

Hermeneutical Reflections on Modern Jesus-Research: An Orthodox View

CHRISTOS KARAKOLIS

1. The Significance of Jesus's Person

The significance of Jesus's person for Christianity cannot be overestimated. The name of the Christian religion stems from the christological title "Christ," which was very soon – already in the Pauline literature – practically used as a second name of Jesus. According to the common faith of all traditional Christian confessions, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who became human and revealed to humankind the way to salvation in an authentic and unmistakable manner. He is the center of Scripture, not only of the New Testament, which speaks about him and the community of his believers, but also of the Old Testament, which the Christian church interpreted christologically from the very beginning of its existence. Apart from that, Jesus is not uninteresting even for non-Christians. Muslims think of Jesus as a prophet. Many Jews consider him to have been a wise rabbi, who was ultimately misunderstood by his followers. Non-religious people often consider him as one of the most important personalities in history because he represented a revolutionary teaching within a very dark historical period – a teaching that led him to the cross, but at the same time had an enormous impact on the historical course of humanity up to the present day.

2. Paradigms of Historical Understanding of Jesus's Life and Person

There has always been a lively interest in the human dimension of Jesus. Paul, the earliest New Testament author, may not give us any historical details about Jesus's life, but he does state that the pre-existent Son of God became a human being and died as such on the cross. We can presume that in his oral preaching, Paul most likely included references to Jesus's life, as his letters do not include the total of his "gospel" but only those parts he

wanted or needed to emphasize to his communities according to their particular situation.

Later Christian writings – especially the canonical and apocryphal gospels – dealt extensively with presenting the Jesus of history. Nevertheless, the people of antiquity had an understanding of history different from ours. They thought that history is, or at least can be, a place in which God reveals himself to humanity. According to this belief, ancient historiography was, as a rule, practically the ascertainment and the putting down in writing of divine interventions within the visible world. The life of Jesus was understood as God's consummate manifestation, as well as his definitive and ultimate soteriological intervention in the world.

From the Enlightenment onwards, a different understanding of history and a different model of historiography has gradually developed and finally prevailed. According to it, the Divine is either non-existent or not interested in human matters. Historical events are totally mundane. Compared to earlier historical understanding, this was a paradigm shift. "Traditional" Christian historians reacted to this change by trying to give proof of God's intervention within history. Both sides agreed – even though they did not necessarily realize it – that the question about the historical Jesus should and could be answered one way or the other. They argued either that Jesus was no more than a simple man – although enlightened in a way – or that he was truly God at the same time. Both were convinced that they could verify their opinion on scientific grounds.

The two paradigms mentioned above can of course not be simplistically distinguished from each other. In antiquity, Thucydides totally excluded divine intervention in his historiography, while there are contemporary authors who by all means presuppose divine intervention in history (especially in the area of ecclesiastical historiography or spiritual literature).

3. The Significance of the Patristic Tradition within the Orthodox Church and Theology

As is well-known, the patristic theological tradition plays an enormously important role within the Orthodox Church and her theology. According to the broad conviction of traditional Orthodox theology, there is an uninterrupted continuity between the theology of the early church and theology today. During all these centuries, theological expression has of course developed. However, in all periods of church history, the Orthodox theological core has – supposedly – remained constant and even identical. By contrast – according to mainstream Orthodox theology – the Catholic and the Protestant confessions have caused changes to the theology of the church

on a doctrinal and ethical level, and should, therefore, return to the original Orthodox faith. It is not coincidental that the Orthodox Church names and identifies herself as the rightly believing church.

Nevertheless, the actual historical development has been much more complex. Especially in the case of biblical exegesis, the following phenomenon can be observed: While in the church of the first three centuries the Bible was considered to be the absolute theological authority in writing, since about the fourth century the writings of the church fathers started gaining in importance. Moreover, the more time passed after the early church fathers of the first five centuries, the more difficult it became for later theologians to develop and express their own exegetical theology. As a rule, the later exegetes of the East were greatly dependent upon the biblical exegesis of the earlier church fathers. For instance, Theophylact of Ohrid or Euthymius Zigabenus reveal in their extensive exegetical work very little originality and rely to a great extent on earlier exegetes, especially John Chrysostom. Even the formation of the catenae during the Byzantine period is a witness to this historical process. The interpretations offered earlier by the church fathers reached in the middle and late Byzantine times an almost canonical status. Theologians believed that they did not actually have to offer original interpretations of the Bible anymore. It was enough for them to read and cite its earlier exegesis. The final downfall of all Orthodox peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean region to the Turkish yoke only intensified this tendency.

Ultimately, tradition has steadily been transformed into a static notion and even nowadays it is widely understood in the Orthodox context as the ultimate expression of all theology. According to this view, there is no place for any fresh theological reflections or even expression. One should just study, cite, and at best interpret the ancient teachers of the church. This view, which as already said is widely and forcefully supported within the Orthodox Church, has – in my opinion – a crucial problem: Since the church fathers have expressed themselves in their own language, according to their own conceptions and within their own time and setting, in modern times it seems hardly possible for the church to enter into dialogue with the world and make herself understandable, if she continues using their largely outdated language.

