

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

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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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.



Still, isn't it true that the Bible has been hyped, interpreted, reinterpreted, and misused many times so much so that it seems to cause more confusion than it solves? Is there something a little dangerous about it?

This is also true. So Reading God's word should be intimidating for us, or more accurately, utterly awesome. In fact, the Church continuously participates in a profound discipline of study, reflection, wonder, patience, and humility before the words of God in Scripture. However, the modern critical intellect is slippery and trained to question this received reverence. We can't casually sidestep significant issues: Is the Bible fallible or infallible? Is it history or myth? poetry or an instruction manual? Did God write it or not? Wouldn't I have to be a fanatic or a saint or a Greek professor to read it? Why does the Bible have such unpredictable effects?

The Church's answers fill libraries, largely because the concerns are not new. Debates have raged around them for two thousand years. Unfortunately, the vastness of this discussion only worsens our modern dilemma. How can busy Orthodox Christians really hope to figure it all out? Where do we begin?

In this context, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox*, edited and compiled by Johanna Manley, comes to the rescue. Inside one convenient cover, the text offers readers a solution that has been used throughout Orthodox history.

Unlike a Bible, this volume presents Scripture passages in an order appointed by the Church for prayer and meditation each day for a year. In this sense, it is a 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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