On the Interpretation of the Holy Bible, Part Four

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

I received several questions seeking clarification on what is meant by contemporary and new approaches to the Bible. I will try to answer by drawing on the words of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware [published in an interview with Mr. Kyriakos Markides in his book *Gifts of the Desert*, chapter eight, "Converted" on pages 160-163].

The modern mind, stemming from its scientific rigor and analytical capabilities on the one hand, and the advancements in sciences as mentioned earlier[1] on the other, raises questions that were not previously posed with such intensity in the past. Among these questions are: How did the event happen? What exactly occurred? What explains the similarities between some stories, especially in the Old Testament, and the literary and cultural discoveries of ancient Babylonian, Assyrian, and other civilizations?

Using the language of the era in which we live to convey the Christian message is natural and indispensable. This is not an innovation or a deviation from the norm. However, when we preach ideas that contradict our faith and do not align with "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3), we fall into heresy. The matter is extremely delicate.

Let us start with the Gospel, where we find that all the parables of the Lord Jesus were agricultural, stemming from the cultural reality of Palestine at that time. He spoke of the mustard seed, the sower, and the shepherd, among others, because these were the language of the environment in which He lived, and these parables were understood by the people He addressed and sought to save at that time and place.

We are compelled to explain the historical context of the text to prepare for entering its meaning and intent. For example, today, we must explain the agricultural practices in the Middle East during the time of Christ's message before interpreting the parable of the sower. This helps people understand how seeds fell on rocky paths, among thorns, and on fertile soil.

Using earthly sciences as auxiliary tools in conveying the message is not new. This approach was adopted by the Apostle Paul when he preached Christ to the people of Athens. He began from their religious reality, which he observed in Athens (the

[1] On the Interpretation of the Holy Bible, Part Three.

altar to the unknown god), and cited some of their Greek poets: "For in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), to bring them closer to what he wanted to preach.

Returning to the first question, we previously mentioned challenges to faith brought about by history, archaeology, and scientific advancement concerning many biblical texts, especially in the Old Testament. These challenges did not exist before the 18th century. These challenges compel the Church to engage in dialogue and provide faithful responses. As long as we believe in the active and living presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, we must believe in its continuous creativity and inspiration, enabling the Church to continue its mission to save the world.

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As for the critical approach to studying the Bible, it must first be noted that the critical approach is not a single school; its methods of interpretation vary greatly. Metropolitan Kallistos states:

> “God has given us a reasoning brain. And we should use this gift to the full. Therefore, the critical study of the New Testament, using all the resources of scholarship, is something that we Orthodox should approve. We do not serve Christ, who is the Truth, by simply shutting our ears and eyes and refusing to listen or look. So, there is certainly a place for the critical study of the Bible. We Orthodox may not always agree with the conclusions of the liberal theologians, but we do affirm the principle of free inquiry. Second, we Orthodox in our approach to the Bible are not adopting exactly the viewpoint of Protestants fundamentalist. Like them, we believe that the Bible is true. But we do not isolate each sentence, each word on its own. We look at the total message of the Bible. This has always been the Orthodox principle of scriptural interpretation: that we take the Bible as a whole and we understand one part of the Bible in the light of another. So, we do not isolate texts in the way some fundamentalists do. I would go further than that. We also need to say that there are many ways of expressing truth and that literal truth of a worldly factual type is not the only kind of truth.

"The true understanding of the scripture comes not just through historical inquiry about biblical origins, but through seeing how scripture has been lived and understood in the Church. This is the difficulty of the historical-critical approach, that it isolates the reasoning brain and is carried out in the scholar's study, whereas the true understanding of scripture comes through the total person, and we have many other ways of understanding as well as the reasoning brain. It comes not through sitting alone in a library, reading books. It comes also, and much more fundamentally, through worship, through sharing the life of the community, through praying together - praying with our understanding but also with our heart, which is something far deeper than just the emotions or reasoning brain. And so, the true understanding of scripture comes through participation in the worshiping life of the Church. The true interpreters of scripture are not so much the learned scholars, though we should listen to them. The true interpreters of scripture are the saints.

"There is a tendency to isolate the letter of scripture. But to truly understand scripture we have to understand it liturgically and experientially: through the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, through participation in the sacraments, through the preaching of the Church, through the lives of its spiritual fathers and mothers. All of this forms part of the total richness of the Church. This is the context we have for understanding scripture. We allow full scope to the witness of the saints. Let us remember what was said by a great Serbian bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, who is already regarded as a saint by the Serbian Church. He said: 'The opinions of the scholars may be marvelously clever and yet they may be completely wrong. Whereas,' he added, 'the words of the saints are often simple but always right.'

"We should not reject scholarship, but as I pointed out, we should recognize that alongside the use of reasoning brain, the *dianoia*, the truth is apprehended more profoundly through prayer, through a life of holiness, a life of living compassion. The true understanding of the Bible comes through God's revelation on this level to the heart, to the *nous*, to the spiritual vision, not just to the discursive reason."