4. Orthodox Theology and the Historical-Critical Method

Orthodox theology has dealt for centuries with philosophy. It has adopted and used – or in certain cases even discarded – philosophical methods. It has participated in theological discussions with other religions and Chris-

tian churches. However, the blossoming of the historical-critical method in the West was a challenge that Orthodox theology largely ignored. It proved far too challenging for Orthodox theology to follow the discussions and the arguments of the Western exegetes in the nineteenth century and in most of the twentieth. Problems such as doubt about the historical credibility of biblical texts, the search for sources and redactional layers, the issue of pseudepigraphy, and perhaps most importantly, the question about the historical Jesus seemed to be threatening to the faith of the Orthodox Church. Indeed, some of the issues that historical-critical biblical scholarship has raised are simply irreconcilable with Orthodox faith and teaching. Orthodox theologians generally (with a few exceptions) did not try to understand this new, dominating force in the field of international biblical studies or even to enter into dialogue with it. At this point, however, Orthodoxy did not even remain faithful to its own theological tradition. In its long history, the Orthodox Church has always engaged in dialogue with non-Christians, as well as non-Orthodox Christians. There are, of course, good historical explanations for why Orthodox theology for a long time did not enter into dialogue with Western biblical scholarship, such as Turkish rule, the two World Wars, the atheist, totalitarian regimes in the Eastern European countries, the highly specialized training of biblical scholars that could only be obtained in the West, and the isolation and feeling of self-sufficiency on the part of local Orthodox churches, as well as the fact that in the Orthodox context, no wide-spread intellectual and critical movement analogous to the Western Enlightenment has ever taken place.

Since the 1950s, however, a way out of this dead end has seemed to emerge. A noteworthy number of Orthodox biblical scholars started training in Western universities and have been intensively seeking a common language between their rich theological tradition and the highly developed biblical scholarship of the West. However, in the Orthodox setting, the question about the historical Jesus has not received sufficient consideration, as it constitutes a very complex and sensitive set of problems from church-political and doctrinal points of view.

The question that is raised at this point with regard to historical Jesus research, is whether Orthodox and Western biblical scholars are currently confined within a set of problems that originated in an earlier time than our own and perhaps do not correspond to the contemporary state of scientific epistemology.

5. The Postmodern Understanding of History with Regard to the Question about the Historical Jesus

Nowadays, history tends to be viewed from a rather different perspective than that which dominated the field of historical studies only a couple of decades ago. I will here simply refer to the book by the English history professor Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London 1991). Jenkins has in a very clear way presented a postmodern understanding of history, according to which history is only a narrative. History is not identical with the past itself but is our narrative about the past. Therefore, history always has a certain target, while past events *per se* do not have any target whatsoever. The historians are the ones who see a meaning in the past events. Furthermore, the historians cannot intrude into the mind of a personality of the past and perceive its intentions through its actions. History is not a window for knowing the past but primarily a mirror in which we get to see our own present; it is a mirror that reflects ourselves. It is not enough to know theoretically the events of the past to know the reality of the past. History is not an empirical science but a form of literature, which is based upon our own philosophy of life. There is no hidden or true history, which would have to be uncovered. There is no privileged, right way that would lead us to the authentic past. Historians always have in front of them open scientific alternatives, they make preliminary decisions, and they have concrete methodological preferences.

On the basis of the above, we note that the time has passed since scholars could be certain that objective reality is accessible and that they will be able to conquer it in some way or another, provided that they utilize their scholarly methods in a consequent and objective manner. However, this has actually never been the case, and this fact holds true with the quest of the historical Jesus as well. In research, there is no consensus about the identity of the historical Jesus, what he did and what he did not do, which of his words in the Gospels are *ipsissima verba* and which originate from later compilers and redactors, how he thought about himself and about his mission, whether or not he intended the formation of the church, his eschatological expectations, and so forth. That means that the time of historical positivism is over. On the scientific level, biblical scholars can no longer claim to know all this information with certainty. They have to reckon with the possibility that they might be totally wrong about it. While they can certainly discuss and speculate about it, they should be alert to the fact that their reading and their rewriting of history is just a subjective reconstruction, which may very well be erroneous. Modern scientific positivism has given way to postmodern scientific relativism.

How then can we speak about the historical Jesus at all? According to the postmodern understanding of history outlined above, the historical Jesus is actually our construct, and he has never existed in the way that we try to reconstruct him. We do not have any objective access to the Jesus who did indeed live during the first century A.D. in Palestine and died on the cross. Consequently, we cannot speak about proven scientific knowledge but only about our own speculations and hypotheses.

