

Reading Holy Texts: A solution for busy orthodox (Sharon Pelfhrey)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English



Too much to learn? Too little time?

A solution for busy orthodox

Why read Scripture? Certainly important reasons are as numerous as readers; however, the simplest answer comes from Christ, Himself. Almost all of His words come from ancient Jewish scriptures. To look more like Him, we have to do as He did. Understood in this way, embracing Scripture makes us more Christlike.

lectionary. Over time, two sorts of lectionaries developed in the Greek Orthodox church. *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox Christians* principally follows the *Synaxarion* and therefore is based on the liturgical cycle in which the Church continually represents Christ's life from Pascha through Holy Week. Three appendices add elements of the *Menologion*, which contains readings for various saints' and Church festivals on the Byzantine civil calendar, beginning September 1.

In turn, the commentaries on each text are simply this: windows into the minds of saints. No higher recommendation can be attempted. Though individually brief as a collection the passages reveal an ever-flowing tide of Orthodox theological thought, consistent in terms of rationality, faith, and love, but highly diverse in terms of pulse and tone.

Consider, for example, these poignant words from Saint John of Damascus, reflecting on the paradoxes of existence: "God made man...a sort of miniature world within the larger one, another adoring angel...earthly and heavenly, passing and immortal, visible and spiritual, halfway between greatness and lowliness..." (Saturday in the Third week of Great Lent).

In contrast, the same paradox moves Saint John Climacus to brittle irony: "He who has lost sensibility is ...a self-contradictory windbag, a blind man who teaches others to see...He praises prayer but runs from it like the plague. He blesses obedience, but he is the first to disobey. He praises detachment, but is not ashamed to be spiteful and to fight for a rag.. .All the time he is his own accuser, and he does not want to come to his senses I will not say cannot" (Thursday of the same week).

In general, however, the straightforward, clear explanations of Saint John Chrysostom dominate, providing overall continuity and thoroughness to this introduction to patristic thought. Nevertheless, the book's Index of Holy Fathers and Authors notes more than sixty commentators representing Orthodox thought from Saint Justin the Martyr (+165 AD) through our own time.

What the commentaries lack in completeness by being excerpted, they more than make up for in ease of use and access. Beyond that, references and study helps provide a solid starting point for further inquiry. Serious Orthodox who have time and leisure will prefer to read these selections and others not represented from original, unabridged sources, but for the majority *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox* provides a much-needed resource for daily study of Scripture within the Orthodox tradition.

As a caution, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers* is not a substitute for a Bible. Bible study within the Church is vitally important for understanding the theology, history, personalities, and complexities of Scripture as a whole. This text is, however, an outstanding devotional aid and highly recommended for any Christian, especially read prayerfully in conjunction with Church worship, sacraments, and hymnody.

The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox: Daily Scripture Readings and Commentary for Orthodox Christians. Compiled and edited by Johann Manley. Menlo Park, California: Monastery Books, 1990.

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