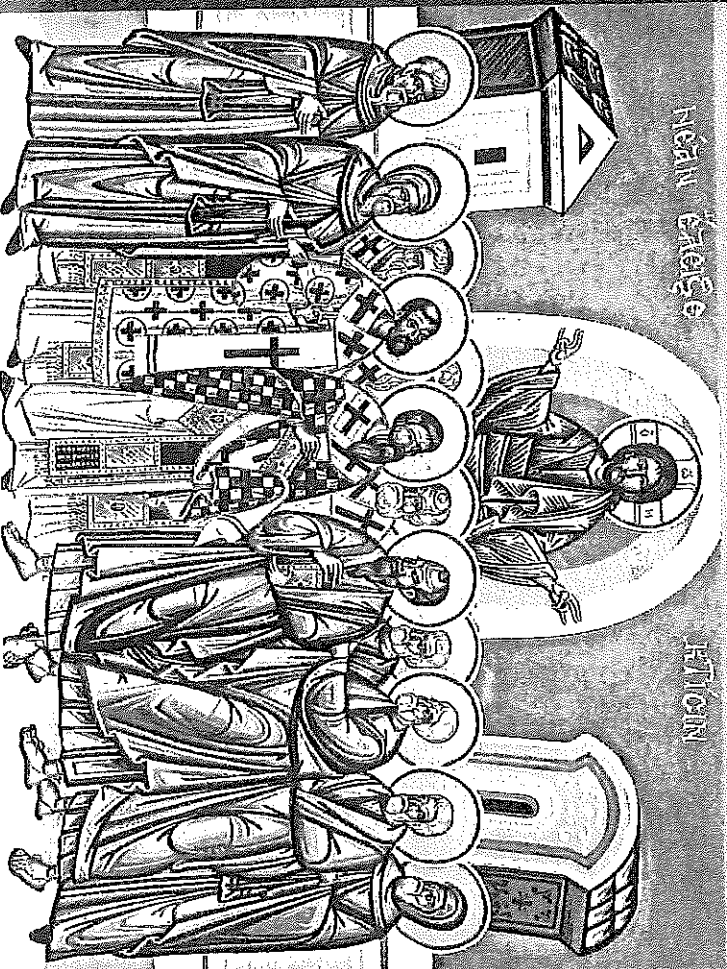


WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

THE PATRISTIC DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE



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EDITORS

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The Patristic Doctrine of Scripture

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Scripture as Divine Mystery: The Bible in
the *Philokalia*

Brock Bingham

The Bible is an entire universe, it is a mystical organism, and it is only partially that we attain to living in it. . . . The Bible is a heavenly constellation, shining above us eternally while we move on the sea of human existence. We gaze at the constellation, and it remains fixed, but it is also constantly changing its place in relation to us.

—Sergius Bulgakov¹

The Holy Scriptures are full of astonishing things.

—Peter of Damaskos²

1. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 20–21.

2. *Philokalia* 3:132. Quotations from and references to the *Philokalia* are from the English translation in *The Philokalia*, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, 4 vols. (London: Faber and Faber, 1979, 1982, 1986, 1999). The first number indicates the volume, and the second the page number.

The *Philokalia* is permeated with Scripture and is a trove of theological wisdom. This collection of Orthodox spirituality, consisting of works by thirty-six authors from the fourth to fifteenth centuries, was formed in the matrix of biblical meditation. Each of the works collated by Saints Nikodimos and Makarios, the editors of the collection published in 1782, reflects the nature of hesychast spirituality: experiencing union with God through prayer and stillness. All of the contributors, from Isaiah the Solitary to Gregory Palamas, offer practical teaching on the spiritual life rooted in Scripture, inspired by the Christian ascetic tradition, and teeming with characters and images from the Bible. For these theologians of the *Philokalia*, the Bible is indeed a divine mystery, an entire universe, a mystical organism, and a heavenly constellation. Scripture is, for these spiritual masters, an expansive cosmos to contemplate, a theological world to inhabit, and a network of theological ideas that encompass and guide us. In the following pages, my goal is to explore aspects of the *Philokalia*'s teaching on the Bible. Along with the other essays in this volume that consider the theological interpretation of Scripture, we will find that the *Philokalia* makes a significant contribution to the conversation.

