# SOME EXEGETICAL ASPECTS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT LECTIONS IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

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**Abstract**: In dieser Arbeit wird versucht, einige exegetische Aspekte der biblischen Lesungen im orthodoxen Kult zu entwerfen, wobei als Fallstudie die alttestamentlichen Lektionen im *Prophetologion* untersucht worden waren. Neben dem in der selektiven Lesungen der alttestamentlichen Stellen festgestellten moralischen Grundsatz, werden die folgenden exegetischen Prinzipien in den Lesungen des *Prophetologion* an der größten Fest der Kirche, Ostern, herausgefunden: (1) Allegorie; (2) Typologie; (3) Exemplifizierung; (4) Rekontextualisierung; (5) Prophezeiung.
**Keywords**: Prophetologion, Paroimiarion, Orthodox exegesis, biblical hermeneutics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I try to outline some exegetical aspects of the biblical lections in the Orthodox cult, taking as a case study the corpus of Old Testament readings found in *Prophetologion*. The *Prophetologion* or *Paroimiarion* is an extinct liturgical book of the Orthodox Church that appeared in the 8th century in Constantinople.

Together with the *Evangeliary* (*Εὐαγγέλιον*) (Patras 1997) and the *Apostolos*, *Prophetologion* is a Byzantine lectionary. It seems that the three lectionaries were used commonly by three categories of lectors and only the poor monasteries were forced to combine the lectionaries in order to be used by a single person (the only known example is a book from the monastery Philotheou in Athos).

It is interesting that the Byzantine lectionaries contained until the 13th cent. ekphonetic notation for cantillation. According to Sysse G. Engberg, the leading expert in the field, there are 202 known manuscripts of the *Prophetologion* from the Middle Age. The critical edition (8 volumes, Prophetologium 1939-1970; 1980-1981) is based on two 11th century manuscripts from Venice and Oxford.

After the Ottoman conquest of Byzantium, the *Prophetologion* began to fall into oblivion, being absorbed into other liturgical books (*Triodion*, *Pentekostarion* and *Menaia*), while the *Evangeliary* and the *Apostolos* survived until now.

In the Romanian ecclesiastical culture the *Prophetologion* circulated in the 17th century: the first Romanian manuscript translation, dated before 1612-1613 (Pavel 2011: 143-144; Andronic 2010) and not in 1569, as assumed by the editor Vasile



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Oltean, was discovered in the library of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church of Brasov. The first printing was prepared by St Dositheos (Dosoftei), Metropolitan of Moldavia (PARIMII 2012), who translated the Prophetologion in 1683 from Slavonic or Byzantine sources (Ungureanu 2011: 282).

The *Prophetologion* includes also New Testament lections, but I shall limit my discussion to the Old Testament lections which make up the main part of the corpus.

## 2. THE TEXT AND THE CANON OF THE OT IN THE *PROPHETOLOGION*

The first question important for the exegesis is which biblical text is used by the *Prophetologion*, because the Old Testament consists of a variety of textual traditions (the Masoretic Text, Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch etc.).

Many theologians and scholars such as Ioan Icǎ jr., Cristian Bădiliţă or Mogens Müller consider the Septuagint as the official version of the Orthodox Church, the only one legitimate in this tradition or the first Bible of the Church. I think we can test this affirmation analyzing the biblical text quoted by the *Prophetologion*, the book of Daniel being an appropriate touchstone. In a Psalter from 10-11 cent. AD (Barberini gr. 285), Dan. 3:57 sqq. is offered in two versions: *κατὰ τὸν ἁγιοπολίτην*, i.e. according to the Jerusalem tradition that represents the Theodotion version and *κατὰ τὸν ἐκκλησιαστήν*, i.e. according to the Hagia Sophia tradition in Constantinople, the Septuagint (Hanke 2002: 143-144). The *Prophetologion* chose for the reading of Dan. 3:1-88 (the last one of the Vesper of Holy Saturday) the Theodotion version of the Jerusalem tradition. In fact, Theodotion was generally preferred for the book of Daniel in the Church of the 4th century (St. Jerome, *Preface in Daniel*) (Swete 1900: 46-47).

