

BIBLICAL STUDIES AND THE EASTERN AND
ORIENTAL ORTHODOX TRADITIONS

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It is a commonplace that the faith and liturgical practice of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox traditions are founded on the scriptural texts each claims to have received and preserved. It is therefore ironic that scholars in the wider field of biblical studies rarely find the Orthodox among their number; while conversely, laborers in the vineyard of Christ, including our own parish priests, rarely have any use for the insights of professional biblical scholars. With the launching of the new *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies (JOCABS)*, we hope to address the crisis of this widening chasm, motivated by the conviction that sound biblical studies not only has something to offer our traditions but remains our only hope for maintaining and preserving “that which we received.” To be sure, a critical approach to the Bible need not undermine faith at all; to the contrary, bold openness to the refining nature of that Word the Church preserves and proclaims, informs, unites, and reinvigorates faith, keeping her true to her Master.

The *JOCABS* editorial board itself reflects the bridging of this gap in that all are committed Orthodox Christian scholars of the Bible, both clergy and lay alike, whose collegial efforts represent a dynamic, international pan-Orthodox team that brings Eastern and Oriental Orthodox traditions together in collaborative engagement with the Word that unites us. Together with our readers and contributors, we hope to be accountable to that Word in our attempt to accomplish a number of tasks vital to the health of the Church and the World. This means critically examining and often avoiding many of the well-worn ruts that lead from the biblical texts in diverse and often competing trajectories, none of which having privilege.

Another of the journal’s tasks will involve the rekindling of Orthodox interests in biblical texts. Whether it is taking a fresh look at the creation imagery in the Psalms, appreciating the prophetic imperative of upholding justice and righteousness, or re-examining the real demands of the Gospel, the texts reinvigorate the reader and summon us back into authentic Christian existence. The idea is well known among members of the welcomed surge of Protestant converts to Orthodoxy; however the zeal of the convert, with all of the psychological distancing processes normally associated with conversion, too often leads to a rejection of things mistakenly assumed to be uniquely Protestant, including an intimate knowledge of, and appreciation for the Bible. Ironically, therefore, the fact that the Orthodox Church is the original context for biblical studies must be realized and affirmed.

As a third task, *JOCABS* seeks to address the almost knee-jerk aversion among many Orthodox theologians today toward the application of any critical methodology to the study of the Bible. To be sure, those of us who teach biblical studies in academic settings

and instructed in the use of these critical methodologies would be among the first to agree that the traditional historical-critical approach leads to a barren wasteland far beyond the outskirts of what most people would recognize as “the Bible.” These approaches offer students almost nothing toward understanding the power these texts possess, not only to have survived against all historical odds but in having emerged into history as the foundational narrative for the entire western world view and informing living traditions to this very day. The challenge for Orthodox biblical scholarship is not found in trying to avoid some imagined intellectual contagion from the world at large; but rather to labor creatively under the canopy of one’s faith to develop approaches that remain true to the Word while acknowledging the real origins and development of the biblical texts and their various interpretations. In this the gospel is fulfilled and the world transformed.

One of the major examples of this creative Orthodox scholarly enterprise emerging from this challenge is the extensive work of Fr. Paul Nadim Tarazi, Editor-in-Chief of *JOCABS*, whose more than 35 years of devotion to teaching Scripture at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, as well as at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, and the St. John of Damascus Institute in Balamand, Lebanon, has educated and inspired a number of Orthodox biblical scholars from around the world. His popular three-volume, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, was recently revised to reflect even keener insights into the nature of the Hebrew Bible and its translations, which present startling implications for Christians to carry out the demands of discipleship. These implications may be discovered in Fr. Tarazi’s new and ongoing *Orthodox Audio Bible Commentary* series issued by OCABS Press (visit www.ocabs.org) and the upcoming dynamic new Chrysostom Bible Commentary series.

Another example of what Orthodox biblical scholarship has to offer is a critical approach to the Hebrew Bible and its translations known as the “Prophetic Priestly Perspective from the Exile,” an ongoing approach originated and developed by Nicolae Roddy, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Creighton University and Senior Editor of *JOCABS*. Roddy’s approach, especially well suited for the undergraduate classroom, is founded on the conviction that following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the subsequent exile of members of its elite society, for a brief but decisive moment in history a relatively small group of royal, priestly, and prophetic types laid aside their deep-seated and long-term differences in order to seek a meaningful response to the disaster that had befallen them. Having come to the end of their national history, these disparate parties set about authoring, collecting, and editing various sorts of texts—cosmogonies and mythic legends, ancestral narratives, legal codes, court histories, prophetic utterances, poetry and songs, and so on—for the purpose of making sense of a most devastating situation. It is at this stage of assembly, roughly comprising the Book of Genesis through 2 Kings, along with several of the prophetic books, that one has a semblance of what may reasonably be called “Bible.” This idea in itself is not original; what is new is Roddy’s assertion that in the attempt to deal with ultimate questions about God and the world, the exiled collaborators of the Prophetic Priestly Perspective managed to produce a means for gaining insight into what it might mean *ultimately* to be human, in contrast to what it means *merely* to be human.

Out of the flux of inherently unresolved tensions produced by their varied experiences and perceptions of the Divine, the God of Scripture emerges. Case in point, the transcendent, cosmic Elohim in Genesis 1 stands in tension with the immanent, anthropomorphic Yahweh Elohim of the Garden of Eden story. The *perichoresis* of these two distinct and unresolved portraits reflects both the infinitude and providence of God experienced in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic worldview. The underlying assumption of this approach is that the monolithic and individual sources themselves, whose original states are lost to us anyway, cannot generate the energy that comes bursting forth from the tensions produced by their being brought together.

This brings us to yet another task that we hope *JOCABS* will automatically assume and that is to become a research forum for Orthodox scholars of the Bible and for scholars interested in the Orthodox hermeneutics and exegesis of the Bible. As in the cases of Professors Tarazi and Roddy, *JOCABS* can nurture critical methodologies of exploring and utilizing the various patristic trends to interpret the Bible in the East. Revisiting these trends in the contemporary light of critical-historical and post-critical historical approaches will help present-day Orthodox scholars forge new prospects for biblical exegesis that look beyond the *status quo* of the methods and assumptions initiated following the European Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation.

Scholars and students of the Scripture can utilize *JOCABS* as an online forum for bringing together the latest scholarly tools, recent findings in the field of archeology, and the data from the newly discovered manuscripts of the Bible, lectionaries and commentaries, to study the biblical text in the Orthodox understanding of the Bible as the Word of God and the instrument of God's self-revelation, written with the main intent of revealing God's saving power. The divine purpose of the biblical revelation, which is at the core of the individual author's intent of writing his portion of the Bible, is as important to any critical study of the biblical text as is the historical settings and literary tools that finalized.

Related to these recent Orthodox contributions to biblical studies, is the fifth task *JOCABS* seeks to address, namely the promotion of a far-reaching ecumenical collegiality that results from a shared appreciation for our scriptural common ground. Not only do the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox editors of *JOCABS* dine together at this table, but places are set for all who are willing to stand in the midst of the refiner's fire that convicts and melts away the ego-self that wrongly affirms that the God of Scripture privileges any single tradition: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jew, or Muslim alike. Rather than justifying one's position with the unsupportable affirmation that "God is on our side!" we prefer to stand with Abraham Lincoln in being more concerned about whether or not we are "on God's side." The former position sadly and tragically divides us; the latter unites. The *JOCABS* Editorial Board and staff are pleased to present you with our inaugural issue and hope you will find in it all the richness that biblical studies has to offer.

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