Postmodern Orthodoxy? Text, Interpretation, and History in Orthodox Scholarship

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Introduction*

One of the pivotal questions in the humanities in general concerns the relation between text, interpretation, and historical reality. In theology, the issue is particularly pressing in regard to the biblical writings. As yet, neither Western or Orthodox theology has found a proper solution. Western scholars grapple with the implications of historical and biblical criticism, which have challenged the status of the bible as Scripture. Whereas the legitimacy or even necessity of historical-critical research is no longer seriously contested, there is no consensus on how to deal with the hermeneutical shortcut it entails. One of the paradoxical responses is the appeal to hermeneutics, for example in the conceptions of “hermeneutical theology” (the “New hermeneutic” of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs), “theological hermeneutics”, and “biblical hermeneutics”. Particularly among Protestant theologians, theology is often regarded as a ‘praxis of interpretation’.1

For various reasons, most Orthodox scholars are rather reluctant to engage in the findings and questions of biblical criticism. Those who do reflect on Western scholarship tend to stress precisely the perspective of tradition and reception which is central to Orthodox theology. This Orthodox stance may be summarized in John Behr’s statement ‘Christ’s question calls for

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1 On these and related trends see U.H.J. Körtner, *Einführung in die theologische Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt, 2006), who p. 24 writes: ‘Insofar as hermeneutical and non-hermeneutical methods of interpretation come to bear, theology can in general be designated as praxis of interpretation [Insofern hemeneutische und nicht-hemeneutische Methoden der Interpretation zum Tragen kommen, läßt sich die Theologie allgemein als Interpretationspraxis charakterisieren]’. On the same page he quotes one of the most prominent proponents of hermeneutical thinking in theology, Ingolf Dalferth, who defines evangelical theology as productive ‘interpretation of interpretations of interpretations’. See also I.U. Dalferth, P. Bühler, A. Hunziker (eds.), *Hermeneutische Theologie—heute?* (Tübingen, 2013) for a critical appraisal of the legacy and potential of hermeneutical theology.
interpretation’, and his paradoxical urge for ‘reappropriation of a premodern perspective in a cautious postmodern fashion’.2

As I will demonstrate, the appeals to interpretation both in Western and Orthodox theological scholarship are variants of an approach which transfers “meaning” from the realm of “lived experience” (a term I will discuss below) to the level of reception/tradition, narrative, and interpretation, without duly reflecting on the relation between text and (lived) reality. My aim is to show in what sense such ideas do not hold for dealing with the contested historicity of the biblical accounts, and to suggest a direction for approaching hermeneutics in terms of not-understanding rather than in terms of interpretation.

A preliminary disclaimer: throughout this article the use of the terms “Western” and “Orthodox” is for brevity’s sake; it is in no way intended to reduce the spectrum of Christian theology to such positions. Even if one can clearly distinguish and identify specific characteristics which constitute Western and Orthodox theological traditions, they don’t determine the issue at stake.

Defining Hermeneutics as a Discipline

Whereas a number of Orthodox scholars use the phrase ‘Orthodox hermeneutics’ more or less naively,3 others doubt whether there as yet is an Orthodox hermeneutics.4 To a certain extent, this is a matter of definition: in Western studies, whence the notion originates, hermeneutics is a specific discipline involving philosophical, literary, sociological, and linguistic aspects.5 By contrast, in present-day Orthodoxy hermeneutics appears to be equated with a particular mode of scriptural exegesis. In his valuable study Biblical Interpretation

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A. Negrov defines his use of the term ‘Orthodox hermeneutics’ accordingly:

[H]ermeneutics ‘has become a highly technical and philosophical oriented field of discussion’ […] Bearing this in mind, the usage and meaning of hermeneutics, in the scope of the present study, will be restricted to the science of Bible interpretation, which primarily deals with a literary corpus of the Old and New Testaments as its material object. It is in this sense the term will be used in the clauses—biblical hermeneutics or Orthodox hermeneutics.6

Given Negrov’s aim—to provide a historical and descriptive survey rather than a substantive analysis—his pragmatic usage of the term is legitimate. But as defined, hermeneutics is substantially different from ‘Bible interpretation’. Hermeneutics should not be a designation of the perspective from which one reads, but a discipline for assessing whether the claims made from this perspective are justified.

This is also the upshot of the distinction Anthony Thiselton makes:

[W]hereas exegesis and interpretation denote the actual processes of interpreting texts, hermeneutics also includes the second-order discipline of asking critically what exactly we are doing when we read, understand, or apply texts. Hermeneutics explores the conditions and criteria that operate to try to ensure responsible, valid, fruitful, or appropriate interpretation.7

In this light, “Orthodox hermeneutics” seems somewhat of a contradictio in adjecto.8 By way of example, John Breck speaks of ‘Orthodox hermeneutic principles’ and lists, amongst others, the ‘Word of God’ as the eternal Logos, and the ‘trinitarian perspective’.9 And in a larger study, he defines Orthodox

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8 By implication, the same may be said of “biblical hermeneutics” or “theological hermeneutics” (a statement Thiselton would probably not agree with).
hermeneutics as ‘the principles and methods for interpreting Scripture’.\textsuperscript{10} What he describes is rather Orthodox exegesis, the conception and practice of Bible interpretation as given within the framework of Orthodox tradition (as Breck understands it). Furthermore, since the eighteenth century scholarship has widely recognized that central Christian dogmas (including concepts like Logos and Trinity) are not given, but have in their traditionally received form basically been established by interpretation of the Bible. In a hermeneutical sense, the dogmatic terms Breck mentions as ‘hermeneutic principles’ are not that what explains (\textit{explanans}), but that what has to be explained (\textit{explanandum}). This is perhaps one of the major consequences of the emergence of hermeneutics for theology.\textsuperscript{11}

A concise definition of hermeneutics is given by Werner Jeanrond: ‘By “hermeneutics” we mean \textit{the theory of interpretation.}’ Hans-Georg Gadamer stresses another aspect: ‘Hermeneutics is above all a practice, the art of understanding […]’.\textsuperscript{12} In a way, speaking of hermeneutics as an ‘art’ itself has at least

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\textsuperscript{10} J. Breck, \textit{Scripture in Tradition: the Bible and its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church} (Crestwood, NY, 2001), p. 9. This explanation is followed by an appeal to 2 Timothy 3:16 and the statement that ‘[t]he Bible is not self-interpreting’ (p. 10, an allusion to Lutheran \textit{sui ipsius interpretes}). This appears to be a contradiction: Breck stakes his claim that the Bible is not self-interpreting with a biblical passage assuming the inspiration of Scripture. At stake here is not a concept of ‘synergy’ between author/reader and Holy Spirit (see p. 39), but the fact that the authority of the Bible is presupposed.

\textsuperscript{11} See also Stylianopoulos, ‘Scripture’, p. 32, who confuses Orthodox principles with hermeneutical reflection. As early as the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there has been a reception of (Protestant) biblical criticism among Russian Orthodox scholars; see Negrov, \textit{Biblical Interpretation}; and J. Wasmuth, \textit{Der Protestantismus und die russische Theologie: zur Rezeption und Kritik des Protestantismus in den Zeitschriften der Geistlichen Akademien an der Wende vom 19. zum 20. Jahrhundert} (Göttingen, 2007), esp. ch. 2. What is typical of nearly all Orthodox scholars discussed is their reluctance to accept the findings of biblical criticism. In a sense, the situation in nineteenth-century Western Europe was not very different, as strictly historical-critical research of the biblical writings was contested until the beginning of the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{12} Respectively: W. Jeanrond, \textit{Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance} (London, 1991), p. 1; H.-G. Gadamer, ‘Reflections on my Philosophical Journey’, quoted in Thiselton, \textit{Hermeneutics}, p. 2; the expression of hermeneutics as the “art of understanding” goes back to Schleiermacher. Even among Western scholars there is no clear-cut definition of hermeneutics, as the huge literature concerning the subject and the inflated use of the term in various disciplines testifies. For some problems concerning definition issues see S.E. Porter, J.C. Robinson, \textit{Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory} (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, 2011), pp. 297–303 (‘Conclusion’). Still, there may be said to be a family resemblance of basic hermeneutic rules.
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a theoretical component. In both cases, what ‘theory’, ‘art’, and indeed ‘interpretation/understanding’ entail requires qualification. Modern notions of interpretation and understanding cannot be indiscriminately applied to such diverse practices and conceptions as allegorical reading among the ancient Greeks, Patristic scriptural interpretation, Lutheran sola scriptura, present-day Orthodox exegetical practice, and narrative theology. Such application would suggest that “interpretation” is a formal procedure or practice which may be determined without asking who is doing (or has done) the “interpreting”.

