological and Trinitarian readings of Bible. The Spirit transforms an allegorical picture from a simple sign into? a symbol, an environment of participation. Starting from the study of the phenomenon of division, from a communication failure, of the "divided sensitivity" that characterizes much of contemporary consciousness, Andrew Louth insists on the value of ?? allegory which "*enables us to restore through her in us the unity and simplicity lost by the fall, and so to come back to love.*" Allegory is a way of prayer, it is at home especially in the Liturgy: "*Allegory is firmly connected to the mystery of Christ, it is a way to tie the whole Scripture of this mystery, a way to make a synthetic vision of the biblical narrative images and events.*"<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Breck, *Sfânta Scriptură în Tradiția Bisericii*, 114-117. Each *lectio divina* can become a reality for us, "Today": "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21).

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Louth, *Deslușirea Tainei. Despre natura teologiei*, translation and afterword by M. Neamțu, preface by Ioan Ică jr. (Sibiu: Deisis, 1999) 169-170, 159-160. "The seduction of allegory path - or awareness of multiple meaning of Scripture - comes from the recognition of this great 'profundness', *mira profunditas*, of the Holy Scriptures" (Louth, *Deslușirea Tainei*, 159).



It is the experience of teachers, saints and ascetics of the Church that the Holy Spirit guides the reader of the Scripture from the literal to the spiritual meaning of the text, and thus through to inner contemplative prayer, this being an act of love of the Holy Spirit. The truth that is being communicated by the Spirit is more than information, it involves participation and communion, an inner journey from *contemplatio* to *meditatio*: “Therefore, says John Breck, *there is no formal technique, nor a systematic methodology to enable us to pass from a literal reading of the text to a purely spiritual reading or from knowledge of God to communion with God, the attempt to hear the voice of God in Scripture...*”<sup>42</sup>

Following the Holy Virgin’s example, we first receive in ourselves the gift and the power of the Holy Word, we read it, we meditate upon it and we internalize it in order for it to come to fruition in us, for our spiritual perfection. *Lectio divina* is a quality and a way of reading the Scripture, possible only through the work of God’s Spirit in us: “*The transition from exegesis to lectio and the transition from the literal to the spiritual meaning of a passage is accomplished less through our human effort and more through the Holy Spirit. Consequently, every authentic spiritual reading of Scripture should start with a triple epiklesis: an invocation addressed to the Father to send upon us the gift of the Spirit, for the Spirit to transform our reading into a deep and constant communion with Jesus Christ, God’s eternal Word.*”<sup>43</sup>

In our last chapter, the continuous synergy between reading and prayer is enlightened by the figure of the elder who communicates us a lived experience of the Word. As we shall see, the desert hermeneutic in this sense involved a hermeneutical circle or spiral – interpretation both derived from and led toward praxis. Thus, in the following, we emphasize that the reading requires spiritual asceticism, humility and purity of heart, because “truth” cannot be reduced to an object of discussion, but demands the role of the Spirit as the inner teacher. Therefore, the Saint Isaac the Syrian will be our practice teacher (born of silence) of the word through our sanctification and astonishment.

## **5. “The Elder” (Old Man) Communicates a Lived Experience – the “Practice” of the Word**

The Church in Persia owes much to Antiochian theological influences, the theological orientation of Alexandrian Cyril (412-444) being perceived as foreign to the East Syriac Church tradition. In its theological schools many scholars monks translated into Syriac a number of Greek philosophical and scientific texts, which were in turn studied by the Arabs. These peoples then brought the material to Europe via Spain. Based on the tradition of the Syro-Oriental schools, the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 127.

Arab academies were developed.<sup>44</sup> Between 471 and 489, the Bishop Barsaûma († about 496), disciple of Iba of Edessa enabled the Persian school of Narsai to construct its first establishment.

The Syro-Oriental Church, now closed off from Persia, was willing to offer to persecuted Edessenes a place where they could reorganize their school which, based on Antiochene theology, was viewed with suspicion by the Byzantines. Following a decision to seek independence from the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Babowai (457-484), and those opposed to “ miaphysitism”, in 484 Barsauma convened *the Synod of Beth Lapat*, at which Antiochene theology was recognized as the basis of the Syro-Oriental Church and with it, Narsai’s exegetico-theological approach which involved acceptance of theological positions condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431? and later at the second Council of Constantinople in 553 (condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Diodorus of Tarsus and Iba of Edessa).<sup>45</sup> Under the regulations of the school of Nisibis,<sup>46</sup> the members of the school, who called

