

A time to read and a time to embody (Part III) (Emma Cazabonne)

[Ξένες γλώσσες](#) / [In English](#)



John always draws these from Scripture, following his own recommendation: “A genuine teacher is he who has received from God the tablet of spiritual knowledge, inscribed by His Divine finger, that is, by the in-working of illumination, and who has no need of other books.”[i]



In other words, for John the genuine teacher is like a new Moses. This is actually how the monk Daniel describes John:

He approached the mountain, he entered the innermost darkness and, mounting by spiritual steps, he received the divinely written law and divine vision; he opened his mouth for the word of God, and drew in the Spirit; then he poured forth a good word from the good treasure of his heart.[ii]

Scholars[iii] remind us that the expression “spiritual tablets” may have been actually the original title of the work, instead of *The ladder*, thus highlighting John

as antitype of Moses, and emphasizing his role in interpreting and transmitting Scripture.

CONCLUSION

Offering his *Ladder of Divine Ascent* as a spiritual guide to the nearby monastery of Raithu, John Climacus relies heavily on Scripture. He does so with boldness and freedom, using chains and keywords, explaining Scripture by Scripture, adding short glosses and allegorical paraphrases. His creative and flexible way of using the Word of God manifests both his own assimilation of Scripture and his wisdom as a genuine teacher and pastor, who listens to the Holy Spirit at work in individual monks, and offers Scripture as a holy medicine adapted to each.

One can say that his use of the Word of God is the fruit of his spiritual maturity and wisdom, rather than the result of a technical study of Scripture. In the way he listens to, reads, embodies and transmits the Word of God, John reveals himself as a great saint.

Scripture is not a dead word, enclosed and limited forever to one unique literal meaning. It is alive and open to a manifold range of interpretations and faces, springing from persons led by the Holy Spirit of God, as they read, assimilate and interiorize Scripture so far as to embody it in their daily lives, hence John's way of using it in so many varied ways.

For John, this is the ultimate spiritual experience which goes along with union with God: "A soul which has united herself to God through purity shall stand in need of no word of instruction, since the blessed one bears the everlasting Word within herself as her Initiator, Guide, and Illumination." [iv]

The value of his work, permeated with Scripture, goes far beyond the monastic audience. His message is most relevant for us, lay readers of the 21st century. Hence the importance of focusing on how he uses the Word of God in his work. According to John, the mere reading of Scripture is insufficient if it is not accompanied by its embodiment. Scripture is a school of life. While reading Scripture, one must live it. Reading and interpreting ought to lead to transformation and conversion, or rather, the genuine interpretation of Scripture is performed through deeds, through a holy life. Let us then follow his advice: "Let what you read lead you to act, for you are a doer." [v] □

Paper given by Emma Cazabonne, independent Orthodox scholar, at the Orthodox Theological Society in America Consultation and Annual Meeting - June 12-14, 2008, in Chicago, Illinois.

Cazabonne has published numerous articles and a book: *A Light to Enlighten the Darkness: Daily Readings for Meditation during the Winter Season* (Collegeville: Cistercian Publications, 2008 - ISBN: 978-0-87907-227-8).

She manages a book blog: <http://wordsandpeace.com>

[i] #5 p.231.

[ii] *Life of Abba John*, p. xxxviii of *The Ladder*.

[iii] Duffy, pp.5-6, for instance.

[iv] *Homily to the Shepherd*, #100 p.246.

[v] 27.78 p.210.