Central to the *Philokalia*'s Vision

One of the most important things to recognize is the centrality of Scripture to the *Philokalia*'s vision of the spiritual life. Douglas Burton-Christie is correct in asserting that on nearly every page of the *Philokalia*, one encounters an allusion to Scripture, a teaching about its efficacy, or a reflection on the significance of the incarnation of the Word. "In this sense," he argues, "the *Philokalia* can be said to be Logo-centric."³ Indeed, the *Philokalia* is shot through with Scripture, ways of interpreting it, and most importantly, guidance on how to live it. Something else recognized in the *Philokalia*'s teaching on Scripture, as reflected in Burton-Christie's quote, is that it is part of the broader

constellation of theological teaching on Christology and anthropology, as well as cosmology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.⁴

A well-known philokalic text from Maximos the Confessor illustrates this focus on the Word and an understanding of Scripture that is linked to an extensive theological vision of reality: "The mystery of the incarnation of the Logos is the key to all the arcane symbolism and typology in the Scriptures, and in addition gives us knowledge of created things, both visible and intelligible. [The one] who apprehends the mystery of the cross and the burial apprehends the inward essences of created things; while [the one] who is initiated into the inexpressible power of the resurrection apprehends the purpose for which God first established everything" (*Phil.* 2:127). What Maximos elucidates here is a perspective shared by many in the *Philokalia*.⁵ The mystery of the incarnation of the Logos discloses the deepest meaning of the Scriptures. These three christological motifs—incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection—provide the key that unlocks the secrets of Scripture, and the *logoi* and *telos* of creation. The experiential knowledge of these mysteries opens up the world of Scripture and the world of God's creatures.⁶

Because Scripture is central to the philokalic vision of the spiritual life, Christians are urged to continually meditate on it. This call to meditate on Scripture day and night as a means to continual prayer, as Nikodimos and others suggest, is for *all* Christians, not just monks and nuns.⁷ As Symeon the New Theologian teaches, the experience of

³ See Paul M. Blowers, "The Analogy of Scripture and Cosmos in Maximos the Confessor," *SPQR* 27 (1993): 145–49.

⁴ Ware argues that the spirit of the *Philokalia* is Maximian and Evagrian, including this perspective on Scripture and its connection to the cosmos. See his article "The *Philokalia*: A Book for All Christians," *Sourzoh* 100 (2005): 14.

⁵ Maximos speaks of contemplating the Scriptures and the natural world. The glory of God can be seen and experienced in both (*Phil.* 2:131, 147). See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximos the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 314.

⁶ *Philokalia* 1xxvii. The introduction by Nikodimos, in which he makes this point, is not included in the English translation by Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware. For Nikodimos, as Ware explains, Paul's injunction to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) is "addressed not merely to hermits in caves and on mountain-tops but to married Christians with responsibilities for a family, to farmers, merchants, and lawyers, even to kings and courtiers living in palaces." Unceasing prayer of the heart is a universal vocation. The best is for everyone." Kallistos Ware, "St. Nikodimos and the *Philokalia*," in Bingham and Nassif, *The Philokalia: A Classic Text*, 12.

⁷ Douglas Burton-Christie, "The Luminous Word: Scripture in the *Philokalia*," in *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality*, ed. Brock Bingham and Bradley Nassif (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 73.

the energy of the Holy Spirit is a gift to be received by anyone, even someone "living in the middle of the city." The best is for all (*Phil.* 4:16-20).

John Cassian, the disciple of Evagrius and the only Latin father included in the *Philokalia*, also demonstrates the primacy of Scripture in the spiritual life. In his immensely practical teaching on the pursuit of God, Cassian reiterates the importance of meditation on the Scriptures. He instructs readers to cooperate with the grace and help of God, who purifies the heart, heals the soul, and fashions the body into a temple of the Holy Spirit. In this arduous struggle, studying and meditating upon the Scriptures is essential, along with prayer, fasting, moderation in all things, and living with godly people (*Phil.* 1:75-88). Further, meditation on the Scriptures, as Peter of Damaskos explains, keeps Christians on the right spiritual trajectory, living in accordance with God's intention, as it is attested by the words of Scripture (*Phil.* 3:265).