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<sup>44</sup> Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God And the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis And the Beginning of Wisdom. The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 24. Like Becker examined the earliest Syriac Sources attest to an understanding of Christianity as a form of learning. Some of the earliest explicit examples in Syriac literature of the tendency to employ pedagogical terms can be found in Peshitta. The Syriac equivalent of the Hebrew root y-š-b (lit „to sit”, was translated as „to live”) it is shift in „to sit in study”. The closure of the School of the Persians in 489 for being a strong-hold of Nestorianism would also have affected the various sources for the School that were composed after this date. In reality, the theology of the School in the mid-fifth century, if it even had a distinctive theology, was not necessarily equivalent to a later East-Syriac one, even if Antiochene writers, such as Diodore of Tarsus, were read there. The ethnic appellation „of the Persians” may be relevant to the origins of the School, but it does not have continuing significance through the fifth century (Becker, *Fear of God*, 45). On the other hand, Theodore’s influence on the Church of the East, including in Christology, exegesis and sacramental theology, was immense (Becker, *Fear of God*, 117).

<sup>45</sup> Barsaûma didn’t hesitate to use political power, obtaining from the “king of kings” Peroz (457-484) the expulsion of “miaphysitists” in Persia. He tried to do the same and in Armenia, but there, in 491, the Catholicos Babken, together with Albanian and Iberian bishops, convened a council at *Valarshapat* which condemned the Council of Chalcedon, Leo’s Tome and Barsaûma. See Sabino Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul – asceză singuratică și milă fără sfârșit*, trans. Cornelia Maria and Deacon Ioan I. Ică jr (Sibiu: Deisis, 2012), 32.

<sup>46</sup> The whole day was divided between study and prayer, and during the school year any working activity was forbidden outside of school. Students were housed in small residential units where they were provided with food and accommodation. The headmaster, called “*Rabban*” was responsible for the Department of exegesis (*kursyâ da-mpshshqânâ*), while “*rabbaitâ*” with the functions of a deputy director in charge of discipline, library and economy. There were foreseen: a teacher of reading (to whom was entrusted the teaching of grammar, reading and composition), a professor of writing and calligraphy and a “*bâduqâ*” (researcher), which deals with non-religious subjects. Besides Scripture, they taught Aristotle and some elements of history, geography, natural science rhetoric. Provide two years study program: teaching first book of Psalms, the student had to memorize them, the second book of the Old and New Testament study by Ephrem and comments of Theodore of Mopsuestia; see Arthur Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, Volumul 12 din Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile (Stockholm: ESTE, 1962) and Raymond Le Coz, *Histoire de l’Église d’Orient, Chrétiens d’Irak, d’Iran et de Turquie* (Paris: Cerf, 1995), 89-105, 311-336, both quoted in S. Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul*, 34-35.

each other “brothers”, were a community (*knushyâ*) of semi-monastic type, remaining in the same time studying in a state of celibacy.

St. Isaac the Syrian, Bishop of Nineveh, lived in the 7th-century. He and his brother joined the ascetic monastery of Mar Matthew, near Nineveh as monks. His passion for reading led him to become blind, says Isho'denah. *But the source of his knowledge was threefold*: first the Scripture or rather “*contemplation of Scripture*”, then, the teaching of the Fathers, whom he calls “*true men*”, and finally his *own experience*. Scripture, the primary source of revelation for Isaac, needs to be investigated, questioned, interpreted, and sometimes even exceeded.

The Fathers are to be read, assimilated, interiorized and re-expressed. Even though accepting the Antiochene methods of exegesis, the Syro-Oriental tradition has not departed from the ancient Syriac tradition, but it has been able to rediscover within the tradition of Antioch elements which we can call typical of the exegesis of Afrah and Ephrem. *That is, while it does not use Alexandrian allegorical method, it does employ the category of symbol and mystery*. This agreement between the oldest Syriac tradition and Antiochian exegesis is not due so much to the historical contacts as to “*the success of the same style in different cultural environments*” (edessano-nisibian of Antiochian and Syriac language and Greek language). The common elements are: *an historic interpretation* but with an affinity for the *Jewish mode of exegesis* and the discrete use of *typology*.<sup>47</sup>

Dadisho 'Qatraya recognizes in the work of Theodore of Mopsuestia<sup>48</sup> (350-428) what he calls “*spiritual exegesis*” different from the exegesis as “*historic*” and as “*homiletics*”.<sup>49</sup> For Theodore, the Logos does not manifest itself clearly in

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<sup>47</sup> Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul*, 122.