The issue may be approached from a different direction, by questioning the soundness of the interpretation principle itself. This may be done by examining the relation between text and historical reality, between text and interpretation, and between interpretation and historical reality. Under the current paradigm, a hermeneutics which takes interpretation as a guiding principle will not be able to reckon with the historicity of the events recounted in a text, nor with the author as a living person.

In a crucial respect, contemporary “Orthodox hermeneutics” and (post) modern Western hermeneutics share this fixation with interpretation, albeit from different angles. One of the aims of this contribution is to identify the paradox of a postmodern Orthodox hermeneutics, but also to show that the paradox lies equally in hermeneutics and in Orthodoxy, and is thus independent of “West”- or “East”-attributions.

**Canon and Canonicity**

The question at stake may be grasped by looking at a central hermeneutical dilemma which confronts theology: the emergence of the New Testament canon.\(^\text{13}\) This is a dilemma in modern perception, as in theological tradition the canon itself was not questioned, but presupposed.

In order to illustrate the main point, we may distinguish between the New Testament canon as the collection of New Testament writings on the one hand, and canonicity as the premise under which the collection was received as Scripture on the other. Canonicity is not a textual or substantial quality

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inherent to the New Testament writings, but testifies to the conviction of the believer who, or the community which, ascribes to these writings a normative status analogous to the Old Testament writings (the idea of Holy Writ).\textsuperscript{14} The awareness of this distinction between canon and canonicity is a consequence of the modern hermeneutical distinction between text (canon) and interpretation (canonicity). For contemporary scholarship and hermeneutics not the distinction as such is being disputed, but how it is to be understood and applied. This will be discussed below.

It may now be considered common knowledge that initially the New Testament writings were not received as Scripture. This is already apparent from the New Testament writings themselves: neither the evangelists nor Paul consider their own writing canonical (or “inspired”) as they did Hebrew Scripture (with the formula ‘it is written’, for example).\textsuperscript{15} Early second-century writers like Ignatius and even Justin Martyr nowhere appeal to Christian writings as Scripture. It would therefore make no sense to say that in their time these writings were already (canonical) Scripture, or indeed to say that they “interpreted” them: the designation as Scripture (canonicity) must be explicitly stated as such and apparent from the usage of these writings.

The New Testament writings were first treated as canonical Scripture, as “Writ”, in the second half of the second century by Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian.\textsuperscript{16} They were the first to argue in favour of accepting particular writings and rejecting others, and partly based their argument on “interpretation” of these writings. All subsequent reception of the New Testament writings, be it exegetical, apologetical, or historical-critical, rests on the acknowledgment of this Scriptural (written) quality. This means that the only legitimate sense in which the notion of interpretation can be applied to the New Testament writings, that of reflection on these writings as Scripture, was not part of the perception of the authors of these texts and of the first generations of Christians (insofar as we can infer they knew the writings at all).\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} J. Kugel, How to Read the Bible: a Guide to Scripture, Then and Now (New York etc., 2008), p. 668 makes a similar point in regard of Hebrew Scripture: ‘Disquieting as it may be, one is left with the conclusion that most of what makes the Bible \textit{biblical} is not inherent in its texts, but emerges only when one reads them in a certain way […]’. And p. 679: ‘Indeed, the very idea of the Bible […] is the product of the interpretive revolution of these closing centuries BCE.’

\textsuperscript{15} On the formula for referring to Hebrew Scripture see Metzger, Canon, pp. 2 and 41.

\textsuperscript{16} Epitomized by Irenaeus’ explanation of the fourfold Gospel, Adversus Haereses III, 11, 8. On the usage of the term “canonicity” see Bestebreurtje, Kanon.

\textsuperscript{17} Instructive examples of this problem in Metzger, Canon, pp. 40–43.
This insight constitutes a hermeneutical and heuristic border which cannot be traversed by any kind of textual interpretation, since this border is created by referring to the texts as Scripture (or in a broader sense, as texts) in the first place.

This border comes out well in Bruce Metzger’s summary of references to New Testament writings in the so-called Apostolic Fathers: ‘In short, we find in both the Jewish and the Hellenistic groups a knowledge of the existence of certain books that later will comprise the New Testament [...] These reminiscences tend to show that an implicit authority of such writings was sensed before a theory of their authority had been developed—in fact, before there was even a consciousness of their authority.’ As Metzger’s preceding discussion showed, however, the “Apostolic Fathers” did not display a ‘knowledge of the existence’ of these books, rather historical conjecture has found that the words the Apostolic Fathers refer to as Jesus’ words stem from some version of the now New Testament writings (or even from oral tradition). But more importantly, what should be assumed under ‘implicit authority’ if this means that the Apostolic Fathers had no ‘consciousness’ of this implicit authority? Positing authority only makes sense if the authors in question would be conscious of it; otherwise it is authority for no one. And as shown, in the case of Scripture, authority is linked to a mode of referring to the Scriptural form.

The epistemological distinction between text (canon) and interpretation (canonicity) gains even more impact if applied to the concept of scriptural inspiration. What does the attribution of divine inspiration to a text and/or its author mean if, first, the author himself, and second, the first generations reading (or hearing) his text did not consider his text to be “inspired” analogous to Hebrew Scripture? In this case, reception and usage conflict with the text on a substantial level. Had divine inspiration and authority been inherent qualities of the New Testament writings, one may assume the first generations would have noticed and understood this as such, which, as indicated above, they evidently didn’t. Given the distinction, inspiration cannot be said to be a quality of the texts (or even the authors); at least, the burden of proof would be with those who claim it is.

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18 Metzger, Canon, p. 73.
19 In this respect, there is a clear difference between Paul and the Gospels on the one hand, and Revelation on the other; the latter fits apocalyptic tradition with an explicit claim to revelation and prophecy (cf. Rev. 1:3).
Other aspects come into play as well. For example, biblical criticism has established fairly definitely that the author of the Gospel according to Matthew cannot have been Matthew the Apostle.20 I will briefly discuss two of the many implications. First, speaking of “inspiration” of a text makes sense only given the authority of the author. Christian tradition since Irenaeus has attributed authority and divine inspiration to the Gospel because it was considered an apostolic writing. This implies that if the apostolicity of its author is no longer assured, there are no grounds for attributing divine inspiration to the text. Thereby the authority both of the Gospel and of its interpretation as a mode of understanding is challenged.21

Second, if one would still argue that divine inspiration may not have been apparent to the (now unknown) author in question, but was revealed only to later generations, this would imply that our present-day interpretation of the text has a more direct and appropriate access to the consciousness (or rather, the unconscious) of the (unknown) author of the Gospel according to Matthew than he had himself. This is invalid reasoning, projecting a later conception of inspiration onto an unknown (“Matthew”), and interpreting accordingly. Saying the author of a text was inspired is an existential statement, which is untenable if one does not even know who the author was. It is a way of neglecting the other on a level of ideology (or intellect) which does not acknowledge the individual, existential moment. Also, it would be at odds with an interpretive tradition placing emphasis ‘upon the mind and purpose of the authors or writers, especially in their commissioned role as apostles or prophets, as the starting point for meaning and interpretation’ , from the Antiochene school to

20 For the briefest argument (and further literature) see U. Luz, "Matthäusevangelium," in Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 4th ed. (Tübingen, 2008), vol. 5, col. 918.
21 Metzger mentions three criteria the early Church Fathers applied for ascertaining which books are to be considered authoritative: orthodoxy (conformity to ‘regula fidei’), apostolicity, and ‘use in the Churches’ (Canon, pp. 251–254). The problem is that even if one would claim that the regula fidei more or less was current in the preceding Church communities, the question for historical epistemology is: in what form? Here the same border exists as between text and historical reality. Current research tends to assume at least a variety/plurality among early Christian communities rather than a pre-existing “orthodoxy” which was then fixed in the New Testament writings. At least these three criteria—which, as Metzger also notes, were far from univocal and clear themselves, but varied in application and explanation (ibid.)—are intertwined: if one of them does not apply, none does.—See for an example in regard to the Old Testament Kugel, Bible, p. 56i, on Isaiah: ‘If the author of chapters 40–66 was not the real Isaiah, the one who had been called on high to God’s heavenly throne, but some unknown writer two centuries later whose prophetic credentials were thus a matter of speculation, what authority did his words have?’
Calvin, Spinoza, and even Schleiermacher. In such reasoning, then, the textual is substituted for the existential, existence and epistemology/hermeneutics are confused. Avoiding such confusion forces us to reckon primarily with the individual in history.

