

# Holy Scripture In the Orthodox Church

Based on Which English Translation of the Bible Should I Use? by Metropolitan Isaiah of Denver

**Strictly speaking, there never was a Bible in the Orthodox Church**, at least not as we commonly think of the Bible as a single volume book we can hold in our hand. Since the beginning of the Church, from the start of our liturgical tradition, there has never been a single book in an Orthodox church we could point to as the Bible. Instead, the various Books of the Bible are found scattered throughout several service books located either on the Holy Altar itself, or at the chanter's stand. The Gospels (or their pericopes) are compiled into a single volume — usually bound in precious metal and richly decorated — placed on the Holy Altar.

The Epistles (or, again, their pericopes) are bound together in another book, called the *Apostolos*, which is normally found at the chanter's stand. Usually located next to the *Apostolos* on the chanter's shelf are the twelve volumes of the *Menaion*, as well as the books called the *Triodion* and *Pentekostarion*, containing various segments of the Old and the New Testaments.

The fact that there is no Bible in the church should not surprise us, since our liturgical tradition is a continuation of the practices of the early Church, when the Gospels and the letters from the Apostles (the Epistles) had been freshly written and copied for distribution to the Christian communities. The Hebrew Scriptures (what we now call the Old Testament, comprising the Law (the first five books) and the Prophets, were likewise written on various scrolls, just as they were found in the Jewish synagogues.

**The Church is *not* based on the Bible.** Rather, the Bible is a product of the Church. For the first few centuries of the Christian era, no one could have put his hands on a single volume called The Bible. In fact, there was no one put his hands on a single volume called The Bible. In fact, there was no agreement regarding which books of Scripture were to be considered accurate and correct, or canonical. Looking back over history, there were various lists of the canonical books comprising the Bible:

- The Muratorian Canon (130 AD) cities all the books we considered as parts of the Bible today, except for Hebrews, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation/Apocalypse
- Canon 60 of the local Council of Laodicea (364 AD) cited Revelation/Apocalypse
- A festal Epistle by Saint Athanasius (369 AD) lists all of them.

Even so, there was no official, authoritative canon listing all the books until the Sixth Ecumenical Council, at Constantinople in AD 680. Canon II of that Council ratifies the First through the Fifth Ecumenical Councils, as well as the local councils at Carthage (AD 255), Ancyra (AD 315), Neocaesaria (AD 315), Gangra (AD 340), Antioch (AD 341), Laodicea (AD 364), Sardica (AD 347), Constantinople (AD 394), and Carthage (AD 419). When the Council at Laodicea specified the content of the bible as we know it — 39 years after the First Ecumenical Council (AD 325) and 17 years before the second Ecumenical Council (AD 381) — the Liturgy was pretty much well-defined and established and had been canonized by common usage — the reading from these books. It was not until the invention of the printing press in Western Europe, coinciding with the period of the Protestant Reformation of Western Christianity that The Bible was widely disseminated as a single volume.

When Protestant Western Christians reviewed the canonical books of Scripture, they adopted the Hebrew Canon accepted by the Jews since AD 100. — See [The Books of the Old Testament](#)

The so-called Apocrypha, or Deuterocanonical, books were a problem for Jews living after the time of Christ, since they often very clearly prophesy concerning Our Lord, and indicate His divinity. Some of the books were also problematic for both the Jews and the

Protestants because they make prophetically evident the special role of the Theotokos in the *oikonomia* of salvation. In fact, the Orthodox Fathers cite passages quite effectively to discuss the Church's understanding of the role of the Theotokos. Also, the only scriptural reference to praying for the dead is found in a Deuterocanonical book: viz., Maccabees. Not surprisingly, these Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books were rejected from the canon of books indicated in the Jewish Scriptures. This canon was formally pronounced by a rabbinical council at Jamnia, which stated that all canonical Scripture had to have been written: in Palestine, in Hebrew (not Greek), and more than 400 years prior (300 BC) to that time.