A second example could be found in Isaiah 9:5, a passage read at the Nativity Vigil. In the Masoretic Text it says: "For a child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. His name is Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace", but the Septuagint has a different end: "and his name is called the Messenger of great counsel: for I will bring peace upon the princes, and health to him". The *Prophetologion* has a mixed reading, a combination of the Hebrew Text and the Septuagint, already attested in Codex Alexandrinus in the 5th century or in a 7th century addition of the Codex Sinaiticus (following the Lucian edition) (LXX GÖTTINGEN 14: 156).

The conclusion? The *Prophetologion* follows not only the Septuagint, but a modified version of Septuagint and in the case of the book of Daniel a completely different version.

The canon list of the OT books quoted in *Prophetologion* is also very significant. As commonly known, there is a contradiction in the Orthodox Churches regarding the position of the so-called "Deutero-canonical books" (*anaginoskomena*). The ecclesiastical canons of the synods and church fathers of the Orthodox Church are



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inconsequent. In 1672 a Jerusalem synod affirms the canonicity of the *anaginoskomena*, supporting the Confession of Dositheus, Patriarch of Constantinople, and refuting the confession of Cyril Lukaris. But the Russian Church during the Tsar Peter the Great, under Protestant influence, excluded the *anaginoskomena* from the canon (Jugie 1907a; Jugie 1907b; Jugie 1907c; Jugie 1907d).

What is the panoply of the OT books used by the *Prophetologion*? It quoted frequently from the book of Wisdom and once from the book of Baruch, without making any difference between those books and the canonical ones.

So, if we take into account the textual profile of the Old Testament proposed by the *Prophetologion*, we must affirm for now: First: The Septuagint is not the only biblical tradition for the Old Testament. Second: The difference between canonical and non-canonical books of the OT (*anaginoskomena*) is not accepted at the liturgical level of the Orthodox Church.

## 3. HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES IN THE *PROPHETOLOGION*

The next step of my discussion is to identify and categorize some hermeneutical principles supposed by the *Prophetologion*. At the first glance, it might seem inappropriate to do this, because the *Prophetologion* is not an exegetical work, but only a collection of biblical texts. Nevertheless one can affirm that the selection itself of the passages represents an interpretative option.

But before we begin the discussion, an observation should be made: not all of the pericopes may have direct relation to the feast and some of them may belong to the old practice of *lectio continua*. During the six weeks of Lent three books (Genesis, Isaiah and Proverbs) are read continually and during the Holy Week these readings are replaced by other three books (Exodus, Ezekiel and Job) (Dragomir 1981). But in fact in the Orthodox cult there is no proper *lectio continua*, but a selective reading (Germ. *Bahnlesung*) (Reumann 1977: 117) urged by the relative length of the text and also by ethical concerns; immoral episodes are excluded (for example in Genesis the episode when Abraham presented his wife as his sister (Gen. 12), Ismael's birth, the expulsion of Hagar; in Isaiah the descriptions of women's jewelry; in Proverbs the seductive women from chapter 7). So a hermeneutical principle for the OT quotations is the *morality*: The biblical text is not self-evident, but needs a higher authoritative institution, in this case the Church, to operate a sort of selection. The Bible is not the ultimate authority, but the Church, which can put aside some unclear passages.

For the historical understanding, we can compare the *Prophetologion* with the Typikon of the Great Church of Constantinople (middle 10th cent.) (TYPIKON 1962; 1963), but especially with two Armenian lectionaries from the 9-11 centuries, which reflect the cult practice in Jerusalem in the 5th century (CAJ 121 1969; 1971; OAL 1905). I shall take into consideration the readings of the Holy Saturday, because this is a good example of hermeneutical principles used in *Prophetologion*.