The primacy of the individual is posited here within a methodological context. It is not intended as a principle of individualism or subjectivity, since any personal conviction and experience has itself to be validated. It is important to stress this limitation of a hermeneutical view, as it is by interpretation of textual tradition (and in a wider context, archaeological evidence etc.) that one usually tries to understand the people from the past. For this reason, clarity concerning the status of textual tradition and interpretation in regard of history is essential.

To identify some methodological implications of these shifts in perception, it might be helpful to draw on two notions borrowed from Charles Taylor, ‘imaginary’ and ‘lived experience’.

‘Imaginary’ and ‘Lived Experience’ as Methodological Restraints

In his book *A Secular Age* Charles Taylor has given a profound philosophical reflection on a shift in what he calls ‘social imaginary’. His central aim seems caught in his statement: ‘[T]he change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.’

Taylor uses the ‘imaginary’ as distinct from (or as incorporating) theory, and thereby succeeds in positioning his own philosophical reflection in relation to the ‘imaginaries’ of historical times. The ‘change’ is then described in terms of ‘conditions of belief’, which comprise the material and the mental levels. He thus acknowledges historical distance both as a temporal and as a mental distance. And this temporal distance essentially makes the mental distance irretrievable, precisely because we live our shared imaginary in the present (which comprises the diversity and even irreconcilability of convictions and imaginaries, as the common ground is not determined in cognitive or psychological terms, but by time). Although I aim to stress the epistemological and

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hermeneutical implications of ‘imaginary’ more expressly than Taylor does, I think these implications are suggested by the shifts he describes.24

Indeed, what Taylor describes as ‘lived experience’ seems crucial.25 In my use of this notion I do not so much mean (as Taylor seems to) a realm in which we live prior to understanding, although this is partly implied.26 Methodologically it serves to indicate the limits of one’s own thought and perspective, as lived experience is inherently bound to an individual. The notion is meant as a restraint for the interpreter; it does not mean that a person or an author is always right in what he experiences or says (which would be individualism instead of individuality).27

In the expression “lived”, the temporal aspect is decisive. I take “lived” to imply that time and mind are inseparable. Both academic discourse and theological thought (including hermeneutics) necessarily operate by distinguishing time and mind. It is one of the seeming self-evidences of tradition that texts may transfer the thoughts and mind of the author (or some potential meaning) over time, beyond his death. Precisely this idea is challenged on the level of interpretation by the notions of the imaginary and lived experience, at least as I take them. The inseparability of time and mind constitutes a hermeneutical limit, and one which is very difficult to grasp, as the limit is drawn by (inherent to) our hermeneutical reflection itself. This is one reason for developing a ‘kaleidoscopic’ approach.28

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24 This is an aspect which seems to have escaped the attention of admirers and critics of Taylor alike. See, for example, the volume of essays Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age, ed. M. Warner, J. Van Antwerpen, C. Calhoun (Cambridge, MA, London, 2010). I do not, however, mean to subscribe to all of Taylor’s views.

25 Cf. Taylor, Secular Age, pp. 10–14; 30–31. In the index, one aspect of ‘lived experience’ is aptly described as being ‘versus theory as basis for understanding moral/spiritual life’ (p. 864).

26 Taylor, Secular Age, p. 30: ‘[M]y target is our contemporary lived understanding; that is, the way we naïvely take things to be […] I am trying to capture the level of understanding prior to philosophical puzzlement.’ As I see it, ‘naïvely’ here encompasses the most refined reflection, for we take that reflection as it is, even think it appropriate most of the time. The element of time always evades (or permeates) any naïveté or reflection. ‘Lived experience’ thus includes what might be called ‘lived thought’ or ‘lived reflection’.

27 This is not to deny shared or community experience, but then it is still the individual who shares in the experience, and it still is lived experience. The issue here is methodical delineation; it is matter of accountability.

Both ‘lived experience’ and ‘the imaginary’ are applicable to the example of the New Testament. As argued above, in respect to the perception of the New Testament writings as texts (other things not equal), the first Christian generations lived in a different imaginary. As common historically informed perception is dependent on texts, one cannot “deactivate” this reflection on textuality. Reflection on this dilemma does not take the dilemma away, but rather confirms it. In that sense, imaginary is an integral part of lived experience.

The concept of the imaginary may also be applied to the more general question of the tension between historical knowledge and theological-exegetical tradition concerning the Bible. Already on the level of the history of ideas, there is a gap between what one can call ancient and modern sensibilities toward the relationship between biblical text and historical reality. Indeed, to speak of a relationship here essentially reflects modern discourse. The emergence of hermeneutics as a discipline could be said to mark the gradually drifting apart of text, reality, and interpretation, or rather, it marks the emergence of this distinction.

It is the basic awareness of this distinction which has been causing such serious problems for post-Enlightenment theology. With the shift from the perception of the Bible as source of revelation in history, as the Word of God, to the focus on the Bible as itself a historical entity, biblical writings have been examined on the way they present and understand revelation. In its consequences, this also implies a shift from, say, the resurrection of Christ as a historical event (or a salvational event, but as such it has to be a historical event) to the faith of the apostles (or even of the evangelists) in resurrection. This affects the substance of theology and, ultimately, of faith. An important aspect, therefore, is to assess the role of faith and the limits of its claims on the text and/or the past.

incomprehensible, but it is essential to delineate the limits of our incomprehension. This is the methodological aim of INaSEC (see http://www.in-a-sec.com/method for a provisional description).

29 I cannot enter into a discussion of the ‘Word (or the text) as event’ here, a theorem relying on the same interpretive conception of language. Again the distinction of imaginaries proves useful. For myself, I may have some idea of language and words being related to an event, simply because I connect them; but even so I may reasonably distinguish between an event and what I say about it. For times past, I can claim neither the equation nor the separation of word (description, text, story) and event (history), since I do not live in them.
The Question in Western Studies

To expound the hermeneutical point in relation to the “historical Jesus”\textsuperscript{30} I will discuss briefly three examples of how the problem of the historicity and textuality of the Gospel accounts is treated among Western scholars.

The first example is taken from the Dutch Remonstrant theologian Eginhard Meijering. One can, he writes, engage in scientific research on the historical Jesus even when one believes in the resurrected Jesus when one realizes what the research can and cannot establish, and what faith is based on. In the Gospels, we have not photographs of Jesus, but portraits. These portraits Jesus himself occasioned, the earthly and the resurrected Jesus. That the resurrected Jesus influenced this image is solely a matter of faith, which can be neither proved nor refuted by the historian, but which he should not consider in his research.\textsuperscript{31}

The separation of historical knowledge from individual faith is problematic in several respects, as the question is how this ‘faith’ relates to historical reality. First, expressions like ‘portraits’,\textsuperscript{32} ‘occasioned’ (if this renders Meijering’s ‘aanleiding gegeven’ correctly), and ‘what faith is based on’ are unclear in this respect. Second, the idea of Jesus resurrected having influenced or occasioned the Gospels as \textit{writings} is hardly tenable. Such a claim would have to be demonstrated by way of the Gospels themselves, but cannot be decided by an appeal to faith. And third, if someone as a Christian believes in the resurrected Jesus, how could the same person as a historian (but this presupposes

\textsuperscript{30} See A.J.M. Wedderburn, \emph{Jesus and the Historians} (Tübingen, 2010) for an excellent overview of recent literature on “the historical Jesus” and related questions.