In addition, the authorized Hebrew translation was at variance with the accepted Septuagint Greek versions, which had been prepared by 72 translators working in Alexandria Egypt. This is significant, because the Apostles, who were the authors of the New Testament, as well as the early Church Fathers, frequently cite passages only found in the Septuagint (Greek) Old Testament that have significant differences in meaning from the Hebrew. Moreover, they frequently cite passages from the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament.

**The Holy Scriptures were produced by the Orthodox Church.** The Church's holy prophets and Apostles wrote the books contained in the Bible. The Church determined which books were authoritative and belonged in Holy Scripture. The Church preserved and passed on the texts of these Scriptural books. According to tradition, the seventy-two Jewish rabbis and scholars who gave us the Septuagint Greek Old Testament, produced seventy-two identical Greek translations working independently and in isolation from one another. Writing in Greek, the Holy Apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, and Jude produced the books of the New Testament.

**The Holy Scriptures were preserved by the Orthodox Church.** These books and letters were studied, copied, collected, recopied,

passed from group of early Christians to another, and read in the services of the Church. Testimony to the fidelity of reproduction in this milieu is the consistent agreement among the Church Fathers when they cite Scripture, and their common understanding of Scripture in their deliberations at the local and Ecumenical councils.

Over the centuries, alterations crept into some manuscripts. Sometimes the texts were altered by accident (e.g., mistakes made in copying these books by hand). At other times intentional alterations were made, either by misguided but innocent copyists who thought they were correcting errors in the manuscripts they were working from, or by heretics who full intended to change the words of Scripture to suit their purposes. The Church, however, guided by the Holy Spirit, distinguished between authentic and inauthentic manuscripts, discarding or ignoring the latter, copying and handing on the former. Even today we see the authentic words of Scripture preserved. When a young priest or a chanter mispronounces a word in its original Greek, there will be a Bishop, an older priest — or even a venerable Orthodox grandmother — who will be quick to point out the aberration from the way the text has always been sung or read!

**The authentic Greek text of the Bible is preserved by the Orthodox Church.** When translating the New Testament into English, there are many Greek manuscripts to choose from. To ask, What does the original Greek say? is to beg the question, which Greek text? For Orthodox Christians this is a very easy question to answer. We simply use the Greek text handed down within the Orthodox Church which has been proven consistent by 2000 years of liturgical use and which the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, has given us. To Scripture scholars there is a huge body of ancient Greek manuscripts, known as the Byzantine text-type, which embodies the Orthodox textual tradition. These old manuscripts and lectionaries differ very little from each other, and are indeed in overwhelming agreement with each other throughout the whole New Testament. Furthermore, they are great in number and comprise the vast majority of existing Greek manuscripts.

**There is another, bogus, Greek text of the Bible.** Besides the Byzantine text-type family of manuscripts, there is a minor collection of Greek Scripture texts which are very old, and sometimes predate the Byzantine texts by hundreds of years.

In the middle of the last century, modern Scripture scholars, or critics, determined that newly-discovered ancient texts — such as the Codex Sinaiticus, the Alexandrian Codex, the Codex Ephraemi rescriptus — dating from the fourth through the sixth centuries, had determining authority in establishing the original text of the Gospels and the words of the Lord. Criticism was leveled against these critics by other scholars who maintained that the older manuscripts had been preserved through the ages precisely because they were set aside and unused since they were inferior copies — obvious from the ineptitude of the hands that wrote them and the many misspellings. They argued that it was hardly logical to prefer inferior texts from one text family over the received Byzantine texts were in agreement. Furthermore, they noted that the received text has even more ancient parallels — in second century Syriac and Latin versions — and is widely quoted in the Fathers. Even papyrus fragments from the first century bear out the veracity of the Byzantine text, and refute the validity of the older texts.