<sup>48</sup> Not only the School of Nisibis helped to propagate the ideas of Theodore. Thomas of Edessa, Posi, Cyrus of Edessa, Išai and Henana of Adiabene, show how faithfully East-Syrian teachers reproduced Theodore's ideas. The 6<sup>th</sup> century was a period of a great exegetical activity (exegetical works of Elisa bar Quzbye, Abraham and John of Bet-Rabban, Mar Aba, Henana of Adiabene and Michael Badoqa, have not been preserved). Apud, Lucas Van Rompay, “The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation,” in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: the history of its interpretation. I/1: Antiquity*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), 612-641, here 636. See, also, Dimitri Zaharopoulos, “Theodore of Mopsuestia, view on Prophetic Inspiration,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 23, no. 1 (1978): 42-52.

<sup>49</sup> See, Luise Abramowski, “Dadisho Qatraya and his Commentary on the Book of the Abbas Isaiah,” *The Harp. A Review of Syriac and Oriental Ecumenical Studies* 4 (1991): 67-83; Paolo Bettolo, “Esegesi e purezza di cuore. La testimonianza di Dadišo' Qatraya (VII sec.), nestoriano e solitario,” *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 3 (1986): 201-213; Robert A. Kitchen, “Dadisho Qatraya's Commentary on Abba Isaiah: The Apophthegmata Patrum Connection,” *Studia Patristica* 41 (2006): 35-50; Lucas van Rompay, “La littérature exégétique syriaque et le rapprochement des traditions syrienne-orientale et syrienne-occidentale,” *Parole de l'Orient* 20 (1995): 221-235; Antoine Guillaumont, “Dadisho Qatraya,” *Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études, Ve Section: Sciences Religieuses* 87 (1978-1979): 327-329; Sebastian P. Brock, *Prière et vie spirituelle. Textes des Pères syriaques. Spiritualité orientale* 90, Translated by Didier Rance, and André Joly (Bégnolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 2011).

the Old Testament, but presents itself in what he refers to as “prophecy” which manifests as “symbol” and “sign” and it is thus different from allegory.<sup>50</sup>

The *Gnostic Century* of Evagrius was adapted to a “Theodorian” environment.<sup>51</sup> It is indeed surprising that Isaac, and not only him, was able to bring together two approaches who were considered in interpretation/exegesis and in theology as notoriously opposed to each other : the Antiochene and Alexandrian schools. John the Solitary (in Apamea, mentioned by Babai the Great) is among the first in the Syriac environment to provide an ascetic and spiritual overview, as Evagrius had done within the Helenophone and Egyptian monasticism in general.

Isaac pays great attention to the topic of reading and sometimes argues strongly against those who despise it (*Discours 29, Part Two*).<sup>52</sup> The reading which St. Isaac invites us to engage in is actually a “hermeneutic” process of disclosure and of perception with the help of the Intellect (*hawnâ*). It is a spiritual reading in which the Spirit enlightens the intellect so that it might embrace the deep sense of scriptural texts. Isaac invites a reading that could be categorized as allegorical, typological, symbolic, anagogic but by “*dilation of the heart*”, the intention being to pursue an understanding of Scripture that goes to the heart of the text and to the author’s intent.

In this regard this approach is Evagrian. Isaac’s aim is not so much to seek from the text a coherent interpretation but rather for the reader to discern the “exteriority of the Scripture” in its intimate significance, that is, a word which is beyond Scripture, but yet still in Scripture, in its most secret heart. This is called by Isaac “inner reading”; Dadisho 'Quatraya prefers the term “spiritual reading.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul*, 125-126.

<sup>51</sup> Philoxenus of Mabbug († 523) in fifth century and Sergius Resh'aina in VI-VII century are the two Syriac translations. Evagrius cannot be considered as an exegete, but, through his *Scholias*, trying to text out of what he calls the ‘intelligible realities’ (*pragmata noēta*) who hide under the ‘sensible realities’ expressed in Scripture and he invites us to understand Scripture into a ‘intelligible mode’ (*noētōs*) and ‘spiritual way’ (*pneumatikōs*), but here the “spiritual” is not conjugated with the “allegorical” but with “intelligible” (*noētōs*). His interest is not to give a new meaning to the current text, but a noetic spiritual sense, but with a sense that has to do with the nous of the reader. “Do not allegorize words of blamable people” (*Gnostic 21*), “Do not explain spiritually all that naturally lends itself to allegory ... you’ll spend more time on Jonah’s ship” (*Gnostic 34*). The literal meaning still has value to the reader through a “large heart” will be reached through pure heart full understanding of the words of God; apud, Chialà, *Isaac the Syrian*, 145.