\textsuperscript{31} E. Meijering, \emph{Geschiedenis van het vroege Christendom} [History of Early Christianity] (Amsterdam, 2004), pp. 30–31: ‘…als men zich realiseert wat het onderzoek wel en niet kan aantonen en waarop het geloof is gebaseerd. Van Jezus hebben we in de evangelïën geen foto’s, maar portretten. Tot die portretten heeft ook Jezus zelf aanleiding gegeven, de aardse en de opgestane Jezus. Dat ook de opgestane Jezus dit beeld heeft beïnvloed is uitsluitend een zaak van geloof, dat door de historicus noch bewezen noch weerlegd kan worden, maar waarmee hij in zijn onderzoek geen rekening mag houden.’

\textsuperscript{32} For a critique of dubbing the Gospels ‘portraits’ or ‘pictures’ of Jesus see also Wedderburn, \textit{Jesus}, p. 47 (against Dunn, who brings an argument similar to Meijering’s). Richard Rothe had called the Gospels a ‘photograph of the Saviour’ ['Photographie des Erlösers’]; quoted in J. Lauster, \emph{Zwischen Entzauberung und Remythisierung. Zum Verhältnis von Bibel und Dogma} (Leipzig, 2008), p. 39. Even if Meijering would here implicitly distance himself from Rothe, his ‘portraits’ is no less problematic.
the distinction) not consider Jesus’ resurrection as part of history? Here faith is in danger of being linked mainly to the formal impossibility of disproving or falsifying. Yet this impossibility is primarily caused by the lack of historical evidence. Actually, Meijering as a ‘believer’ seems to assert for himself a certainty of resurrection (by virtue of his faith) which he as a ‘historian’ denies the evangelists, stating one can from their writings only ascertain their faith.\(^{33}\) The distinction he evokes between the ‘historian’ and the ‘believer’ confuses history and epistemology, thus neglecting the actual problem knowledge of historical and textual tradition raises for religious claims.

As a second example, the Catholic scholar John Meier in his multi-volume *A Marginal Jew* sets out parameters for speaking of the ‘historical Jesus’, which he acknowledges is an ‘abstract construct created by modern scholars applying historical-critical methods to ancient sources’. The quest for the historical Jesus ‘prescinds from or brackets Christian faith’.\(^{34}\) Consequently he distinguishes between the quest for the historical Jesus and Christology, considering both to be valid academic endeavours. The historical Jesus thus defined is not the “real Jesus” (the total reality of everything Jesus said and did during his life); and ‘the quest for the historical Jesus […] does not mean that it denies, rejects or attacks’ Christian faith.\(^{35}\)

However, it is not evident what use such a quest would be. What we may know of the ‘real Jesus’ largely depends on the four Gospels. Then the question still hinges upon the interpretation of textual sources (although source is an ambiguous term here). In applying historical-critical methods, one inherently undermines one of the precepts of Christology, that is, the reliability, even the revelatory (inspired) quality of the Gospels in their textuality. In this sense, biblical criticism seems to rule out appeal to the Bible as a source for authoritative Christology.\(^{36}\)

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Although Meier repeatedly stresses his intention not to enter into theological discussions, rather to provide an ‘academically respectable common ground and starting point for dialogue among people of various faiths’, the issue of faith cannot be bracketed by maintaining ‘a strict distinction between what I know about Jesus by research and reason and what I hold by faith’. As in Meijering’s argument, whatever sparse historical information the Gospels contain, faith would have to validate the idea of the resurrected Jesus. But this view constitutes a clear break with Christian theology, which roughly up to Reimarus presupposed the veracity of the Gospel accounts and the reality of Christ’s resurrection, or in other words, which did not distinguish between Gospels (as texts) and resurrection (as reality) in the way Meijering and Meier do (in this regard representing the ‘modern imaginary’).

Furthermore, ‘total reality’ is what should be taken as the reference for assessing the status of one’s own historiographical endeavour, precisely because one cannot grasp this total reality of any person (materially nor spiritually). Meier does address this himself: ‘What do we mean when we say we want to investigate the “real Jesus” […] or the real anybody in ancient history? […] Obviously we cannot mean the total reality of that person, everything he or she ever thought, felt, experienced, did, and said’. This is a plain description of what the notion of ‘lived experience’ would designate, as well as the hermeneutical precept it entails. But Meier does not work out methodological consequences of the absolute validity of this insight. Awareness of the unknowability of “total reality” means that knowledge and understanding, and indeed interpretation, are secondary to lived experience. This awareness is one of the foundations of the ‘kaleidoscopic’ approach.

Clarity concerning this point is crucial, both for a historical and a Christological conception of Jesus Christ. There has to be some identifiable existential/historical link between the real Jesus and the reconstruction of the historical Jesus to make the latter (and consequently the former) of any interest.

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An author who has thoroughly reflected on the question of history and interpretation in relation to the historical Jesus is James Dunn, who gives a summary of the problem:

[1]n what sense, if any, can we speak of the resurrection of Jesus as historical? [...] Part of the data is the interpretation of the first disciples that ‘God has raised Jesus from the dead’. The data include the interpretation made by the disciples. For the twenty-first-century quester, the conclusion that ‘God has raised Jesus from the dead’, as a conclusion of the quest, is a further act of interpretation—again an interpretation (evaluation) of the first-century interpretation. When we add the initial observation—that departure from this life (death) can indeed be described as a historical event, whereas entry on to some further existence can hardly be so described—it can be seen just how problematic it is to speak of the resurrection of Jesus as historical.40

This quote mainly serves to point at the different layers of interpretation involved. Dunn is scrupulous enough to lend ‘interpretation’ at least a problematic ring. As an alternative, he works out a conception of what he calls ‘Jesus remembered’. But as Samuel Byrskog (amongst others) has noted, ‘Dunn’s way of using the label “remembered” is, in fact, hard to distinguish from “interpreted”’.41 Indeed, given his explicit objective, Dunn abandons the level of the event (existence) and takes tradition (interpretation) as the main focus:

(1) The only realistic objective for any ‘quest of the historical Jesus’ is Jesus remembered. (2) The Jesus tradition of the Gospels confirms that there was a concern within earliest Christianity to remember Jesus. (3) The Jesus tradition shows us how Jesus was remembered; its character strongly suggests again and again a tradition given its essential shape by regular use and reuse in oral mode. (4) This suggests in turn that the essential shape was given by the original and immediate impact made by Jesus as that was first put into words by and among those involved as

40 J.D.G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*, vol. 1: Jesus Remembered (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, 2003), pp. 875–876. For Dunn’s methodological distinction between event, data, and fact, see §6.3b (pp. 102–105).

eyewitnesses of what Jesus said and did. In that key sense, the Jesus tradition is Jesus remembered. And the Jesus thus remembered is Jesus, or as close as we will ever be able to reach back to him.42

In (1), the shift from reality (historical) to interpretation (remembered) may be clear. As Dunn seems to stress oral tradition (3), he neglects the fact that he is here interpreting written sources/interpretations (as he noted in the earlier quoted passage), that is, text.43 This also makes (4) problematic: what is an 'original and immediate impact'? How much of what we interpret in the Gospels goes back to eyewitness, and is the ‘eyewitness’ a solid criterion? In the hermeneutical sense, the Jesus of tradition might indeed be called ‘Jesus remembered’. But in the final sentence of the passage, Dunn leaps to an existential statement (‘the Jesus thus remembered is Jesus’) — the proviso (‘or as close . . .’) does not clarify or legitimate this leap. ‘Jesus remembered’ seems to be a form of Wirkungsgeschichte, which does not really answer the historicity question.

I took these three more or less random examples not from literature on theological hermeneutics in a strict sense, precisely because the issue at stake is not so much the theory of interpretation, but the actual application and account in dealing with the texts and the history concerned.44 Whereas Meier and Meijering want to restrict themselves to plain historical description, transferring the question of resurrection to the realm of faith, Dunn acknowledges the impasse as such, and by his conception of ‘Jesus remembered’ tries to cope with it. Yet all three illustrate the hesitancy to simply state that Jesus has risen, since given the historical paradigm such a statement is untenable. Important in this context is thus not only the knowledge and insights historical research has brought, but also the restraints and challenges it implies for claims of faith. It is in this light that the concept (and practice) of interpretation would have to be reconsidered. At least, these insights, which cannot properly be refuted, call into question not so much the interpretations of earlier times, but rather our appeal to these interpretations.