Amazingly — indeed, even unbelievably — most modern translators work from an eclectic or critical text, which draws very heavily from the older Codices. This eclectic text is a patchwork of readings from the various manuscripts which differ from each other *and from the Byzantine text.*

Any Greek Orthodox Christian can take a copy of the Nestle-Aland critical (eclectic) text into church, and compare the Epistles with those in the *Apostolos* — they differ, often, radically, in hundreds of places, not only in words and word order, but also in tenses and meanings! The same comparison can be made between an English translation of the Psalms and the Greek version found in the *Horologion* — they differ in thousands of places. The English has often been translated from the Hebrew Masoretic text which was compiled by Jewish scholars during the first ten centuries after

Christ. These scholars used inferior texts or edited them to delete or minimize the messianic prophecies or types which refer to Christ. Surprisingly, this Hebrew version of the Psalms is used even though the Greek Septuagint is often used to decipher the Masoretic text which is often unintelligible since the vowels are not indicated.

**Most modern English Bible translations are based on bogus versions of the Scriptures.** Unfortunately, no English translation of the Bible has been made using the Byzantine text-type manuscripts of the New Testament since the King James Version (KJV) in 1611. The others are all based on the eclectic Greek New Testament manuscripts and various Hebrew Old Testament texts. The bottom line is that manuscripts which the Orthodox Church did not use or copy have been elevated above those texts which the Church has preserved by modern and contemporary Scripture scholars and translators. Sadly, but perhaps significantly indicative, is the fact that the scholars who put together those eclectic critical texts decisively reject the Byzantine (that is to say, Orthodox) text-type, claiming that the Byzantine text was corrupted by Orthodox copyists eager to conform the text of Scripture to Orthodox theology as it developed over the first several centuries of the Church's life.

**The Orthodox stand on the Critical Eclectic Texts.** As Orthodox, we cannot believe that the text of Scripture is arbitrary and governed only by human considerations — especially those of modern scholars who decide what is and what is not authentic. We see the presence of God and His providence in our daily lives; how can they be denied to exist in the Church and in the canon and text of the Holy Scriptures? Otherwise everything in our liturgical worship is suspect and unreliable. The human element cannot be ignored or denied, but neither can the divine. Yet most biblical scholars and textual critics wish to disregard any form of divine intervention or revelation in order to make their study scientific. In fact, present-day biblical scholarship hides its fundamental unbelief from believers and even from itself. It ultimately results in such ludicrous claims that Jesus Christ never spoke any of the words recorded in the Bible —

claims that make the front page of national news magazines and mislead millions of people.

Perhaps the best example of the modern scholars bias is found in the first chapter, first verse of the Gospel of Mark: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God The modernists drop the words the Son of God because they are absent from the Codex Sinaiticus and papyrus miniscules 28 and 255. Yet they appear in all other copies and versions and in many quotations of the fathers!

**Modern translations obscure the Divinity of Christ.** In what can only be a return to the ancient heresy of Arius, even the much touted 1952 Revised Standard Version (RSV) translation of Scripture tends to minimize Christ's divine nature. Forty years ago the King James translation was widely impugned for being based on the Greek Byzantine texts which were called corrupt — an amazing accusation considering the pedigree of the eclectic critical texts. In the liberal theological milieu of that time, many Protestant theologians denied not only the virgin birth, but also the divinity of Christ and His resurrection. One curious feature of the RSV translation is its apparent mixture of old and new English; the older traditional second person singular pronoun, thou/thee/thy, is intermixed with the nondescript modern ye/you/you. While at first glance this seems chaotic, it actually serves as a hidden code. The traditional thou usage is employed when God is addressed, but you whenever anyone else is addressed. Note, for example, that the Our Father in the RSV retains the word thy in referring to God's name, kingdom, and will. But note that in the RSV translation a leper addresses Jesus in Mark 1:40, Saying If *you* will, *you* can make me clean, and Peter says in Matthew 16:16, *You* are the Christ, the Son of the living God. The only time in the RSV that Christ is addressed as Thou is after He is no longer on earth, but even this is found mainly in Hebrews when Paul quotes from the Old Testament.