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## 4. THE EASTER VIGIL

For the Easter Vigil in the Holy Saturday, the *Prophetologion* has 15 OT readings plus a reading of the Matins/Orthros which in the Jerusalem tradition was part of the original group of readings and we can consider here together with the others. In the 5th century Jerusalem tradition, there were 12 OT readings, as attested by the Armenian Lectionaries, Georgian Lectionaries and a Georgian Lectionary of St. Sabba monastery tradition. It is interesting to observe that, similarly to the Epiphany, the readings were divided roughly into two parts, each part ending with a biblical song: the song of the Red Sea (Exod. 15) and the song of the three youths (Dan. 3).

In the Typikon of the Great Church of Constantinople, it is stipulated that all lections are to be read only if the patriarch spends more time for baptizing, otherwise if he is about to end the baptisms, readings no. 8-15 are skipped. From this note, similar to the Epiphany and Nativity Vigils, Juan Mateos considered that Easter Vigil, as Epiphany and Nativity Vigils, had basically seven readings (no. 1-7). The other seven (no. 8-15) (in the Epiphany only five) are secondary readings for the eventuality of a longer service. Mateos deemed that last reading, no. 15, part of the Liturgy, together with the Apostle and the Gospel reading (Typikon 1963: 87, n. 1).

But comparing this list of 15/16 readings with the Jerusalem tradition of 12 readings attested by the Armenian lectionaries, Mateos' reconstruction seems problematic. Why did the *Prophetologion* shrink the earlier Jerusalemite list of 12 readings to 7 readings? Even the theory about the presence of OT reading in the Liturgy (the so-called three readings theory: OT, Apostle and Gospel) is now contested (for example by Engberg 2008). The reading no. 15, the song of the three youths, is in closer connection with the reading no. 6, the song of the Red Sea. It is therefore more plausible that the earlier list was enlarged and partly modified by the Byzantine tradition. In fact the *Prophetologion* maintained only 9 readings of the earlier tradition (including Ezek. 37) and brought 7 new readings. But in time the original list of reading was minimized because the number of the catechumens diminished.

We can observe the order of the passages. There is no interest for systematization of the biblical quotations, a reality evident in the cases of great feasts, where multiple quotations are at hand. In the Holy Saturday, it would have been more adequate to group the passages according to the theme or the books from which there are extracted. Instead the passages about Passover, Exod. 12:1-11 and Josh. 5:10-15 are separated by the long text of the Jonah book. Between the resurrection of the boy accomplished by prophet Elijah (3 Kgs 17:8-24) and that by prophet Elisha (4 Kgs 4:8-37) 3 other pericopes are interposed. This allegedly chaotic juxtaposition of the biblical quotations represents in my opinion an assumed hermeneutical principle: through foreshadowing and coming back a tension is established between the prefiguration and the reality. I'll name it the



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*prefigurative principle*. By intermingling the texts and shortcutting the natural order of the thematic pericopes a system of cross-references is formed that buttresses the unity between the prophecies and the NT fulfillments.

Now let us analyze the readings and try to categorize the exegetical procedures. The single lection of Matins is Ezek. 37, the vision about the resurrection of the dry bones. The verbs in future (vv. 12-14) suggest that the prophetic vision refers to something in the future that will happen. The *Prophetologion* identifies this moment with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who "has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). I propose to label this understanding of the OT text as a foretelling of the events that will be fulfilled in the NT or Church period as *prophecy* or *anagogy*.

In the Jerusalem tradition, the first reading of the Easter Vigil contains the chapters 1-3 of the book of Genesis, but the *Prophetologion* limited the pericope to the first day of creation. Alexeev suggests that either Gen. 1 was the ordinary lection of the day (as Karabinov) or it describes the primeval chaos foreshadowing the death of Christ (Alexeev 2004: 108). Unfortunately I must disagree with these suggestions. Gen. 1:1-5, describing the first day of creation, has important *allegorical* connections with Christ's resurrection: 1) the light – "God said: 'Let there be light'"; 2) separation (*diachorizo*) of light and darkness; 3) the one day (*hemera mia*). Christ has risen in the first day of the week, as a recreation of the world (*cf.* Justin).