6. The Historical and the Literary Jesus

There seems, however, to be a safer way to access Jesus than the historical one. We can still have access to the Jesus of the texts. We may not actually know the historical Jesus, but we know the Jesus of the Gospels in the way that their authors presented and interpreted him in their own narratives. Since history is not identical with the past but only a literary account of the past – that is, a narrative – this is also the case with the Gospels, which are mainly narratives about Jesus. The literary access to Jesus has important advantages and makes it possible for Orthodox theology to participate in the scholarly dialogue without being compelled to abandon its theological principles and its firmly established theological tradition. According to this view, the question about whether and to what extent the gospel narratives reflect the historical truth about Jesus is irrelevant and cannot be adequately answered on scientific grounds. Accordingly, the question about whether Jesus did indeed think about himself the way we think about him or whether he was a radically different person, is not a matter of concern. Such provocative and therefore highly intriguing questions can be altogether avoided according to the postmodern understanding of history presented above, as they cannot be answered with certainty. The literary level remains the only ground on which exegetes can examine the sayings and narratives of the Gospels with commonly accepted methodological tools and can probably reach a broader consensus than has ever been possible in the past with regard to the historical Jesus quest.

Nonetheless, historical Jesus research has indeed been useful. We have learned a good deal about Jesus's time; we have tried to understand him in light of his own time and to explain his uniqueness in various ways. Through this process, we have come to understand ourselves anew. After the holocaust humanity is not the same anymore. Since that time, it has gradually become more and more important to demonstrate and underline that Jesus was indeed a Jew. Quite differently, after the Enlightenment, it was crucial to demonstrate that Jesus was a human being like ourselves, who thus provided an outstanding ethical example for us to follow. In ear-

lier times, his divinity was underlined; only if he is indeed truly God can we be saved through him, as no simple human being can vicariously redeem the whole of humankind through his or her sacrifice. In all these examples, theologians have interpreted Jesus according to their own contemporary conceptions and needs. What we learn from the postmodern understanding of history is that these various focal points with regard to the historical interpretation of Jesus's person are unavoidable and in this sense also legitimate. We have to be aware of this fact and therefore be modest in our conclusions, as we do not know the actual historical truth, and we will never know it in an objective manner.

7. The Orthodox Access to Jesus as a Legitimate Alternative

Is the Orthodox perspective compatible with the above-presented postmodern notion of history? In my opinion, the answer cannot but be positive.

When reading the exegetical texts of the church fathers, we notice that some of their principles also apply to concrete currents of contemporary biblical scholarship, such as: (a) the literary unity of the texts regardless of possible sources that have been used in the process of their composition, (b) the relativization of the significance of the "historical truth," and (c) the legitimation and use of a great variety of exegetical methods and hermeneutical perspectives.

The church fathers understand the biblical texts as theological narratives and not as precise historical documentations according to the modern understanding of the term "historical." They read them not only on the literary or narrative level but first and foremost on the pastoral and spiritual level, which opens up the possibility for a wider spectrum of theological interpretations. Furthermore, they are aware that they are not indisputable authorities with respect to the interpretation of the Bible. According to their understanding, the ultimate authority in this regard is the church as a whole. Therefore, they are conscious of the fact that their exegesis is just an attempt to contribute to the contemporary needs of the church. Finally, they do not look for the historical Jesus behind the gospel narratives, but they fully accept and deal with Jesus as presented by these very narratives. In our postmodern time, these are noteworthy concepts and principles that are not to be a priori rejected but can indeed be discussed and further explored.

Obviously, it is not enough for present-day Orthodox theologians to cite the church fathers. They have the responsibility – whether they are aware of it or not – to adopt and use the language of their present scholarly context, just like the church fathers did in their own time. The relativism and

the skepticism that nowadays dominate even in science allow Orthodox theology to reintroduce its understanding of Jesus based on the texts of the New Testament and its own long exegetical tradition. However, it cannot anymore raise the absolute truth claim, which had been self-evident and characteristic of it in the past. Now Orthodox theology will have to present its view as an alternative and try to convince its dialogue partners, if it really intends to communicate with our postmodern world.

At this point, I would like to bring my reflections to an end by referring to the Areopagus speech of the Apostle Paul. Paul evidently had an absolute truth claim of his own. According to the narrative of Acts, when he spoke to the Athenians, he did not raise this claim of his in a clear way but offered them an alternative to their beliefs in their own religious language. The Athenians listened to him but were not persuaded by his speech. This was, however, just the beginning of a communication between Christians and Gentiles that lasted for centuries to come. Perhaps, the time is now ripe for Orthodox theology to be inspired by the example of Paul in this story. Using the language of today's biblical scholarship, Orthodox theology could possibly contribute to the opening of new paths in Jesus research. However, it should be prepared to leave aside its absolute truth claim in its rhetoric, so that it can enter into dialogue with modern biblical scholarship using contemporary exegetical tools and terminology. On the other hand, contemporary biblical research could perhaps also profit from the Orthodox perspective, as it is always in search of exegetical and hermeneutical alternatives. The Orthodox alternative of an access to Jesus through faith, liturgical participation, sacraments, prayer, and so on, which is based upon a centuries-long tradition but which at the same time will be expressed in modern theological language, can be interesting, perhaps even attractive, and nowadays in any case legitimate. The question of whether or not such an alternate exegetical approach can also prove convincing, will at present have to remain open.