42 Dunn, Christianity, p. 335 (cf. p. 882).
43 For methodological remarks on the heuristic border implicit in the shift from orality to scripturality see Bestebreurtje, Kanon, pp. 129–130.
44 However, Dunn extensively reflects on the impact of hermeneutics for biblical study (Christianity, in particular I,6: ‘History, Hermeneutics and Faith’).
The Question in Orthodox Studies

How do present-day Orthodox scholars and theologians account for the relation between text, interpretation, and history? As indicated, I do not intend to narrow down different voices to an “Orthodox hermeneutics”, even if some common features of biblical interpretation as conceived by Orthodox scholars can be discerned. In regard of biblical studies and criticism, Orthodoxy is in a situation the Roman Catholic Church was in some 250 years ago (and partly still is). This is not a value judgment; the situation is recognized by Orthodox scholars as well. In an article on the Orthodox Church and contemporary biblical research the Greek scholar Savas Agourides stated: ‘What made me finally decide on this topic was the fact that the Roman Catholic church has a very rich and historically interesting experience on the question of the Church and the Bible during the 18th and 19th centuries, and this experience may be able to help us’.45 Yet Orthodox scholars on the whole still seem wary of accepting such an assessment.

A prominent feature of current Orthodox conceptions is the central place given to interpretation. In the following section I will discuss some scholars who appeal to interpretation as a principle of Orthodox faith, starting with John Behr, who writes: ‘Christ’s question calls for interpretation [...] The writings of the New Testament are already such interpretations [...]’.46 The formulation ‘Christ’s question calls for interpretation’ does not clarify how Behr detaches ‘Christ’s question’ from his interpretation of the New Testament writings as ‘interpretations’. To call the Gospels ‘interpretations’ fits (post)modern discourse, but cannot be said to be a premodern conception. The paradigm shift expressed in Western studies would have us start with the observation “The New Testament writings are already interpretations”,47 but the ‘such’ in Behr’s statement further implies that he knows what these interpretations

45 S. Agourides, ‘The Orthodox Church and Contemporary Biblical Research’, in Dunn et al. (eds.), Auslegung, p. 139. That is, if the question appears to be the same, i.e. the relation between text and historical reality, the setting and imaginary are entirely different, since 250 years have passed.


47 See for example Dunn’s remark quoted above: ‘[P]art of the data is the interpretation of the first disciples that “God has raised Jesus from the dead”’. 
refer to, that is, what ‘Christ’s question’ is. Where Meier and Dunn, acknowledging the problem, cautiously and provisionally try to delineate what ‘Christ’s question’ might have been, Behr poses ‘Christ’s question’ in an abstract sense which, historically speaking, is not covered by the answer he then gives.

Accordingly, Behr writes: ‘The Christ who appears on the pages of the writings recognized as canonical Scripture, the Scriptural Christ, is always the crucified and risen one. By this I do not mean to undermine the historical specificity of the Passion […] but to emphasize who it is that these texts describe.’\textsuperscript{48} The ‘scriptural Christ’ comes close to what Meijering called the ‘portraits’ of Jesus, and the same reservation applies. A reading like Behr’s inherently undermines the ‘historical specificity of the Passion’ in that he on the one hand implies knowledge (by his faith?) of who it is that the canonical writings ‘describe’, and on the other hand fails to inquire what can be and has been historically established about Jesus Christ. As in the preceding quote, there is a mixture of epistemological/hermeneutical statement (‘the Scriptural Christ’) and existential statement (‘is always the crucified and risen one’). Such an argument ignores both the insight that the Gospels mediate (or perhaps more correctly, create) that ‘image’ as well as the question of the relation between historical knowledge and theological explanation.\textsuperscript{49} The circularity of this reasoning seems partly to result from the focus on interpretation and literary reception as a theological principle (‘Christ who appears on the pages’).\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48} Behr, \textit{Formation}, p. 49. Behr uses the ‘image’ of Christ in a critique of John Zizioulas: ‘Of course, theological reflection [in Patristic theology, F.B.] became ever more abstract, but the point of such ongoing reflection is not to describe ultimate structures of ‘reality’ […] whether of “Being” or “communion” (or both) […] We must be very careful not to substitute the explanation for that which it seeks to explain. The aim of such theological reflection was and is to articulate, as precisely as possible, in the face of perceived aberrations, the canon of truth, so as to preserve the undisturbed image of the Christ presented in the Scriptures.’ Quoted by A. Brown, ‘On the Criticism of Being and Communion in Anglophone Orthodox Theology’, in \textit{The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church}, ed. D.H. Knight (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 35–78, p. 45 (my italics, F.B.). Notions are left indeterminate: it is not clear what ‘undisturbed’ means, nor what status an ‘image’ ‘presented’ may have.


\textsuperscript{50} Behr stresses the ‘literary’ side of tradition: ‘If God acts through His Word, then that Word needs to be heard, to be read, to be understood—the relationship with God is, in a broad
This principle appears in other contexts as well. In a later book, Behr argues: ‘[I]t is a stubborn fact, or at least is presented this way in the Gospels [...] that the one born of Mary was not known by the disciples to be the Son of God until after the Passion, his crucifixion and resurrection [...] Thus, to speak of the “Incarnation” [...] is an interpretation made only in the light of the Passion. It is a confession about the crucified and exalted Lord.’

The point here is how to assess the distinction between ‘stubborn fact’ and something ‘at least presented this way in the Gospels’. Such a distinction between fact and presentation cannot be reasonably said to have been intended by the evangelists: it too reflects the modern distinction between text and interpretation, between history and story. Substantially, Behr speaks within the same (postmodern) imaginary as Meijering, Meier, and Dunn, who, as shown above, saw this distinction precisely as the reason for problematizing interpretation in regard to historical reality.

Behr’s stress on interpretation is reflected in his assessment of history: ‘Although popular imagination is still enthralled by the idea of “what really happened,” it is generally recognized that there is no such thing as uninterpreted history. Failing to appreciate the confessional nature of theological assertions gives much modern theology a character that can only be described as an odd mixture of metaphysics and mythology.’ Here, too, the adverb ‘confessional’ is an abstract criterion, as the leap from ‘theological assertion’ to ‘history’ (or the ‘stubborn fact’) has to be accounted for. Thus, Behr’s own confession or conviction can never ascertain what he calls a ‘fact,’ unless he relies on the New Testament writings. But that would be a circular argument leaving the actual question of historical reality out of account. This understanding of confession again resembles the argument in Meijering and Meier, who drew a line of faith to limit the reach of historical research (see above p. 189).

sense, literary. [...] It was no accident, as Frances Young observes, that what came to be normative or Orthodox Christianity was “committed to a text-based version of revealed truth”. Behr, Formation, p. 15, quoting F.M. Young, Biblical exegesis and the Formation of Christian culture (Cambridge, 1997), p. 57. Here, too, notions like ‘broad sense’ or ‘no accident’ require explanation. Concerning circularity: V. Mihoc propounds a circularity of ‘Scripture in Tradition’ (‘Basic Principles of Orthodox Hermeneutics’, in Die prägende Kraft der Texte. Hermeneutik und Wirkungsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments, ed. M. Mayordomo (Stuttgart, 2005), p. 53); according to Breck, Scripture, p. 10, inherent to Orthodoxy is a ‘closed “hermeneutic circle”’. Both value this circularity as a distinct quality.

51 Behr, Mystery, p. 16.
52 Idem.
The idea that ‘there is no uninterpreted history’, indeed a sort of postmodern truism, should rather be a reason to be cautious of one’s own claims regarding the past, as they are defined from the present. This conception takes interpretation as a guideline, and implicitly confuses existence/reality and epistemology: a single aspect of modern historiography is taken as *pars pro toto*. If one would take “history” in its sense of lived reality, it would be more appropriate to say something like “We cannot but give an image of history”, which makes clear that the problem lies with the interpreter (historiography), and not with history, as his/her interpretation does not decide anything for the level of lived experience, of ‘what really happened’. This too marks the limits of interpretation as an epistemological principle, and the need for acknowledging the inaccessibility of the past at this point. Even if the claim that ‘there is no uninterpreted history’ may be quite commonplace, its methodical implications are not.