<sup>52</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian, *Cuvinte către singuratici. Partea a II-a, recent descoperită*, introductory study and translation by Ioan I. Ică jr. (Sibiu: Deisis, 2003), 339-442. His constant prayer was, “*Make us worthy of the truth that is within the Scriptures.*”

<sup>53</sup> Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul*, 160-164. Scripture as a mirror and as an inexhaustible source are two images used by Ephraim. Isaac expresses the same images as ‘sipped’ the meaning of words and ‘swimming’ in the ocean texts. The reader is continually seems to float in an ocean that does not leave broke, you must descend into the abyss, it means moving from “simple form” outside to deep waters. Dadisho ‘Quatraya lists three types of exegesis: one that sheds light on the of “historical” meaning (*tashcītānāyā*)

Isaac sees the “other” as a possible place of revelation. In this context he calls the old man’s figure and role as the one who initiates into the lonely life and therefore introduces into knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Himself fulfils the role of “elder” for the solitary ones, and the epistolary genre of some of his speeches reveals an activity of a spiritual accompanying.<sup>55</sup> An entire journey of initiation glimpse from his work, a journey which is being made by the lonely one under the guidance of an “old man”, of which he remains linked throughout his spiritual journey.<sup>56</sup>

Between reading and prayer Isaac sees a continuous synergy with each feeding each other.<sup>57</sup> In illustrating this process, Isaac compares it to the figure of a solitary old man who leads us to knowledge. Gaining a certain amount of discernment, the old man is there to show, to accompany, but not to replace. “The Elder” (old man) communicates, therefore, a lived experience, a necessary addition of the Word in Scripture, meaning the “practice” of the Word.<sup>58</sup>

The desert fathers recognized that in order to appropriate the words of Scripture and weave them into the fabric of their lives. Those who came to the elders seeking “a word” did so not because they wanted or needed an extended spiritual discourse. They sought instead to have their very particular needs and

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who are interested in “school people” that the meaning of a second “homiletic” (*mtargmânâyâ*) way Saints Basil the Great and John Chrysostom is addressed to the world, and, finally, a “spiritual explanation” (*pushâqâ ruhânâyâ*) for the solitary and the saints. *The historical reading and homiletics, fully legitimate, do not cover reading Scripture*. Reading requires spiritual asceticism, humility and purity of heart, just as the Word will light in the depths of the reader, making his spiritual spurting more hidden meaning.

<sup>54</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, “Du maître de sagesse au maître spirituel”, Giovanni Filoramo (ed.), *Maestro e Discepolo. Temi e problem della direzione spiritual tra VI secolo a.C. e VII secolo d.C.* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2002): 13-24; Kallistos Ware, “The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity”, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), John Sommerfeldt (ed.), *Abba. Guides to Wholeness and Holiness East and West* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications Kalamazoo, 1982), Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness. The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), J. Behr, A. Louth (eds.), *Abba. The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West. Festschrift for Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>55</sup> Isaac, Part III, *Discours* 12.

<sup>56</sup> Isaac, Part II, *Discours* 3, cap. IV, 71.

<sup>57</sup> Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul*, 164. Isaac draws parallels between Scripture and creation: the *physis* has a didactic and therapeutic function ascribing to beings revelatory function, that despite their lack of reason, make them mediators of knowledge.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-173. There is a contemplation of Scripture and one of the created realities, but there is also a contemplation of the practical work. Image of the sun or the water painted on a wall, are associated with knowing the, «truth», that can be acquired only by «tasting the spiritual carrying out of», «trying mysteries with their own life» because they cannot be understood „in teaching of a man or by researching books”. The simplicity of the words together with the knowledge coming from inner experience and shall be more valuable than teaching from one sharpness mind or by hearing and in the ink.

concerns addressed by direct, immediate words of salvation.<sup>59</sup> The careful attention given to words in the desert was complemented by the importance attributed to praxis. The question of how to bring one's life into conformity with Scripture became a burning question: "They were convinced that only through *doing* what the text enjoined could one hope to gain any understanding of its meaning".<sup>60</sup>

The elders discouraged attempts to inquire into the meaning of a particular text, because for the desert fathers, Scripture existed in order to be put into practice. This practical appropriation of Scripture was seen as a "process of coming truly to understand and realize the meaning the Scripture. Attaining a saying from Scripture, realizing its truth within oneself, implied a deep moral and spiritual transformation".<sup>61</sup> So, there is a hermeneutical significance of *praxis*. The monks' insistence on the importance of praxis had a direct influence on the way they approached the interpretation of Scripture.