Readers of the *Philokalia*, therefore, discern the foundational role that Scripture plays in the quest for God, purification of the heart, and growth in love for God and neighbor. Commenting on "the spiritual Way" of the Orthodox faith, drawing from many philokalic authors, Kallistos Ware claims that along with being ecclesial and sacramental, "it is also *evangelical*."⁸ "At each step along the path," he adds, "we turn for guidance to the voice of God speaking to us through the Bible."⁹ The purpose of studying the Scriptures, Ware says, is to ignite our hearts in prayer, to fuel our love for God, and to receive guidance in our personal life. Studying the words of Scripture "should give place to an immediate dialogue with the living Word himself." Whenever you read the Gospel . . . Christ himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking with him."¹⁰ In some sense, we might think of the *Philokalia* itself as a record of conversations between its authors and Christ as he speaks from the pages of Scripture. To read

the *Philokalia* is to enter into this living conversation, to be drawn into a transformative experience of the Word.

Mystical Character

Along with the centrality of Scripture in the *Philokalia* and its logocentric perspective, the philokalic theologians underscore the mystical character of the Bible. For example, Mark the Ascetic says, "When you read Holy Scripture, perceive its hidden meanings. For whatever was written in past times was written for our instruction" (*Rom.* 15:4)¹¹ (*Phil.* 1:112). The notion of hidden meanings within Scripture, and of biblical texts from the past reverberating with deeper meaning for future readers, is a common theme in the *Philokalia* and in Scripture itself.¹² Neilos the Ascetic, while interpreting an Old Testament passage on the sons of King Saul to uncover its hidden meaning, says, "This story in Scripture should not be taken literally . . . [for] improbable details are often included in a story because of the deeper truth they signify" (*Phil.* 1:210). It is not that the literal meaning is unimportant in any way, but that beneath or beyond the face value of the text lies deeper spiritual wisdom. For the philokalic authors, each person, place, or event may symbolize or point to some profound spiritual truth that leads to richer intimacy with God.

Maximos speaks of this in the story of Jacob's well, an image that illustrates the deeper, mystical character of Scripture.¹³ The depth of the well is the spiritual meaning of the text, which must be attained through great effort; the water is the spiritual knowledge hidden in Scripture. One way of getting to the water is with the bucket, that is, learning acquired through the written text of the word. Another way is granted by the Logos: access to the ever-flowing waters of wisdom that overflow from the fountain of grace. Furthermore, in the tradition of Origen,¹⁴ Maximos says that Scripture is made up of flesh and spirit,

8. Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995).

109.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 111.

11. Examples are found in 1 Cor. 5:6-8; 28-10; 10:1-11; Gal. 4:21-31.

12. Maximos is utilizing imagery from John 4:5-15.

13. On the hermeneutics of Origen, see Ronald Heine, "Reading the Bible with Origen," in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity*, ed. and trans. Paul M. Blowers (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 131-48.

and should be understood accordingly: "All sacred Scripture can be divided into flesh and spirit as if it were a spiritual [person]. For the literal sense of Scripture is flesh and its inner meaning is soul or spirit" (Phil. 2:134). The aim of the Christian interpreter, therefore, is to probe beneath the outer layers into the spiritual heart of the text, where one encounters the Spirit of Christ.¹⁴

Maximos also explains that, in a mystical manner, the Logos "becomes flesh" in the texts of Scripture. Understanding that not everyone is prepared to contemplate the true simplicity of the "naked Logos," the Logos is presented clothed in parables, symbols, stories, and dark sayings. The intellect (*voûs*), the organ of contemplation or eye of the heart, is enabled to peer into the "inner meaning" of Scripture and there encounters the Logos who has become incarnate in these sayings. Additionally, those who only see the Logos "as embodied multifariously in symbols in the letter" of Scripture have not "achieved spiritual insight into . . . the incorporeal, simple, single and unique Son, according to the saying, 'He who has seen Me has seen the Father . . . and I am in the Father and the Father in Me' (John 14:9-10)" (Phil. 2:155). The incarnation, again, is the hermeneutical lens through which Scripture is read and understood. For Maximos and the other philokalic writers, Scripture is a mystical world in which the revelation of the incarnation and Trinity unlocks its deepest meanings.

