

Claudia Rapp & Andreas Külzer (eds.), *The Bible in Byzantium. Appropriation, Adaptation, Interpretation, Reading Scripture in Judaism and Christianity* 25, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2019, 160 p.

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The Biblical text was and is unmistakably the safest and most convenient ground for ecumenical dialogue. It is not by accident that biblical academic societies are most varied in terms of confessions. However, traditional Orthodox churches are still very poorly represented in these academic societies. I underline here the *academic* profile of these societies because a certain degree of scientific objectivity is – besides the biblical text itself – the indispensable ingredient for making inter-confessional or inter-religious dialogue possible. The difficulty of traditional Orthodox countries consists of a complicated historical context which has marked the last half of the past millennium. Today, however, it seems that more than any external condition, the need for introspection, a critical and a scientific approach to our own Eastern tradition is required. This seems to still be a very difficult step to make especially when we think of those living in the cultural and religious milieu marked by the legacy of the Byzantine Empire.

As has happened in Western Europe with the editing and translation into modern languages of biblical or patristic texts, we are currently witnessing a profiling of Byzantine studies towards a field as novel as it is necessary: the reception of biblical texts in the unprecedented spectrum of the Byzantine socio-cultural context. This book confesses from the very first lines how stunning its task would be when faced with the richness and diversity of the material to be researched:

The wide range of source materials that inform the contributions to this volume – from manuscript and military handbooks to lead seals and pilgrim guides – shows both the potential and the limitations of studying ‘the Bible in Byzantium’. To offer a full and exhaustive treatment of the topic is an ambition that defies realization. As a thoroughly Christianized society, the Bible had sunk deep into the cultural DNA of Byzantium. (p. 10)

In the introduction written by Claudia Rapp we learn about recent projects preceding this volume, which offer similar and equally venturesome perspectives (*Old Testament in Byzantium, New Testament in Byzantium, ParaTextBib*). We also hear about the working sessions of international con-

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ferences that underlie this volume. But beyond this useful information, we realize a very valuable thing: publishers and authors of this volume manage to move from a remote, historical, philological or statistical approach towards a holistic and much more appropriate one, that would also be more acceptable for the Eastern world: “the current volume contributes to these explorations, with a firm focus on the *Byzantine experience of the Bible*.” (p. 8) The novelty of this approach lies above all in recognizing that the Byzantine Liturgy is one of the most consistent levels of this experience of the Bible in the life of believers during the time of the Christian Empire. Claudia Rapp states that:

Most of the men, women and children in Byzantium would have encountered the Holy Scriptures predominantly in the context of the divine liturgy. They would have seen the preciously decorated book covers as the codex was carried from behind the iconostasis into the congregational space for the liturgical reading, they would have heard the priest recite passages from the Gospels according to the calendar of readings, and all the while, they may have noted in the church around them depictions on icons or frescoes of selected words and phrases from the Bible associated with figural or scenic representations. (p. 8)

This awareness of the importance of the liturgy for understanding the Bible in Byzantium produces considerable consequences first of all on the perception of the biblical text itself. We know that in Western Europe it was used at universities and translated for churches from the critical edition. This process of critical editing begins in the West shortly after the fall of Byzantium in 1453. That is why the first essay in our volume properly addresses this issue of the biblical text in the Byzantine tradition.

Karl Klimmeck offers in his paper (*Auf der Suche nach dem Byzantinischen Bibeltext*) the Byzantine view of the biblical text, stating that there is simply no official biblical text for the Orthodox Church until today. The text of the Orthodox Bible is the text of tradition, more precisely, the text present in the liturgical codices used over time, the so called “practiced” text, or *Mehrheitstext* in the scientific language. Klimmeck explains to the reader of this volume that the inspired text also calls for an inspired reader (p. 12), and that the proper place of biblical reading (“der eigentliche Ort der Schriftauslesung” p. 13) is the liturgy, the gathering of the faithful. The one who reads biblical pericope is the priest in the case of the Gospel, or the lecturer/*anagnostos* in other cases. The blessing of reading biblical texts within the liturgical framework is the foundation of any ordination in the Byzantine clerical system.