By incorporating the teaching of a particular text into one's life "reveals the end of the hermeneutical process as far as the monks were concerned: fulfillment or incorporation of the text in a life".<sup>62</sup> In short, the monks' practical orientation to Scripture provided the key which opened up its worlds of meaning: "The desert hermeneutic in this sense involved a hermeneutical circle or spiral – interpretation both derived from and led toward praxis. To understand the Scriptures, it was necessary to make some attempt to put them into practice".<sup>63</sup>

"Practice" is not opposed to "knowledge".<sup>64</sup> Thus, *praktikē*, *askesis* and keeping/guarding the commandments, is itself a way of knowledge or a "place

<sup>59</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie, *Word in The Desert. Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 134: "Two constantly recurring questions found in the *Sayings* remind us of the inextricable bonds that connected words and praxis for the desert monks. The first – "Abba, give me a *word*" – is more of a plea than a question, but nevertheless implies a multitude of questions. The other – "Abba, what should I *do*?" – reveals the concrete and practical character of the monks' concerns and complements the first."

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-5. The reasons for their refusal to discuss the texts were that: excessive speculation on Scripture would inevitably lead one away from the simple exercise of putting the commands of the text into practice.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 165. See also, L. Roger Owens, *Abba, Give Me a Word: The Path of Spiritual Direction* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2012).

<sup>64</sup> About the idea of a pedagogical sufferings or a "conversion of asceticism" to St. Isaac, see Ioniță Apostolache, *Hristologie și Mistică în Teologia Siriană*, (Craiova: Editura Mitropolia Olteniei/Cetatea de Scaun, 2014) 279-300, în mod special p. 284-290. And about the relationship between *Praxis* and the spiritual vision, see, also: Valentin Vesa, *Cunoașterea lui Dumnezeu la Sfântul Isaac Sirul* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renașterea, 2013), 211-215.

of knowledge”.<sup>65</sup> Knowing the truth can only be achieved “by tasting the spiritual deeds”, “trying mystery with one’s own life”, because they can’t be understood “from a person’s teaching or from researching of books”.<sup>66</sup> Isaac distinguishes between “knowledge from deeds” and “idle wisdom”, resembled with a painter who paints a wall with water that can’t relieve his thirst.

So, the “experience of things” that this ordinary man has it makes much more than the knowledge of the “wise who speaks because he studied but without having the experience of things”.<sup>67</sup> „Reading of Scripture” (*qeryana* - a syrian term that refers to both to Bible and the Holy Fathers) banishes despair from the soul of the one who chose to live in *xeniteia* (syr. *askesayuta*). „Reading” is not a study of the biblical text with a cognitive purpose, but a mystical meeting, the direct experience of conversation with God. Scripture is the main way for spiritual transformation of human and the rejection of his sinful life.<sup>68</sup> It is not necessary that the monk to be an erudite, he rather must have a pure mind.<sup>69</sup> According to Isaac, true faith is not achieved from books but from experience; it emanates from the purity of mind rather than from reading. „The one who has tasted the truth no longer argues for it”.<sup>70</sup>

Alfeyev makes some suggestions on how to read the Scripture („praying reading”) to capture mystical understandings (*sukkale*) of the spiritual significance that arise in the mind of the ascetic: 1) silently and quietly 2) by gathering of mind and absence of thoughts from outside 3) praying before reading. Not every word of Scripture has the same meaning for every reader.

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<sup>65</sup> Patrick Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 112-173, 213-221. See also: Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006), Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), Richard Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Sidney H. Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220-245, Constantine N. Tsiiranlis, “Praxis and Theoria: The Heart, Love and Light Mysticism in Saint Isaac the Syrian,” *Patristic and Byzantine Review* 6 (1987): 93-120, Leif E. Vaage, “Ascetic Moods, Hermeneutics, and Bodily Deconstruction,” in *Asceticism*, ed. V.L. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (1995), 246-63, Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugen, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008).

<sup>66</sup> *Discours* 3, IV, 1, cf. Isaac, *Cuvinte către singuratici. Part II*, 200.

<sup>67</sup> *Discours* 1, 39 and 53: „Love the simplicity of words accompanied by the knowledge that comes from experience rather than looking inward a river Ghisoni (cf. Gen. 2:13) coming from the teaching of the sharpness mind, from hearing and from ink”.

<sup>68</sup> I/1 (3-5) = PR 1 (2-5) [pp. 26-28]. Cf. Ilarion Alfeyev, *Lumea duhovniceasca a Sfântului Isaac Sirul*, trans. Dragoș Dâscă (Iași: Doxologia, 2014), 107, 173.

<sup>69</sup> I/64 (307) = PR 65 (446-447) [pp. 452-453]. Cf. Alfeyev, *Lumea duhovniceasca a Sfântului Isaac Sirul*, 176-8.