With grace and practice, Maximos suggests, believers are equipped to penetrate "the veils of the sayings which cover the Logos," in order to contemplate "the pure Logos, as he exists in Himself, clearly showing us the Father in Himself" (Phil. 2:155). Thus, the believer "who seeks God with true devotion should not be dominated by the literal text, lest he unwittingly receives not God but things appertaining to God; that is, lest he feel a dangerous affection for the words of Scripture instead of for the Logos" (ibid.). And with a bit of wit, Maximos says the Logos will elude those who think they have "grasped the incorporeal Logos by means of His outer garments, like the Egyptian woman who

seized hold of Joseph's garments instead of Joseph himself (cf. Gen. 39:7-13)" (ibid.). Readers of Scripture are to focus ultimately on the Logos hidden in the text; otherwise, they will find that the Logos has slipped away.

Many other philokalic texts speak to the mystical character of Scripture.¹⁵ The passages we considered exemplify the *Philokalia's* multifaceted teaching on reading Scripture for its deeper spiritual meaning. It is also interesting to notice how these views of Scripture are grounded in Christology, Trinitarian theology, and theological anthropology. As other essays in this volume are exploring, patristic understandings of Scripture are intrinsically linked to various streams of theological reflection. In the philokalic texts discussed here, we saw the importance of a christocentric (or Logocentric) perspective on Scripture. The reality of the incarnation is the grid through which Scripture is read. The Logos is enfleshed and encountered in a human body, and the Logos is enfleshed in the words of Scripture, drawing believers into a mystical encounter with the Second Person of the Trinity. This brings us to another dimension of the *Philokalia's* teaching on Scripture as divine mystery.

Intention: Experience, Theosis, Healing

In addition to the centrality and mystical character of the Bible, the *Philokalia* underscores the intent of Scripture: to mediate a transformative experience with the Holy Trinity. As we saw in Maximos, reading Scripture is meant to bring one into the presence of Christ. The written word, Maximos says, is intended to draw the believer into an encounter with the living Word. To feel affection for the words of Scripture instead of for the Logos to whom they point is dangerous, argues Maximos. These perennial words of wisdom are strikingly relevant for modern students of the Bible. Karl Barth shared the same idea when he confronted his fellow Protestant theologians for their "biblicism" and "bibliolatry." Barth said that many Protestants

14. See George C. Berthold, "Levels of Scriptural Meaning in Maximos the Confessor," *SPR* 27 (1993): 129-44.

15. For example, Phil. 1:112; 2:94; 3:266; 4:165; 251. Citing John Chrysostom, Peter of Damaskos encourages readers to search the Scriptures like gold miners who seek out the finest veins (3:266).

failed to discern the difference between the *Logos* and the *logos*, or the Word as the revelation of God and the Bible as the record of that revelation. This failure to distinguish between the two elevated the Bible onto the same plane as God, creating a "Fourth Person" of the Trinity. Barth's view of the Bible, akin to that of Maximus on this point, was that the living Word of God breaks into the lives of human beings as they read or listen to the preaching of the written word. Hearing the words of Scripture becomes an event, a moment in which one encounters the transformative grace of God in the person of Jesus, who is present through the Holy Spirit. The aim of Scripture is to reveal the glory of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. To simply read, study, or be enamored with the biblical text is to miss the point. It is like obsessing over a biography when the person about whom it is written is standing outside the door, ready to come in and have a conversation. Or as Maximus says, it is like focusing and hanging on to the clothing of Christ while he slips away.¹⁶