The second reading was initially Gen. 22, but this reading was replaced by Is. 60, probably under the influence of the increasing importance of the Paschal canon of St. John the Damascene and especially the Eirmos of the 9th ode, dedicated to Virgin Mary. Is. 60 illustrates the OT motif of the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem in connection with the pilgrimage of the nations which came with many gifts and are subdues to Israel. The text is used, just like Gen. 1, as an *event allegory*: "Be enlighten, be enlighten, o Jerusalem, for thy light is come" (v. 1) suggests the light of the resurrection. For me it seems hard to accept Alexeev's suggestion, who followed Karabinov and Kniazeff, that Is. 60 was together with Gen. 1 the ordinary lesson of the day (Alexeev 2004: 108). We have indeed in the Good Friday Is. 52-54, but this was neither an ordinary lection. In fact the Isaiah cycle had been already finished at the end of Lent (*cf.* Is. 65:8-16 at the Sixth Hour Thursday in the Weeks of the Palms and Is. 66:10-24 at the Sixth Hour Friday in the same week).

The third reading reflects a sophisticated *Christological typology*. In Exod. 12 God commanded Moses and Aaron to prepare the Paschal lamb, which must be slaughtered during the evening twilight and whose blood must be applied on the door-posts and on the lintel of the houses to prevent the death of the firstborn children. The lamb is a *typos* of Christ (1 Cor. 5:7), whose death prevents the death of mankind for their sins. The unleavened bread prefigured the flawless Church (*cf.* 1 Cor. 5).

The fourth reading, the most extensive one, including the entire book of Jonah, provides also a *Christological typology* based on character typology and event typology. Jonah is the *typos* of Christ: as he stayed three days in the belly of the sea monster,



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so Christ spent three days in Hades. The preaching to the Ninevites prefigures the spreading of the Gospel and their repentance and the salvation of the city are a spiritual model for the believers. So we can find here also a *believers' typology*.

The fifth reading, Josh. 5, is an innovation. In the Typikon of the Great Church of Constantinople the pericope is Josh. 11, the battle of Merom in the northern part of the Holy Land and the burning of Hazor. In this text Joshua (Iesous/Jesus in Greek) is the faithful follower of Moses. The same idea is stressed also in the earlier Jerusalem tradition: there the pericope of Josh. 1:1-9 functioned as a divine support and urge for Joshua to accomplish the conquest of the land, Josh. 11 of the Typikon of the Great Church being actually the fulfillment of this command. The new reading of the *Prophetologion*, Josh. 5, fits more precisely into the Easter feast: it narrates the Passover at Gilgal and the eating for the first time of the produce of the Promised Land. The reading represents therefore *a Christological typology* based upon name typology and event typology.

The sixth reading, Exod. 13-15, is an *event believers' typology* regarding the baptism. It should be kept in mind that primarily the great feasts of the Church were good opportunities for the catechumens to be baptized. The passing through the Red Sea is a *typos* of baptism (*cf.* 1 Cor. 10). The pericope begins in Exod. 13:20, an important text that mentions the presence of God in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. 1 Cor. 10:1-2 acclaimed that "our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea". Moses is here a typos of Christ. The pericope has also a hymnological character by including the song of the Red Sea.

The seventh reading, Zeph. 3, is viewed by Alexeev as a baptism pericope (Alexeev 2004: 107-108), but at a closer look we discover clear connections with the Easter feast. The text begins with the words: *διὰ τοῦτο ὑπόμεινόν με λέγει κύριος εἰς ἡμέραν ἀναστάσεώς μου* "Therefore wait for me, says the Lord, until the day of my resurrection" (Brenton translates here "until the day when I rise up for a witness"). Lord will gather on his holy mountain "a meek and lowly people" and "the remnant of Israel". Finally Zion is called to rejoice, because the Lord has taken away the iniquities and "the Lord, the King of Israel, is in your midst". In my opinion, the reading has nothing to do with the baptism, but with the Resurrection. The exegetical approach could be labeled *recontextualization* or *relecture*: the text is extracted from its original milieu (decontextualized) and then is relocated into a new context. The focus is upon the exact wording, which receives a new sense in the light of the new settings.