Behr’s appeal to the claim is reminiscent of a strand in current (protestant) treatments of the dilemma between historical reality and (confessional) interpretation, briefly illustrated here by two examples. Jörg Lauster, after having noted that a literary approach to the Bible tends to fictionalize ‘the question of the factuality of what is being narrated’, offers a ‘religious theory of interpretation’ as an answer to this dilemma. For this, he appeals to the Gospels as ‘expressions of religious experience’.53 Such a view shifts the question to the level of the experience of the Gospel authors, which leaves us with the same hermeneutical questions: how can we ascertain what they experienced? And what can their ‘experience’ prove in terms of the ‘factuality of what is being narrated’?54 This seems an intricate way of focusing on textuality and interpretation (*Deutung*) rather than reality, simply because the Gospels give insufficient clues to this reality.

In a similar vein, Jens Schröter denies a distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and post-Easter interpretation of Jesus (which would cover Behr’s view of the disciples noted above) since ‘the pre-Easter Jesus is also an interpreted Jesus’. Here too reality (lived experience) is confused with postmodern epistemology (interpretation; ‘the pre-Easter Jesus *is* also an interpreted Jesus’). Wedderburn’s question in reply to Schröter may equally apply to Behr’s

53 Quotes from Lauster, ‘Entzauberung’, pp. 40–41 [‘die Frage nach der Tatsächlichkeit dessen, was in der Bibel erzählt wird’; ‘religiöse Deutungstheorie’; ‘Ausdrucksformen religiöser Erfahrung’].

54 Here is another example of the kaleidoscopic approach: if we claim something about the experience of an other, the burden of proof lies with us; if the other claims to have experienced something real, the burden of proof lies with him.
argument: ‘But does one not need to add that this is true of the pre-Easter Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospels?’\textsuperscript{55} This confirms the fundamental importance of disentangling text and reality.

**Premodern and/or Postmodern?**

As quoted above, Behr expressly pleads for a ‘reappropriation of a premodern perspective in a cautious postmodern fashion’.\textsuperscript{56} This is at the same time more and less than a paradox. There is no return to a past imaginary, as already the wording itself makes clear: premodern and postmodern exclude each other epistemologically, and that means also existentially. One may imagine ‘premodern’ aspects in postmodernity and vice versa, but the nexus, the ‘kaleidoscopic’ coherence of all aspects, is decisive.

This kind of reasoning, confusing the interpretative and the historical aspects, is encountered in the work of other Orthodox scholars. Peter Bouteneff raises a similar point, that ‘there is no unbiased recounting of history’.\textsuperscript{57} Yet when speaking of the scriptural authors (like Behr, neglecting the question whether it was really Matthew etc.), he writes: ‘They were compiling written and oral material; traditional stories; histories and embellished histories […] As their Christian interpreters, we might add that they were doing all of this under divine inspiration.’\textsuperscript{58}

Such a view does not seem to match the ‘premodern’ conception of what the scriptural authors did: the notion of the Gospels as compilations of different oral and written sources is clearly modern. But more importantly, does ‘divine inspiration’ here imply that the (hi)stories they supposedly gathered are correct, or even inspired themselves? We hardly know anything of the relation of this material to historical reality, and there is no reasonable way to imagine how this gathering of ‘written and oral material’ under divine inspiration took

\textsuperscript{55} Wedderburn, *Jesus*, p. 19, where also Schröter is quoted. Wedderburn offers an outstanding overview and critique of contemporary research on the “historical Jesus” from an epistemological perspective. He stakes his point over a number of other authors, and the central aim of his book is to see whether and how they distinguish between aspects of history, historiography, and story in respect to the Gospels and the historical Jesus.

\textsuperscript{56} Behr, *Mystery*, p. 19 (see also above, n. 2).

\textsuperscript{57} P.C. Bouteneff, *Sweeter than Honey: Orthodox Thinking on Dogma and Truth* (Crestwood, NY, 2006), p. 83. See also Breck, *Scripture*, pp. 40–41. Of course the question is not whether one has some bias, but whether it is a correct one, and whether one is prepared to reflect and change it if this proves reasonable.

\textsuperscript{58} Bouteneff, *Sweeter*, p. 84.
place. Bouteneff as a ‘Christian interpreter’ explicitly attributes divine inspiration, which raises the question of what his attribution and interpretation could prove (similar to Meijering’s ‘faith’). In this, he appeals to a past imaginary without reflecting on his own stance towards what he describes: ‘[W]e have to bear in mind that the clear-cut distinction between “description of actual events” and “stories about the past” takes on different contours in the premodern mind.’\textsuperscript{59} The issue, however, is not the distinction between ‘description’ and ‘stories’, but the relation of either to the actual event. Simply stated, this distinction did as such not exist, and consequently cannot take on ‘different contours’ in premodern imaginary; any contour one could identify would be our interpretation within our discourse and imaginary. Oddly enough, Bouteneff insists that ‘these are our categories’,\textsuperscript{60} without reflecting the implications for what he says about, for example, what the evangelists would have done. The ‘(post)modern’ mind has to acknowledge that it can never think like or acquire the premodern mind (if such ‘minds’, rather than individuals, may be said to exist at all); otherwise the distinction wouldn’t even make sense.

Along the same lines, Bouteneff concludes his survey of patristic readings of the creation narrative as follows: ‘The point is not, then, whether the fathers took the seven “days” or Adam to be historical. For the fathers, as for us, the historicity question has much more to do with how narrative, and scriptural narrative specifically, works to convey its message […].’\textsuperscript{61} The message of Scripture appears transferred to the textual realm, which brings it close to postmodern theories of language and literature. Yet what if something did not take place, or not in the way that Scripture recounts it, and one develops a profound exegesis about it, based on the wording of the text? The point is not that everything in the Bible must necessarily have taken place as described, but how a theologian accounts for his understanding of biblical writings. Leaving the historical reality or content of creation or revelation undecided in this way raises a range of theological problems.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{59} Idem; see also p. 75.
\textsuperscript{60} Idem, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{61} P.C. Bouteneff, \textit{Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives} (Grand Rapids, MI, 2008), p. 183. For a similar argument in relation to typology see Breck, \textit{Scripture}, p. 28: ‘The type, then, consists of interpreted events whose historicity is of secondary importance.’ But if the event is not historical (real), there is nothing to interpret either. Here clearly interpretation is inflated into a principle dominating the event.
\textsuperscript{62} A similar problem mars Bouteneff’s assessment of the case of Father Arseny, the “hagiography” of a saint whose existence is being disputed. On this case see K. Tolstaya, P. Versteeg, ‘Inventing a Saint: Religious Fiction in Post-Communist Russia’, \textit{The Journal of the American Academy of Religion} 82/1 (2014), pp. 70–119.
This would, of course, require a detailed exposition of Scriptural exegesis in Origen, Jerome, Basil, etc. To take just one example, one might think of Origen, whom both Behr and Bouteneff mention as the “Father” establishing scriptural interpretation as part of salvation. Bouteneff renders part of Origen’s argument as follows: ‘Origen’s suspicion—perhaps derived from the Stoics—as to whether the events of “factual history” can be determined at all is nearly postmodernist.’ He then refers to *Contra Celsum* 1,42 on the ‘Savior’s experience of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. [Origen] asserts something quite profound: these things happened, but they happened for […] Jesus and, in their transmission, they happened ultimately for us and for our salvation. But they did not necessarily happen as events in physical space.’

If this is an overall correct rendering of Origen, then it is interesting to see in him the same sort of logic, transferring the question of historical reality to the ‘experience’ of (in this case) Jesus, which then finds transmission eventually through the Gospels. But this is no answer to the question of historicity and interpretation, as Origen takes for granted that Jesus was baptised and did experience this. The question remains: How do we ascertain what Jesus experienced? We cannot claim the reality of an experience which is not described as such (for it is not Jesus himself who describes this ‘experience’, but the authors of the Gospels who narrate the baptism of Jesus as an event, something which ‘happened’); otherwise we would be left with arbitrariness in interpreting a passage like this. At least Jesus’ experience must have been in physical space, otherwise we are approaching a docetic view. Here, too, the distance in time and imaginary makes itself felt: even if an isolated thought from Origen may seem to cohere with certain current notions, it is the totality, the overall (kaleidoscopic) constellation of first having to account for one’s own notions and reading of Origen which precludes direct appeal. And for that matter, both Origen and we could be wrong.