According to the *Makarion Homilies* in the third volume of the *Philokalia*, the events narrated in Scripture are "realities encountered inwardly by each soul" (*Phil.* 3:300). Through reading the text, praying, believing and loving the Lord, and fighting against evil, Christians experience the liberating power of Scripture, and their intellect (*voûs*) communes with God. In the same volume, Peter of Damaskos, drawing from John Chrysostom and John of Damaskos, explains that when Christians read Scripture, they are led into an encounter with Christ. As Christ met with Nicodemus (see John 3), he revealed to Nicodemus the meaning of his words, bringing him to salvation. Thus, the teachings of Jesus, and all the words of Scripture, are explained by the *Logos* as one listens to his living voice and encounters his transfiguring presence (*Phil.* 3:190). The task of spiritual interpretation is not simply a matter of understanding the meaning of the text. Reading and interpreting the Bible are linked to salvation. To read the Bible is to

enter into the salvation history of which it speaks, to open oneself to the divinizing, healing presence of God.

Peter of Damaskos asserts that human beings are created for salvation. Salvation is a free gift of grace, Peter says, acquired through faith, repentance, and cooperation with the Spirit, who energizes our efforts to obey God. Spirit-empowered obedience to God is realized as one reads and keeps the commands of Scripture, actions that engender longing for God, humility, and love for God and neighbor. In numerous texts, Peter explains how the spiritual interpretation of Scripture is intrinsically linked to the salvation of human beings. In one passage where Peter comments on how secular learning can be of great help when it acts as the vehicle for the higher wisdom of the Spirit, he reinforces that reading Scripture is intended to bring us into an experience of God, divine grace, and the saving power of God in Christ (*Phil.* 3:83–86, 266–69).¹⁷

Other philokalic texts speak of the saving intent of Scripture in terms of *θεωσις* (deification, or divinization). Ware argues that deification is a unifying motif in the *Philokalia*. Rooted in biblical texts such as 2 Pet. 1:4 and Matthew 17,¹⁸ which speak of participating in or partaking of the divine nature and the transfiguration of Christ, deification is the transformation of human beings through union with God.¹⁹ Ware explains that the "general aim and purpose of the spiritual life, as presented in the *Philokalia*, is plainly affirmed in the opening sentence of the introduction by Nikodimos."²⁰ Nikodimos writes, "God, the blessed nature, perfection that is more than perfect, the creative

¹⁷ The *Philokalia* itself is a remarkable example of secular learning in the service of spiritual wisdom. Many of the philokalic authors were educated in leading schools. In no way does the *Philokalia* disprage education or learning. The key is that this learning serves the higher purpose of the life of prayer and union with God.

¹⁸ Second Peter 1:4 speaks of Christians participating in or partaking of the divine nature; Matthew 17 describes the transfiguration of Jesus, the paradigm for Christians who are transformed by the Spirit into the likeness of Christ. See the excellent study on *θεωσις* by Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ See *Phil.* 2:173, where Maximus writes, "God made us so that we might become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4) and shares of His eternity, and so that we might become like Him (cf. 1 John 3:2) through deification by grace. It is through deification that all things are reconstituted and achieve their permanence; and it is for its sake that what is not is brought into being and given existence."

²⁰ Ware, "St. Nikodimos," 31.

¹⁶ There are numerous places in *Church Dogmatics* where Barth distinguishes between Jesus Christ as the Word of God and Scripture as the witness of the prophets and apostles to this Word. See the section on the Word of God in its threefold form in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 88–120.

principle of all that is good and beautiful, himself transcending all goodness and all beauty, in his supremely divine plan preordained from all eternity the deification of humankind."²¹ Ware contends that deification is our supreme goal as human persons. "We are not called to merely obey and imitate God in a moralistic fashion, but it is our vocation to participate by grace directly and organically in the divine life and glory, becoming one with the Holy Trinity in a transforming interchange of love."²² This, Ware says, is the overall message of the *Philokalia*, and the "ideal of *theosis* is the most decisive of all the connecting threads that bind the *Philokalia* in unity."²³

Theodoros the Ascetic speaks to this when he explains that everything may be understood in terms of its purpose. The purpose of human life, Theodoros says, is to experience *θεωσις*. The "purpose of our life is blessedness or, what is the same thing, the kingdom of heaven or of God. This is not only to behold the Trinity, supreme in kingship, but also to receive an influx of the divine and, as it were, to suffer deification" (*Phil.* 2:43). Maximos asserts that failure to realize this purpose, "to attain by grace the deification" for which we are created, is the ultimate disaster of humankind (*Phil.* 2:297).