<sup>70</sup> *Chapters on knowledge* IV, 77 (p. 227); cf. Alfeyev, *Lumea duhovniceasca a Sfântului Isaac Sirul*, 178.

When the man receives the Paraclete, he no longer needs divine Scriptures, „heart learns in a hidden way from the Spirit”.<sup>71</sup> Thus, says Alfeyev, „Isaac emphasizes the primacy of spiritual experience towards any formal expression of this experience, whether it is the reading of scriptural and ascetic texts”. In *Discours* 19 of Part I, St. Isaac speaks about six kinds of discoveries mentioned in Scripture: through the senses (burning bush, cloud of glory, Abraham’s receiving of the three men give to, Jacob’s ladder), through bodily seeing, through ecstatic rapture of spirit (Isaiah’s and Paul’s visions), „the stage of prophecy”, „thought in a certain way” (dogmas) and „as in a dream”.<sup>72</sup>

The “crucifixion” of man is the primary way to knowledge: contemplating the cross, “the sipped” of the Scriptures, but also to draw the life from the mystery of Christ’s death. Cross is a receptacle of power, of the glory or the “*shekinah* of God”, the place of divine mysteries and knowledge, “Christ’s robe.”<sup>73</sup> It is revelation which encapsulates in itself the dynamics of salvation, the “emptying out” of the love of both the Son and the Father. The gift of contemplation is given to the one who dies with “the death of Christ.” Contemplation and “practice” of the cross are described by Isaac in terms of “crucifying the flesh” and “crucifixion of the intellect”. The Cross is twofold: patience of sorrows and the pain of mind in unceasing prayer and in other and it is called “contemplation”.<sup>74</sup>

There is one last way of knowing, namely, discoveries or revelations (*ghelyâne*), in which one distinguishes between “material” discoveries or revelations, meaning those perceived by the senses, and discovery or “spiritual” revelation. Of the first type of events Isaac says that we observe them in Scripture or in the Fathers and they typically occur through the mediation of angels; thus they are called “angelical discoveries / revelations”. The second type, “spiritual discoveries” are gained through the revelations of the Holy Spirit which perceived in the inner man ???: “in the feeling of heart, a hidden discovery, without the mediation of external senses.” It is the perception that there is no involvement of him who receives it is but simply a “work of the Spirit”, the man being in “astonishment”, in non-prayer.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> 1/6 (58) = PR 6 (91) [56, pp. 286-287]; apud Alfeyev, *Lumea duhovniceasca a Sfântului Isaac Sirul*, 182.

<sup>72</sup> Alfeyev, *Lumea duhovniceasca a Sfântului Isaac Sirul*, 230-3. The term „understandings” (Sukkale) is therefore semantically close to the term of „discovery”.

<sup>73</sup> About the relationship between the knowledge from experience of asceticism, and the knowledge from contemplation of the Cross (the “*shekinah* of God”), see: Brenda Fitch Farady, „Isaac of Niniveh’s typology of the Cross” *Studia Patristica* 35 (2001): 385-390.

<sup>74</sup> Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul*, 175-176: St. Isaac quotes here from Abba Isaiah who said, „if the intellect wants to climb the cross before to be calmed the waywardness of senses comes upon him the wrath of God” [Abba Isaiah, *Asketikon* 26 (gr.17) 4], i.e. without being healed the weakness of his thoughts by the patience and shame of the cross, dared to imagine its glory in the cross intellect (n. 84).

<sup>75</sup> Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul*, 177-178. With their discoveries / revelations angels cleans the man in order to makes him a temple of the Holy Spirit, Who, in His turn, sanctifies man with the discovery / revelation of Him. Revelation are therefore aimed at cleansing and sanctification of man, in order for it, remembering God unceasingly to become the temple of the Trinity.



Isaac discovered the *relationship between* discovery / revelation and truth: “In this way these should be understood: one is the discovery and the work [of God] and the other is truth and knowledge. Because the discovery is not the accuracy of the truth, although it’s showing some with signs [*remze*] and clues [*’âtwâtâ*] suitable for human powers. So, to the work [of God] and to the wonder of discoveries are not given the name of knowledge and truth. [...] Therefore one who receives a discovery or in which a work is been worked [divine] will not necessarily know truth and accurate knowledge of God: because many are those who receive gifts like though they know God like children [cf *Heb* 5, 13].”<sup>76</sup> So, even in discovery, which is a privileged path of knowledge, the experience of it does not guarantee its truth. Those who master knowledge through their own endeavors are also prone to being caught up and blinded by pride and the *more they study, the more darkened their understanding can become*. Isaac notes that “truth” cannot be reduced to an object of discussion, but must first be received and then offered, wrapped in his natural garment which is discretion.