The clearly Protestant bias against the Theotokos, and her Orthodox definition as critical to preserving the divinity of Christ is also very evident in the RSV. Consider Matthew 1:25 (KJV): (Joseph) knew her not till *she had brought forth her firstborn son*; and he called his

name Jesus. But in the RSV: (Joseph) knew her not until *she had borne a son*; and he called his name Jesus. From the Byzantine, Orthodox, texts, the KJV tells us that Mary brought forth not a son, but her firstborn — precluding her having had previous children. Moreover, He is clearly *her* son; but not Joseph's. Note how the RSV is distinguished from the KJV in Luke 2:33; after Simeon returned Jesus to His mother, the narrative tells us (KJV): *Joseph and his mother* marveled at those things which were spoken of him. But the RSV: And *his father and his mother* marveled at what was said about him. The RSV infers that Joseph is Jesus' father, presumably his biological father — a clear refutation of the dogma of virgin birth.

Or again, consider the following notable omission in John 3:13. KJV: No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which *is in heaven*. But the RSV: No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man.

The Byzantine text is clearly reflected in the KJV; the eclectic text by the RSV. Yet only a tiny handful of manuscripts omit the expression *which is in heaven* while the vast majority of manuscripts include it, as do the quotations of Church fathers such as Saint Basil the Great, Saint Hilary, Saint John Chrysostom, and Saint Cyril. This particular Scripture text is the clearest witness to the Orthodox teaching that Christ is fully man while not being circumscribed in any way as God, since it indicates that Christ was simultaneously on earth in the body and in heaven with the Father. It also indicates, contrary to modern liberal theology, that our Lord knew very well just Who He was, where He came from, and what business He was about.

There are many more examples, but let us simply note one more, I Corinthians 15:47, which needs no further comment. KJV: The first man is of the earth, earthly: the second man is *the Lord* from heaven. But the RSV: The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.

**The Corruption of Paraphrased Bibles.** There is no need in this article to provide such critical analysis of the various other

translations which followed the RSV (e.g, NIV, NAB); all are even more flawed. A comment should be made, however, of several very dangerous paraphrased versions of the Bible, such as Today's English Version and the volume sold as The Book. If the Scripture scholars can criticize the Byzantine copyists for corrupting the text to conform to Orthodox theology, what are we to say about the non-Orthodox paraphrases who have radically altered not only text, but the whole meaning of various passages? These Bibles are to be totally and completely avoided by the Orthodox; they have no good purpose whatsoever because they are gross distortions of the truth, and serve only to infiltrate a completely corrupted theology into the minds of the faithful.

**The Orthodox Witness.** One very interesting question, never asked, is this: If scholars are willing to assemble an eclectic text out of Scripture fragments from various sources — often of unknown doctrinal origin or authority — why haven't they ever considered the living archeological evidence of Scripture segments that have been repeated faithfully for ages in the Orthodox Liturgy? Why haven't serious modern scholars considered the incredible coincidence that 72 Hebrew scholars could all translate the Old Testament in exactly the same manner into the Septuagint Greek? Why haven't they examined the translation of the Scriptures done a thousand years ago from Greek into Slavonic, which has preserved exactly, accurately, and precisely the meaning of the Greek original? And, more to the point, if errors have crept in and accumulated as texts were copied over the years, why aren't the existing copies of these Greek and Slavonic Scriptures divergent?

Non-Orthodox scholars cannot answer these questions because, to do so honestly and truthfully, they would have to admit that in fact the Orthodox Church, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has preserved intact and correctly the Holy Scriptures. And, moreover, this preservation is in part assured by the dogma and doctrine of the Church which both draw from the Scripture and provide evidence and support of its truth.

**What Translation Should I Use?**The answer is this: the King James Version (KJV) is the most reliable and faithful English translation. Unfortunately, it is written in an archaic, 500 year old style of English. Although not as incomprehensible as the 2000 year old Greek of the New Testament and Liturgy is to modern Greek speakers, it is still awkward and difficult for many to understand. The real question that begs — indeed pleads — for an answer, is this: Why hasn't the Greek Orthodox Church sponsored an accurate translation into modern English from the Byzantine texts and extant fragments of Scripture found in the liturgy of the Church?

Source: Greek Orthodox Diocese of Denver Bulletin: March 1995, Volume 3, Number 3., pp. 14-17.