63 Behr, *Formation*, p. 177; Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, pp. 103–104.

64 Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, pp. 105–106, and given the above quote from Bouteneff (see p. 236), one might surmise his endorsement of Origen here.

65 This same point may be applied to Lauster’s conception of ‘Erfahrung’ (see above p. 234). Also, the question of authorship would have to be considered; and the context of Origen’s argument should be taken into account. He refutes Celsus’ already fictitious question by transferring the argument onto a plain of general difficulty of establishing facts, referring to the Trojan war etc. Thus he evades a direct answer to the question and leaves it in the realm of possibility—a transfer from reality to epistemology.

66 Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, p. 29 makes the same point, stressing the danger of a strictly literary approach of the Bible ‘placing a low emphasis on historical reference and enfleshment or “bodiliness”. It becomes docetic.’
The ecclesial argument, the synthetic conception of ‘Scripture in tradition’, does not refute this reservation. For example, Breck states: ‘The Church is the proper locus for the interpretation as well as for the proclamation and liturgical celebration of the Word of God.’ And Georges Florovsky writes: ‘The Church had the authority to interpret the Scripture, since she was the only authentic depository of Apostolic kerygma […] Scripture, that is—its true understanding, was only in the Church, as she was guided by the Spirit.’

In such a conception, ‘interpretation’ remains indeterminate in relation to the specific exegesis as developed by the Church Fathers, but also in relation to academic hermeneutic standards. Neither Breck nor Florovsky accounts for the epistemological shift the canon of Scripture marks (from the Gospel to the written Gospels).

Furthermore, the reliance on Church tradition (with liturgy at its centre) is subject to the same critical examination as is a strictly text-oriented exegesis; indeed, to consider the liturgy/Eucharist a hermeneutical realm is a confusion of the sacral and the textual, as in the words of John Breck: ‘The emphasis of the fulfillment of the Word of God through liturgical celebration marks the uniqueness of an Orthodox hermeneutic.’ Crucial, however, is not the way

67 Breck, *Scripture*, p. 39; similarly ‘Orthodoxy’, p. 144. John McGuckin speaks of an Orthodox hermeneutic of ‘familial trust’, as opposed to a Western ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ in *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Malden, MA, Oxford, 2008), p. 105. On the authority of scripture and tradition in Orthodoxy, he states p. 108: ‘The principle of authority is robustly resisted in modern critical hermeneutic precisely because the contemporary interpreter is given the highest status of authority.’ This may be true for a brand of postmodern reading theories, but not for the mainstream of historical research (and the aligned hermeneutics), which aims exactly at checking one’s own reading by reflection and honest inquiry. What he calls ‘familial trust’ may easily slip into subordination and ignorance. Such a one-sided negative view of Western science and its ‘ideology’ may equally be found, for example, in official statements from the Russian Orthodox Church (see ‘The Basis of the Social Concept’: http://www.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/xiv/).

68 G. Florovsky, ‘The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church’, in *Bible, Church, Tradition: an Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, MA, 1972), pp. 73–92, quote pp. 89–90. Bouteneff, *Sweeter*, p. 84 states: ‘But as Christians, the question that ought to occupy us is not what the scriptural authors thought. What really matters to us is how the Church read and continues to read Scripture.’

69 Nor, incidentally, do Western scholars and theologians. See Bestebreurtje, *Kanon*.

70 Breck, ‘Orthodox Principles’, p. 79, quoted in Wasmuth, *Protestantismus*, p. 170, who suggests a figure like M. Muretov, whose reception of nineteenth-century Protestant biblical hermeneutics she discusses, would be critical of such a statement for narrowing the idea of the Church. However, Wasmuth does not give a clear definition of ‘Orthodox
Postmodern Orthodoxy?

(ecclesial) tradition is conceived of, but whether the foundational principles appealed to are sound, which among other things leads back to the question of historicity, irrespective of the form in which divine knowledge would be transferred, oral, written, liturgical, etc.\textsuperscript{71} And finally, the general claim that one can only understand the New Testament when one accepts its authority,\textsuperscript{72} is no answer to the questions raised by biblical criticism, but exactly the kind of conformation of the exegete to the ‘doctrinal and moral teachings of Holy Tradition’\textsuperscript{73} against which a scholar like Savas Agourides has argued.

Neo-Patristic Synthesis as an Option?

Even if there are points of contact, Western and Orthodox scholarship diverge on the acknowledgment of the findings of biblical criticism and historical research. One initiative trying to bridge the gap between Western and Orthodox scholarship is that of Orthodox-Western New Testament Scholars’ conferences, where Western and Orthodox theologians discuss biblical and ecclesial themes on an ecumenical basis.\textsuperscript{74} It may be worth quoting part of a summary from one of the participants of the third conference, held 2005 in St Petersburg: he observes the Orthodox’

use of dogmatic instead of exegetical arguments […] a certain lack of critical dialogue with the newest state of research or even of knowledge of current scientific trends, a tendency to work on the texts systematically instead of analytically and in detail, and to read given orthodox theses

\textsuperscript{71} I will have to leave the discussion of the notion of tradition to a further article. An Orthodox conception of tradition may be found in Vladimir Lossky, \textit{In the Image and Likeness of God} (Crestwood, NY, 1974), esp. ch. 8 (‘Tradition and traditions’).

\textsuperscript{72} See for example Mihoc, who invokes the Holy Spirit as the ‘‘hermeneutic bridge’ that re-actualises the biblical event in the Church’ (‘Principles’, p. 56; see also p. 62, where he quotes Staniloae). Just about all theologians Negrov, \textit{Biblical Interpretation} discusses essentially adhere to a similar view.

\textsuperscript{73} The phrase is from Breck, \textit{Scripture}, p. 40: Orthodox exegetes ‘will conform their interpretation to the doctrinal and moral teachings of Holy Tradition’ (see also Breck, ‘Orthodoxy’, p. 145). For some articles by Agourides available in English see the bibliography below.

into the texts. Present-day Orthodoxy often has the problem that it wants to find its own truth founded in the texts, isolated from their historical context. That was a legitimate premodern exegetical method, which was used in this sense by the biblical authors and the Church Fathers. It can be legitimate within a spiritual or ecclesial context even today. But from a scientific perspective it is not considered legitimate anymore, as long as it is not at least combined with a historically oriented exegesis.75

This generally describes the state of Orthodox exegesis, and in many respects addresses the problems I intended to elaborate above. Now this was written by Christos Karakolis, a Greek Orthodox scholar. In part—as Karakolis himself points out—this state of affairs is due to secondary conditions: in Eastern European countries, Orthodoxy and Orthodox academic theology have had to recover from two to three generations of state atheism and suppression, and this recovery is still in hesitant progress. However, it also clearly reflects a fundamental tendency in Orthodoxy.

Karakolis sees the challenge for Orthodoxy in developing an academically informed exegesis without assimilating or surrendering its peculiar character. He considers the neo-patristic synthesis in its Florovskian sense as a direction to pursue. Florovsky never really set out distinct rules or principles for returning to the Fathers. Still, given its import, his contribution would require a separate appraisal;76 here I can only briefly indicate that some of the problems mentioned also encounter in his work.


76 For a critical appraisal of Florovsky’s ‘return to the Fathers’ see P. Kalaitzidis, ‘From the “return to the Fathers” to the need for a modern Orthodox Theology’, St Vladimir’s
Even though Florovsky seems not to disregard the question of historicity, his own conception remains unclear. On the one hand, he introduces an argument which might even apply to Behr and Bouteneff:

What is the theological use of the Bible? [...] The easiest solution would have been indeed if we could simply overlook or overcome the diversity of times, the duration of the process itself. [...] [This temptation] was at the root of all allegorical interpretations [...] The Bible is regarded as a book of sacred parables, written in a peculiar symbolical language, and the task of exegesis is to detect their hidden meaning [...] The historical truth and perspective are irrelevant in this case. Historical concreteness is no more than a pictorial frame, a poetical imagery [...] The dangers and shortcomings of such a hermeneutical approach are too obvious to need an extensive refutation. But the only real remedy against this temptation would be the restoration of historical insight. The Bible is history [...] At the same time, it is not history of human belief, but the history of the divine revelation.