How is this doctrine of *θεωσις*, which is the overarching theme that unifies the *Philokalia*, linked to a philokalic theology of Scripture? Besides the point that it is a doctrine rooted in Scripture, two additional comments can be made. One is that the spiritual contemplation of Scripture is coupled with deification. Maximos says that the spiritual contemplation of Scripture reveals the law of grace that confers deification on those who are obedient to it (*Phil.* 2:267). A second and particularly important reason is that deification is joined to the Jesus Prayer or the invocation of the Holy Name and to the testimony of Scripture. Hesychios the Priest states that communing with God through the Jesus Prayer, inner watchfulness, the use of

sacred texts, biblical meditation, love, and self-control transforms the soul. Persistence in the Jesus Prayer, a prayer based on petitions found in the Gospels (Luke 18:10-14, 38), has transfiguring power.²⁴ Invoking the name of Jesus purifies the heart, unifies the fragmented self, and beautifies the inner shrine of the soul, lighting it with divine fire and a blazing lamp (*Phil.* 1:173). The Jesus Prayer also draws believers deeper into the "Mysteries of Christ." Hesychios, like others in the *Philokalia*, speaks of practicing the Jesus Prayer in the context of the sacramental life of the church (*Phil.* 1:179).²⁵

The *Philokalia*, therefore, is clear on the intention of Scripture. Reading, meditating on, and spiritually contemplating Scripture brings one into the very presence of God. The written words of Scripture are intended to lead us into an encounter with the living Word of God. The union of doctrine and experience is obvious here. As Vladimir Lossky says in his classic study on mystical theology that includes many philokalic writers, "Spirituality and dogma, mysticism and theology, are inseparably linked."²⁶ Rich theological concepts and practices found in the *Philokalia*, such as deification and the Jesus Prayer, illustrate the high value placed on Scripture by these theologians. With the aim of Scripture in mind, we turn to consider the next aspect of the *Philokalia*'s teaching on Scripture.

Understood according to Spiritual State

Exploring a theology of Scripture in the *Philokalia* reveals its centrality in the spiritual life, its mystical character, its transformative purpose, and how it is understood based on the spiritual state of the reader. We have already seen the Logocentric nature of the *Philokalia*, that the incarnation of the Word is the key that unlocks the meaning of

²¹ See Mary B. Cunningham, "The Place of the Jesus Prayer in the *Philokalia*," in Birgmann and Nassif, *The Philokalia: A Classic Text*, 195-202; and Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: SILG, 2007).

²² On the ecclesial dimension of the *Philokalia*, see Krastu Baner, "The Ecclesiology of the *Philokalia*," in Birgmann and Nassif, *The Philokalia: A Classic Text*, 163-74.

²³ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 34; cf. Ware's comments, "Just as there is no separation in the *Philokalia* between inner prayer and the sacraments, so there is no disjunction between spirituality and doctrine." Ware, "St. Nikodimos," 28.

21. Quoted in *ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.* Ware also clarifies that this "divinizing participation is understood within the *Philokalia* primarily in terms of the essence/energies distinction: union with God signifies union with the divine energies, not the divine essence." *Ibid.*, 31-32.

Scripture and the natural world. What this means, among other things, is that readers of Scripture place themselves in a relationship to that Word as each reader seeks to understand and apply the Bible to his or her life. According to the philokalic theologians, this relationship requires certain things of the Christian searching Scripture. One of them is a dependence on the Holy Spirit to unveil the meaning of the text, bring the believer into contact with Christ, and provide guidance and healing through the Scriptures.

Does this mean that someone who is not a Christian is unable to read, understand, or glean something from the Bible? Of course not. Neither the *Philokalia* nor the broader Orthodox tradition teaches this. Neither does the Western Christian tradition, for that matter. As Augustine recounts in his *Confessions*, during a reflective (and rather dire) moment, while strolling through a garden, he heard a voice telling him “Tolle, lege” (“Take up and read”). By his account, he was not in a righteous spiritual state at the time, yet the light of the Word flashed in his heart and left him changed forever.²⁷ Likewise, all of us, no matter what spiritual condition we are in, are invited to “take up and read” the Scriptures. There is no fence raised around Scripture that prohibits certain kinds of people from reading it. All are invited to come and drink from the life-giving streams of Scripture, even those who may not realize that they are thirsty.