Besides the descriptive but welcome presentation of the Orthodox theology about the place of the Bible in the Liturgy and the general but well-structured information on biblical lectionaries and the state of research in this field, Karl Klimmeck's essay remains essentially to announce a commendable and extremely necessary project, the translation into German of the Orthodox/Byzantine text version, so not the one from the critically edited text, but from the majority text, the above mentioned "lived" text in the liturgical framework (p. 20). The project is called *Byzantinischer Text Deutsch* and is being undertaken by the *Schweizerische Bibelgesellschaft*. Of course, for the Orthodox in the German-speaking world, this is good news and a long-awaited project. But, in my opinion, the author's claim that also the Old Testament must be read in Christological terms (p. 12) somehow exceeds the intention of the present volume, going massively into the field of confessionalism.

It is clear that the translation project described here by Karl Klimmeck is a necessary one. The author of the article seems to be fascinated by the Byzantine tradition of biblical texts and the way they were "lived" within the Byzantine liturgy. But in my opinion precisely this perspective is, unfortunately, more and more absent from Orthodox communities in the Eastern countries. Believers living today in a country under the cultural influence of the former Byzantine Empire need a profound initiation into their own liturgical rite. In addition, the perspective offered here by Klimmeck and by those who show a fascination for the Byzantine ritual and culture within the church must also, in my opinion, take into account or simply recognize the critical voices regarding the Bible during the Byzantine period.

But the merit of the volume is precisely that of presenting articles that complement one another. That is why I believe that the perspective of the first author should be associated with the perspective offered by Meredith L. D. Riedel on the way in which biblical texts were perceived, appropriated, and ultimately instrumentalised by a Byzantine Emperor Leo VI (*Biblical Echoes in Taktika of Leo VII*, p. 25-38). This article is very valuable for accessing a universe the researchers have not yet examined enough. It speaks about the fluidity of the Biblical texts in Byzantium and especially about the impact of biblical texts, especially if the impact is mediated by a personality such as that of the Byzantine Emperor himself. M. Riedel discusses a "distinctive leonine way of using and perhaps abusing scripture." (p. 24) Thus, the famous Byzantine "symphony" between political and ecclesiastical power proves in this case to be a not very happy one. The passage below encompasses, in essence, the value of M. Riedel's article:

...it is true that soldiers will follow a leader whom they hold in high regard with more enthusiasm than one whom they abhor, but what strikes an odd note here is Leo's bloodless application of Scripture not for the sake of faith or love for God, but for the sake of a political ambition: the winning of battles. In effect, Leo encourages the general to become like Christ to his soldiers, to become someone for whom they are willing to die because they love him. However, the scriptural context is very nearly the opposite: it is about Christ announcing his willingness to die for his followers. Leo's exegesis inverts the biblical context for the purpose of his own political agenda. (p. 28)

This demonstration of the way an emperor with solomonic claims instrumentalised the biblical text is extremely valuable for us today. Here, it must be noted that the same subject of the exploitation of biblical texts in the hands of political leaders is also the subject of Yannis Stouraitis's paper (*Using the Bible to Justify Imperial Warfare in High-Medieval Byzantium*, p. 89-106). But beyond the scientific profile, the necessity and pragmatism of such studies, the authors of these two studies let us read between the lines about the extent to which biblical text itself was a norm in those times, and the ends that could be reached through the dangerous conjunction between religion and power in Byzantium. Certainly this information should be relevant also to the current approach to the relationship between political power and the church in the cultural space marked by the millennial empire. Our volume, however, does not diminish this polarization of religion and politics in Byzantium. Other studies the diversity of the media through which biblical texts were transmitted and read, but also by the way they were implicitly perceived and interpreted. Thus, Ernst Gamillscheg initiates us into the world of Bible reading in Byzantium with the short example (p. 39-42) of two Codices of the sixth century, which also include patristic comments in the form of *catenae* (*Cod. Vind. Theol. Gr. 11 – Nikatas-Bibel and Codex Zachyntus, Cambridge Univ. Library*).