This is a very clear critique of the tendency to neglect history and historicity. Published in 1951, one might even say it identifies the flaw of postmodern conceptions before they had emerged! Yet with his characterization of the Bible as the history of divine revelation, Florovsky remains in the same problematic field. His approach is as much an exegetical one as any allegorical or
poetical reading. When he confronts allegorical exegesis with Patristic typology, he neglects the distinction between text and event which he more or less acknowledged in the previous passage: ‘On the contrary, typology was not an exegesis of the texts but an interpretation of the events.’ This may partly be due to his conception of the ‘continuity of divine action [as] the basis of what was called the “typological” interpretation’.79 Again, the implication is that the work of interpretation (which Florovsky mainly locates in the Church/ in liturgy) is part of revelation and the grace of the Holy Spirit. On this level, Florovsky would face the same methodological and historical questions applied above.80

As a final suggestion here, we may consider the well-known passage: ‘“To follow” the Fathers does not mean just “to quote” them. “To follow” the Fathers means to acquire their “mind”, their phronema.’81 In the light of modern hermeneutics, this seems at odds with the dilemma (roughly since Schleiermacher) that through texts it is impossible to acquire the mind of any person in history, let alone that of the ‘Fathers’, which is itself a theological-historical construct. Here the conception of the total reality of a person, of lived experience, could serve as a methodological reminder not to lay claim on the mind of any other, except to acquire a more solid understanding of the limitations of one’s own.

81 G. Florovsky, ‘St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers’, in Florovsky, Bible, pp. 105–120, quote p. 109. As I said, Florovsky is more complex than I am able to present here; for example, his notion of the ‘Christological meaning’ of typology (p. 32) should be considered.—Stylianopoulos, ‘Scripture’, p. 23 notes ‘that the mind (phronema) of the major Fathers with respect to biblical interpretation held a flexible view of the Bible as a divine and human book’. ‘Flexible’ seems an understatement for the primacy of interpretation, as the examples Stylianopoulos gives display the ingenuity of patristic interpretation from the unchallenged premise of the Bible as Scripture. Flexibility thus concerns practical exegesis rather than principle.
The solution Karakolis proposes, that of a ‘historically oriented exegesis’, might signify in a nutshell the paradox of any modern-day theology. Historically oriented exegesis—that is, an exegesis distinguishing between text, interpretation, and history—will always first have to account for its relation to the text, and then for the relation of the interpreted text to history. This challenges traditional convictions and doctrines based on the intertwinement of the historical reality of revelation and the continuity of revelation in (interpretation of) the New Testament.

The call for a neo-patristic synthesis among Orthodox theologians and the growing interest in the Church Fathers among Western theologians perhaps largely stem from the exegetical-hermeneutical interest in interpreting the text on the level of narrative, of story. For this, the Church Fathers may seem to provide an exegetical hold, for example in the *theoria* of the Antiochenes, which includes ‘the inspired vision of the biblical author’ as well as ‘the inspired perception of the later interpreter’.82 This might be part of what Behr called the ‘reappropriation of a premodern perspective in a cautious postmodern fashion’, in which (inspired) interpretation would serve as the bridge or bond. But here, too, it is the distinction between text and reality which makes the interpretive conceptions of the Church Fathers fundamentally inapplicable. They had a totally different imaginary within which they “interpreted” the New Testament writings. We may describe or interpret this imaginary, but we cannot live it.

Frances Young described this point in another way:

No Antiochene could have imagined the kind of critical stance of the Biblical Theology movement, explicitly locating revelation not in the text of scripture but in the historicity of events behind the texts, events to which we only have access by reconstructing them from the texts, treating the texts as documents providing historical data. This is anachronistic [...] For them Scripture was the Word of God, an unproblematic account of what had happened which pointed to the truths of Christian dogma.83

The methodical limitation of ‘imaginary’, therefore, is not whether we can interpret *theoria* within our imaginary, but that the Antiochenes didn’t and couldn’t interpret modern approaches (here represented by the Biblical Theology movement) in theirs. The anachronism thus lies both on the epistemological and on the existential levels, since time and mind are inseparable.

82 Breck, *Scripture*, p. 37.
Acknowledging the fundamental inapplicability of the Church Fathers is not to dismiss them, but rather precludes any uncritical appeal to them.84

Conclusion

The paradox we are facing is that Orthodox exegesis, Western hermeneutics, and a historically informed academic approach all grapple with the premise of interpretation.

For Orthodoxy, the Bible as Word of God is part of revelation, interwoven with Christ as Logos, and from that perspective, ecclesial interpretation (tradition) is also part of revelation. Thus, text, interpretation, and reality appear not to be divided. But as I have tried to show, specific modern conceptions within current Orthodoxy use a concept of interpretation derived from this distinction, whilst at the same time appealing to Orthodox tradition. The samples I gave, at least, do not solve this paradox.

For an academic approach,85 the Bible is a historical entity, a research object rather than a direct source. Academia has legitimately questioned the historical reliability of the biblical writings. The distinction between text and interpretation is imperative here, and in a sense, rules out any appeal to the divine by way of the biblical texts.86 At the same time, the reliance on texts is acknowledged to be a problem, which requires us to consider the status of historical perception in relation to the past reality and imaginary as well; this cannot be left out as a sort of “negative” insight, when a positive discourse is being maintained in parallel (both on theoretical and practical levels of historiography).

Western theology seems to hover between the two poles: it recognizes and applies the findings and methods of biblical criticism, but cannot give up the

84 Cf. Kalaitzidis, ‘Return’, pp. 24–25: ‘[H]as not the celebrated “return to the Fathers,” as it has been understood and applied by several Orthodox theologians, served also as a bulwark against modernity and the challenges it posed, in spite of itself and contrary to its declared aim of renewal? Has it not thus hindered both the word of God in its incarnation and revelation within each particular social and cultural context, and the development, within Orthodox theology, of hermeneutics, biblical and historical research, systematic theology, anthropological and feminist studies, and political, liberation, and ecumenical theology? Has it not contributed in its own way to making the entire Orthodox ecclesial life a prisoner to pre-modern structures and practices and to a conservative mentality?’

85 Again, to be taken in the proper sense that the question is not decided or determined by categories of “Western” and “Orthodox”, “academic” and “religious”, etc. Evidently, any scientific approach may be problematic on its own terms.

86 On this question see Bestebreurtje, ‘Limits’.
Bible as Word of God (in whatever theological explanation or constellation) without giving up its identity.\(^7\) Some of the knots resulting from this disunity have been indicated in the above.\(^8\)

What, then, if the historical reality and the actuality of Christ's revelation is no longer ascertained by the Bible/the biblical text or by the tradition that is related to that text? Most historians, perhaps, would prefer to leave the question open, saying that given the lack of documented testimony, it cannot be resolved. But can theologians leave the historical (and thereby the present) reality of revelation, of resurrection, unclear or undecided?

Here emerges the need to redefine hermeneutics not as a discipline of interpreting texts, but of ethically accounting for one's interpretation in relation to history, that is, in relation to the people in history.\(^9\) And one guideline would be to acknowledge the unknowability of the past, of the people in their lived experience. To be sure, this acknowledgment is present to some extent in any form of historical study, but it is necessary to reflect upon it at every level. Applied to hermeneutics in theology, the aim could be to define the scientific conditions for easing the status of Scripture without necessarily abandoning the Gospel it testifies to: for such abandonment would still take the textual status of the New Testament writings too strictly. This will require a methodological definition of the (epistemological and existential) limits of both theological and scientific/academic thought in relation to the text.

A hermeneutics, then, which realizes that interpretation of the text—indeed, the text itself—is secondary, might get further in understanding what the text is about and what it is not about, but foremost, what one's own faith is about and not about. This is not intended to bring the historian or the exegete into an irresolvable position: it should, rather, enable each scholar to appropriately reflect upon his/her relation to the past, to prevent improper claims made on supposed meanings from the past, and to disclose unfounded opinions in the present.

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\(^8\) A summary of the dilemma in Reiser, ‘Geist’, p. 63, even if his suggestion that Orthodoxy may have the medicine for the Western ailments, and the Western approach that for the Eastern ailments, underestimates the core of the dilemma.

\(^9\) This demand for an ethical account in hermeneutics is developed both methodologically and in application in K. Tolstaya, *Kaleidoscope*, where she focuses on the limits of interpretation of individual faith (in her case, Dostoevsky’s).
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