However, there is a theological perspective on the Bible that is developed by the authors in the *Philokalia*. The Scriptures, explains Nikitas Stithatos, mean different things for different readers, depending on their spiritual state. Describing what the Scriptures are for different readers, Nikitas suggests a threefold schema. First, for those who have recently embraced the life of holiness, the Scriptures are bread from God’s table (Ps. 104:15), strengthening them in spiritual warfare and their struggle for virtue, so they can experience God preparing a table in the presence of their enemies (Ps. 23:5). For the second type of reader, those who have the attained the middle state,

the Scriptures are wine from God’s chalice, gladdening their hearts (Ps. 104:15), transforming them through their deeper spiritual meaning, so that their intellect is raised above the letter and led into the depths of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6; 1 Cor. 2:10). Finally, for the more spiritually mature, those approaching perfection, the Scriptures are the oil of the Holy Spirit, anointing the soul, making it humble and gentle through divine illumination, raising it above the material realm of the body, glorifying it, so that the reader may experience the anointing of the head with oil, and divine mercy following him or her always (Ps. 23:5-6; Phil. 4:133-34).²⁸

In addition to his threefold schema, Nikitas also speaks in terms of two types of readers of Scripture. The first are the psychics (from the Greek word ψυχή, meaning “soul”), those dominated by self-love and the passions, who are not interested in obedience to the commands of Scripture. They are called “psychics” because they are void of the Spirit, their intellects are impervious to the divine, and they are without faith and love. Because their intellects are clouded and without the guidance of the Spirit, they are incapable of plumbing the depths of the Spirit, and there is no light in them to open their intellect to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). Nikitas finds this view in Paul, who says that the psychic person cannot grasp spiritual things (1 Cor. 2:14). The second type of person is one who cleaves to the Spirit (Gal. 5:25), living a life fully committed to God’s will and the spiritual life. This person, whose intellect is purified by the Spirit, who lives in the midst of the church of God,²⁹ is granted insight into the hidden wisdom of God within creation and Scripture (Phil. 4:1:08-9).

Therefore, the theologians of the *Philokalia* suggest that Scripture is differently understood according to the reader’s spiritual state. This does not mean, as we have seen, that the person outside the Christian faith or the spiritually immature cannot glean something from

²⁷Maximos, along with other philokalic authors, speaks of various types of people who read Scripture and how the meaning of the text is linked to their spiritual state. *Phil.* 2:134-35.

²⁸As mentioned in footnote 25, it is important to recognize the ecclesial dimension of the *Philokalia*. Some readers overlook this aspect or misread the *Philokalia* as some kind of spiritual self-help guide for individual and private use only. It does, in fact, reflect an implicit and explicit ecclesiology.

27. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12. A particularly fine translation is Maria Boulding, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, pt. 1, vol. 1 (Hyde Park: New City, 2001).

Scripture. It does mean that the spiritually mature—those who have a rich history of walking in the Spirit, controlling the passions, cultivating virtue, and experiencing the illumination of their intellect—are more likely to discern the deeper meanings of Scripture. The reader or interpreter of Scripture brings herself or himself to the text, and there is a correlation between the purity and clarity of each person's intellect (*voûs*) and the person's understanding of the multilayered meanings of the text. This brings us to the next facet of the *Philokalia's* teaching on the Bible.

Connection between Interpretation and Praxis

Closely related to what we have considered, the *Philokalia* emphasizes the connection between interpretation and praxis. To understand the teachings of Scripture, one must put them into practice. Mark the Monk speaks about this many times. He urges readers to call upon God to open the eyes of their heart, so that they may see the value of prayer and spiritual reading of Scripture, when it is *understood and applied*. There is a direct correlation between the understanding and application of Scripture. Mark explains that, if we want to understand Scripture, we should apply its teachings to ourselves, not to someone else. In one pithy saying, Mark asserts, "Understand the words of Holy Scripture by putting them into practice, and do not fill yourself with conceit by expatiating on theoretical ideas" (*Phil.* 1:110, 116). Scripture is understood, and spiritual maturity attained, through the sustained practice of Scripture. When it comes to reading and interpreting Scripture, theory without praxis is insufficient.³⁰

In a text that resonates with Mark, Hesychios the Priest explains that there is a relationship between understanding and doing Scripture.