The eighth reading, 3 Kgs 17, narrates the multiplying of the meal and oil in the house of the widow of Sarepta and her son's resurrection by prophet Elijah. I would entitle this exegetical approach *exemplification*: this is not a structural analogy, but an identical case as the one celebrated in the Church feast. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ represents just the top of the gradual scale where Old Testament examples could be found. The resurrection of the widow's son understood in its



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historicity functions as another example of resurrection in order to support its reality.

The ninth reading, Is. 61-62, is indeed connected with the communal baptism performed at the feast. The pericope proclaimed the status of the newly baptized symbolized by their white baptismal garment: "Let my soul rejoice in the Lord; for he has clothed me with the robe of salvation, and the garment of joy: he has put a mitre on me as on a bridegroom, and adorned me with ornaments as a bride" (Is. 61:10). This case could be understood as a believers' *recontextualization* of the cry of joy for Jerusalem.

Gen. 22, the tenth reading, offers a beautiful example of *typology*: the sacrifice of Isaac as a prefiguration of the sacrifice of Christ. The fact that Isaac bore the woods (*ta xyla*) of the offering prefigured the bearing of the cross by Jesus Christ. I already noticed that Gen. 22 was the second reading of the old Jerusalem tradition attested by the Armenian lectionaries.

The eleventh reading, Is. 61, represents in the Old Testament a resumption of the songs of the Servant of Lord in Trito-Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me; he has sent me to preach glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken in heart, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind". This exegetical procedure is in my opinion a Christological *recontextualization*.

The twelfth reading, the resurrection of the Shunammite's son by prophet Elisha in 4 Kgs 4, corresponds closely to the eight reading, the resurrection of the widow's son by prophet Elijah. Similarly we can find here an *exemplification*.

The thirteenth reading, Is. 63-64, is a confession of faith remembering the passing through the Red Sea and God's guidance through the wilderness. It resumes the theme of the sixth reading, being an *ecclesiastical typology*.

The fourteenth reading, Jer. 31, proclaims that the Lord will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. At the exegetical level, it is understood as the fulfillment of a *prophecy*, as shown in Heb. 8:8-12. Christ is the mediator of the New Testament (Heb. 9:15).

The fifteenth reading, Dan. 3, consists of the story about the three youths, who didn't obey king's command to worship the golden idol and therefore were cast into the hot furnace. In my opinion, Dan. 3 is a pendant of Exod. 15, a hymn that exults the victory of faith. Pharao from Exodus has his counterpart in king Nebuchadnezzar as diabolical characters. As the song of the Red Sea, the song of the three youths is linked to the baptism, as an event believers' typology.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Beside the moral principle observed in the selective reading of the Old Testament passages, I have found the following exegetical principles in the lections of the *Prophetologion* at the greatest feast of the Church, Easter: (1) allegory; (2) typology; (3) exemplification; (4) recontextualization; (5) prophecy. I differentiated



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between allegory, typology and exemplification. The allegory offers a spiritual understanding of the text, going usually far beyond the text. A banal event could be read *otherwise* (*allegoreo*). The connection between the text and the spiritual sense cannot be perceived immediately and directly, the reader must contemplate the profound meaning. The typology is an analogy between two structures. While in allegory this similarity is not present, in typology the first assembly prefigures the second one. The structures need not to be identical, only to have some similarities which could be used. The exemplification supposed identical events that repeated in the history of salvation: other resurrections, other submersions that could be identified as baptism. In the recontextualization a passage is removed from its original context and placed into a new one. The wording takes another meaning. Finally the prophecy implies an anagogic aspects clearly stipulated by the text itself. Something that will occur is predicted with the introductory expressions such as "in those days" etc.

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Vassiliadis 2013: Prof. Petros Vassiliadis, *The Liturgical Use of the Bible in Greek Orthodoxy: An Orthodox Critical Approach in 12 Steps*, paper delivered in an international conference on "The Present and the Future of Biblical Studies in the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches", held in Firenze, Italy (6-7 June, 2013) (http://auth.academia.edu/PetrosVassiliadis/Papers).



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