In the *Discourse 13* of the *Third Part*, he speaks of “three places of knowledge” in nature (meditation), apart from nature (mind), and beyond nature (faith).<sup>77</sup> In the third ‘place’, knowledge ends, facts come to an end and senses become superfluous. Here, the object of knowledge is Being itself; the senses become useless because what is already discovered by the one who perceives is not something unknown to him, and the only author of the discovery / revelation is Holy. The usually term for knowledge used by Isaac is the Syriac *te’oryâ* which transliterates the Greek *theoria* (contemplation),<sup>78</sup> and indicates “deep understanding” of a reality that is born of silence, that is, contemplation as “spiritual vision”<sup>79</sup>, where the exact and intimate knowledge of the examined reality must be generically understood.

Words have limits. Isaac asks God for the gift to “hear the word of silence”, a ‘word’ which rises “in the heart without being written bedding”, which moves “the intellect without expressing itself” and is a word “upon the lips of the Spirit”.

<sup>76</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian, *Discours 19* in *Cuvinte către singuratici. Part II*, 415.

<sup>77</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian, *Cuvinte către singuratici. Partea a III-a, recent regăsită*, Foreword, introduction and text Sabino Chialà, trans. Ioan I. Ică jr. (Sibiu: Deisis, 2007), 160-168.

<sup>78</sup> Sebastian Brock, „Some Uses of the Term *theoria* in the Writings of Isaac of Niniveh”, *Parole de l’Orient* 20 (1995): 407-419, here 408-410.

<sup>79</sup> St. Isaac uses a concept, precious to John Dalyatha also, that of the glory of the divine nature. He distinguishes between two visions, for which we possess two eyes: the contemplation of the glory of God concealed in created natures and that of the glory to His divine nature. Apud, Robert Beulay, *La Lumière sans forme. Introduction à l’étude de la mystique chrétienne syro-orientale* (Editions de Chevetogne: Chevetogne, 1987), 206-210, here 201. See, also, Robert Beulay, *L’enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha, mystique syro-oriental du VIIIe siècle* (Beauchesne: Paris, 1990), 386-463, in particular 447-455.

Thus the truth in its fullness “will be revealed at the proper time from itself,” while the depth of the mysteries is yet guarded by silence. In this, Isaac seems to show himself as belonging to the ancient tradition of apophatic theology. However, one can recognize a difference of emphasis in Isaac, because, although the knowledge he speaks of is beyond nature, it does not leave nature behind. Rather, for him, the Spirit descends into nature and works within her heart.

In Isaac's thinking it is not a matter of ecstasy, but of astonishment (*tehrâ*) as a sign of lack of knowledge and non-prayer. We have already seen how the Spirit is active only in the third stage of spiritual life, of which Isaac speaks, where there is no human work: the lack of knowledge (surprise), as in the non-prayer. He sees the role of the Spirit in ? discovery, which means to live in constant remembrance of God. In Isaac's vision, however, the Spirit has other functions, such as that of “inner teacher.” The Spirit works deep down the “shading” (*magnânutâ*) in two forms: sanctification received through the grace of God and “astonishment” or the power of understanding by which the intellect receives divine revelations.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusions

In this study we wanted to emphasize the link between asceticism and the interpretation of Scripture and, for this reason, we turned to the most popular ascetic experience of the Church, namely the Syrian spirituality, taking St. Isaac the Syrian as a model. But the stages of the study were dictated also by the several adjacent readings, like that of: N. Berdyaev (about the relation between revelation and truth<sup>81</sup>), Christopher Veniamin („cloud of witnesses”<sup>82</sup>), Norman Russell<sup>83</sup> (link between *theoria* and *theosis* in Scriptures and the living experience of deification – “do you live it?”<sup>84</sup>) and Dumitru Staniloae (“Holy Fathers

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<sup>80</sup> Chialà, *Isaac Sirianul*, 182-186, 194-195.

<sup>81</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation* (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

<sup>82</sup> Christopher Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation. “Theosis” in Scripture and Tradition* (Dalton, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2014), 66: “As great Paul himself proclaims in the epistle reading for Orthodoxy Sunday, we have a ‘cloud of witnesses’ (Hebr. 12:1), who testify to the Truth”. This will be the orthodox interpretation of Holy Scripture.

<sup>83</sup> Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers With God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 55-72.