30. As Balthasar notes, Maximus suggests that theology without praxis is the theology of demons: *Ἐκείνων θεολογία . . . ἕξτα τριτάτης γυῖσος*, *Epistle 20* (PG 91:601C), as quoted in *Coptic Liturgy*, 333n198. Theology, in the philokalic sense, denotes more than simply learning about God through academic study; "it signifies active and conscious participation in or perception of the realities of the divine world—in other words, the realization of spiritual knowledge. . . . To be a theologian in the full sense, therefore, presupposes the attainment of the state of stillness. . . and dispassion . . . itself the concomitant of pure and undistracted prayer, and so requires gifts bestowed on but extremely few persons." *Phil.* 2:389.

The one "who does not know the truth cannot have faith; for by nature knowledge precedes faith. What is said in Scripture is said not solely for us to understand, but also for us to act upon" (*Phil.* 1:172).³¹ As faith and knowledge are related in a reciprocal manner, so are understanding and doing Scripture. Knowledge fuels faith; acting upon the teachings of Scripture feeds our understanding of it.

Yet, as the philokalic authors teach, the relationship between understanding and practicing Scripture entails hard work. The *Philokalia* is clear on this point. Hermeneutics involves praxis, and it is a struggle. As Burton-Christie says, according to the *Philokalia*, to read and interpret Scripture involves disciplined spiritual practice, opening oneself to the Word, and engaging in a lifelong process of transformation. Reading and interpreting Scripture is an intense existential struggle, an arduous task that includes performing the text and living the gospel, particularly a life of love for God and neighbor.³² The interplay between reading, interpreting, and practicing Scripture is, for the authors of the *Philokalia*, a primary means to spiritual transformation, to experiencing the deifying energies of God's grace.

Concluding Remarks

The *Philokalia* is rooted in and saturated with Scripture. Scripture is central to the *Philokalia's* vision of the spiritual life. It is a Logocentric collection, rich in theological ideas about the Bible. Its writings are born out of persistent meditation on the revelation of the Word in Scripture. In the current conversation about the theological interpretation of Scripture, the voice of the *Philokalia* makes important contributions. This essay has considered only a few. Along with the centrality of Scripture in the *Philokalia*, we reflected on other aspects of its theological teaching on the Bible. The philokalic authors regularly

31. It is interesting to note how Hesychios views the relationship between understanding and faith, particularly in comparison to the way Anselm of Canterbury articulates it: "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*).

32. Burton-Christie, "The Luminous Word," 73, 83-84; cf. the illuminating chapter "Words and Praxis," in Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 134-75.

speak of its mystical character. Readers are urged to probe the ever-deepening layers of scriptural meaning. The goal of this search is not the accumulation of exegetical or intellectual knowledge, but the direct experience of God. Reading the Bible is a means to this end, rather than an end in itself. As one encounters the Holy Trinity in and through Scripture, one is deified, healed, and transformed into the image of God in Christ. Approaching the Word in Scripture, according to the *Philokalia*, entails a certain frame of mind and heart, a spiritual disposition, a life shaped by the grace and discipline of the Holy Spirit. Scripture, therefore, is understood according to the reader's spiritual state.

Related to this, the *Philokalia* suggests that there is an intrinsic connection between biblical interpretation and praxis. To understand the teachings of Scripture, the reader must put them into practice. And this seems to be one of the more significant messages about the theological interpretation of Scripture conveyed by the *Philokalia*. Readers of Scripture, whether in the church or in the academy, begin to understand it more clearly as they enter into its universe of meaning, search out its many mysteries, and navigate their lives according to its spiritual wisdom.

PART II

Modern Approaches Inspired by the Fathers