If this article is about passing on the text itself by copying it and adding comments, Alexandra-Kyriaki Wassilou-Seibt addresses the subject of receiving biblical texts through the images and inscriptions of the Byzantine seals (*Biblische Reminiszenzen im Bild und Text auf byzantinische Bleisigeln*, p. 124-144). She confirms that the Byzantines were familiar with some passages from the Bible only *through the liturgy*. Most Byzantine seals do not reproduce the fragments of biblical text itself, but rather the manner those texts were filtered through liturgical hymnography: „der Bezug zur Bibel in versifizierten Sigelinschriften erfolgt eher indirekt über die Hymnographie

und die liturgischen Texte, mit denen die Byzantiner schon durch das kirchliche Repertoire sehr gut vertraut war.” (p. 133) This observation draws our attention, on the one hand, to the ubiquity of biblical texts in Byzantine culture, but at the same time it indicates that the access of the Byzantines to the Scripture was one mediated by the liturgy and was inevitably a partial one.

The field of Bible reception in the large spectrum of Byzantine images is exemplified here by Pinar Serdar Dincer (*The Vienna Genesis in the Light of Early Byzantine Illuminated Theological Manuscripts*, p. 47-67). Western Christian culture, much less rich in images compared to Byzantium, is marked – especially since the 1517 Reformation – by attention to the biblical text. The reflection of biblical text in images is an almost new research field. The example given here by Pinar Dincer is a notorious one, but insufficiently studied. Dincer offers here a part of his doctoral thesis (2016) dedicated to the precious *Vienna Genesis* manuscript (*Austria National Library, cod. Theol. Gr. 31*) from the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The author’s article is extremely valuable because he analyzes the manuscript from all points of view. Of course, being a manuscript containing images rather than text, iconographic analysis occupies an important place. The results are in line with the place that this manuscript occupies in the collection of Byzantine codices, because P. Dincer concludes that, unlike other illuminated manuscripts such as *Rosano Gospel*, *Vienna Genesis* „is a blend of both Greek (Hellenistic) – Roman and Jewish narrative art.” (p. 52, 54) Recognizing the fact that a sixth-century biblical manuscript shows iconographic associations with the mosaics of the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Santa Maria Maggiore (Rome) and presents elements of Judeo-Hellenic art seems to me a huge gain both for the history of art and for the Jewish-Christian relations in general. P. Dincer states that:

Considering the Vienna Genesis manuscript scenes, it can be observed that apart from Biblical Genesis, such Jewish texts as Targum Pd. Jonathan, Targum Neofiti Pirke de Rabi Elieser, Midrash Rabba and Sefer HaYasha were referred to. In the light of the scenes that have been identified, at least one non-biblical Jewish text was referred to for each biblical prophet mentioned in the manuscript. (p. 52)

The fact that the images of the codex naturally feed on both Jewish and Christian textual traditions demonstrates that Judaism and Christianity had not broken up with each other so early. If, at the level of textual polemics, we can already follow the actors of the famous “parting of the ways” in the first and second centuries of the Christian era, it seems that art history as well demonstrates an unforeseen longevity of the natural connections between the two religious communities in the Mediterranean basin.

The interference between both religious traditions is enriched by Johannes Koder's article regarding the transfer of Judeo-Christian biblical contents into the Islamic tradition (p. 69-87) and Andreas Külzer's text on the reception of biblical texts in *Proskynētaría tōn hagiōn topōn* (p. 145-160). The volume also includes an interesting essay to the relationship between the feeling of shame and the Last Judgment in Byzantium written by Eirini Afentoulidou. This last one has less to do with the biblical text itself, but it illustrates a consistent chapter of Byzantine religious literature inspired by biblical texts (p. 107-121).

After scrutinizing this volume, the reader will surely be convinced by the broad and still pristine field of research on the reception of biblical texts in Byzantium. This focus on the biblical reception in the complex Byzantine social context, not only in liturgical texts, is a welcome and very necessary step. Moreover, the volume opens up new research paths concerning how the Bible could be perceived, interpreted, appropriated, or even distorted in much wider contexts, including political, military, and artistic ones. Compared to the area of textual criticism, which has dominated the last few centuries of biblical research, it appears that Byzantium offers a wide range of environments where biblical texts have been received. Studying these topics related to the Eastern context, the authors will certainly contribute to the creation of bridges between the East and the West and will help Eastern Orthodox theologians approach their own Byzantine tradition more critically.