<sup>84</sup> Russell, *Fellow Workers*, 169: “When my book on *theosis* in the Greek Fathers was published a few years ago, I showed a copy to a Jewish friend, a student of the Kabbala. He looked through it intently for some minutes, then said, ‘Yes, but do you live it?’. A humbling question. *Theosis* is not a subject of study. If it does not affect us personally, it does not become the context in which we lead our Christian lives, it has no more value than any other topic of intellectual curiosity”.

may still be<sup>85</sup>). All in an attempt to highlight the very important contribution of biblical studies, that can bring an awaited 'corrective' to the twentieth century neo-patristic theology.

Therefore, in this study we have established the link between early Christian ascetical practices and the Holy Fathers' mode of Scriptural interpretation, their critical gift of discerning multiple layers of meaning in the biblical text, making possible a hermeneutics in which the literal and historical meaning is brought into close relation with the spiritual level of meaning, which directly addresses to the reader's life situation.

The desert father's hermeneutic in this sense involved a hermeneutical circle or spiral – interpretation both derived from and led toward praxis. We can, also, make reference to John Cassian's theory of Scripture's four senses (literal, allegorical, thropological and anagogical). For St. Isaac the Syrian, Bishop of Nineveh, the source of his knowledge was threefold: "contemplation of Scripture", teachings of the Fathers, and his own experience. He was able to bring together two approaches opposed to each other: that of Antiochene and Alexandrian schools. The reading which St. Isaac invites us is actually a "hermeneutic" process of disclosure and perception with the help of the Intellect (*hawnâ*).

Isaac discovered the relationship between revelation and truth. We may now "read the Bible holistically" starting from the unifying message on which the Fathers insist that "the narrative of the Bible is a continuous". So, we have to let the living and life-giving Word of God speak to us instead of questioning the biblical text itself. For tasting the Word with the Heart we can't ignore the understanding of the early church. This is the way of a pre-critical culture such as that of early monastic biblical school. For them Scripture prescribes a way of life – "Christ in us".

But, for a long time the pre-critical exegetical tradition was seen as a decided obstacle to the correct deciphering of the true sense of text, and the historical-critical method, on the other hand, is the key that can unlock this primitive meaning of the text. The Orthodox approach to the problem of "doctrinal development" consists neither in a sort of continuous revelation, nor in making additions to Scripture, but in solving concrete problems. The movement is from biblical theology, to historical theology, to systematic theology, to homiletics. Thus, the atheistic-modern methodology is opposed to

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<sup>85</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, „Sfânta Tradiție. Definierea noțiunii și întinderii ei,” *Ortodoxia* 16, no. 1 (1964): 102-103. To say that there can be „fathers” anymore is to suggest that the Holy Spirit left the Church. The neo-patristic syntagma „Back to the Fathers” involved a creative interpretation of their experience which is the „practice of the Word” or the „enfleshed Scriptures” in their own lives.

the patristic “pre-critical” approach, because, for the Holy Fathers, exegesis never had a purpose enclosed within itself. Orthodox biblical interpretation has traditionally opted for a homiletic approach instead of a purely exegetical one.

The exegetical vision of the Holy Fathers was one inspired by a desire for a deeper understanding of God, a vision which was called *theoria* and was achieved through “synergy”, a mutual effort between human author and the Holy Spirit. A principle promoted by The Holy Fathers taken directly from Hebrew rabbis, is that of an exegetical reciprocity which assumes that all Scripture is entirely inspired. Thus, the search for an inspired vision of divine truth (*theoria*) had led them to the identification not of two meanings, but of a double meaning: both literal (namely historical) and spiritual. Also, the antitype and archetype are already, in a prophetic way, present in types. Church Fathers argued that every God’s theophany in the Old Testament must be understood as a theophany of God the Son (the type already contains and manifests antitype). In story of the Transfiguration, the bleached clothes of Christ are a symbol of the words of Scripture, which became bright, clear, pure and understandable.

Holy Scripture cannot be understood, therefore, *in vacuo*, apart from the *illumination* provided by the whole Church’s tradition. The biblical-patristic hermeneutic principle refers therefore to the necessity of reading the Scriptures “from inside”. The ultimate purpose in *lectio* was to reach to *illuminatio* and *deificatio* (*theosis*) as human participation in God’s life. The process begins with biblical exegesis and ends with “the prayer of Scriptures”. Eastern Fathers present accounts of any systematic technique for reading Scripture. *Phronêma ekklēsias* or “thought of the Church” must be able to “discerning the unitive ‘mind’ (*dianoia*) of Scripture” (F. Young) which is essential for reaching to a proper interpretation. We have to distinguish, also, two levels of inspiration: that of Scripture (revealing inspiration) and that of Tradition (anamnesis inspiration).

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