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THE HOLY BIBLE - THE WORD OF WORDS. A POINT OF
REFERENCE IN THE ROMANIAN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

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Review of Ioan Chirilă, *The Holy Bible - The Word of Words* (Sfânta Scriptură – Cuvântul Cuvintelor), (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renașterea, 2010), 415 p.

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A recent editorial appearance, *The Holy Bible - The Word of Words*, offers the possibility of meeting again with an unmistakable style in the field of the Romanian Old Testament theology, that of Ioan Chirilă¹. The volume integrates a series of theological studies presented at various conferences, colloquies and work sessions both in the country and abroad, or published in specialist magazines during the last few years. As everyone got used to in Ioan Chirilă's previous writings, we rediscover in this volume the touch of a master in what regards the polyphony of nuances of theological depth flowing as if from an interior river with countless meanders.

The volume has four thematic components. The first of them, *The Bible, Reading and Christian Confession*, aims at the relation between the Bible, the Holy Tradition and the Holy Liturgy, the spiritual reading of the Holy Bible according to the patristic tradition, and the act of translating in the light of the testifying faith. In the second structure, *The Holy Bible in Romania*, the author examines the Romanian translation of the Bible, the partial and integral editions of the Bible in Romania, as well as the way in which the Romanian theologians and especially the Transylvanian ones have developed certain research directions in their biblical studies, works which have been compiled into "a concrete theology of irenicism and dialogue".²

The principles of translating and interpreting the Bible that are stated in the first two structures are illustrated in the *Old Testament's Exegetic Fragmentarium*, a component which comprises precise exegetic studies inserted here to show the way in which the principles of patristic interpretation can be applied today, and this without developing an anachronistic speech, but by applying the interpretative paradigms of the Holy Fathers with a view to clarifying a modern message that can be addressed to the contemporaneity. This type of theological vision is faithful to an idea constantly worded in the East, that of *returning to the Fathers* (G. Florovsky), an idea that is becoming increasingly popular in Western theology.

"*The hermeneutic set of instruments*" is addressed especially to those students whose preparation includes a biblical component. This part comprises fragments from the Bible and quotations from different sources that have different aspects of biblical hermeneutics in view, all in a punctilious thematic classification. The way in which the Scripture is understood in the biblical canon is prioritized, after which the essential points of reference for a *lectura christiana* of the Holy Scripture are established, as well as hermeneutic elements, rabbinic and modern interpretation principles, patristic arguments in favour of a spiritual reading of the Bible and, finally, a large bibliographical part divided into Romanian and international theological references.

The element of novelty that the volume brings about in Romanian theology results not only from the style of the discourse, with symbolic or metaphorical touches that sometimes resemble the liturgical way of

expression (that of the prayer-text) in form and rhetoric, but also from the way in which the tackled topics find their resolution in glades of salvation messages, beginning with the Old Testament, usually regarded only from a historical point of view or in the type-antitype binomial. The author aims at a unitary perspective of the message. In this process of extracting the redeeming meaning, ciphered in the Old Testament, which he makes accessible, in the gnoseological paradigm the contemporary man, he makes reference to sources from various periods and fields of activity, but which he harmonizes in an exemplary way. For example, in the first study we may find quotations from the Holy Fathers (Saint Athanasios the Great, Saint John Chrysostom or Saint Maximus the Confessor), neopatristic theologians (father Paul Florensky, father Gerorge Florovsky, father John Breck, father Boris Bobrinskoy, father Dumitru Popescu), philosophers, phenomenologists, hermeneutics specialists (Paul Ricoeur, Petre Țuțea, Michel Henry, Achille Degest, Jacques Derrida or Karl Jaspers). But the book is not addressed exclusively to the theologian reader. Anyone can find theological answers for questions related to anthropology, philosophy (the author often refers to philosophers) or biblical themes used randomly in literature.

Questioning himself on the possibility of translating the Bible into Romanian, the author stresses the fact that no argument against the transposition of the text in another language can be found in the Bible. On the contrary, the New Testament aims to the universalization of the divine message. The perspective of translation opens up two paths, the theological and the philological one, that try to provide answers to questions such as: Is an interconfessional translation of the Bible possible? The philological perspective fits the *historical stasis*, the need of adapting to the contemporary lexical level, but this limits in a way the text to *the specific influence of a literary moment*.³ From the Christian point of view, *the purpose of the Bible is the knowledge of God*⁴ beyond any historical aspect, beyond any subjective or objective conditioning, beyond the level of perception of those who read it. The author underlines the prophetic character of all the writings in the Bible, that of eternal sight which “cannot be circumscribed to the word, but encompasses the heart, transcends the mind and feeds the soul”.⁵ That is why, in order to translate the Bible accurately, one needs more than philological and historical knowledge. The linguistic issue is a primordial consequence of the fall (The Babel Tower), but the Pentecost occurrence symbolizes the restoration, the knowledge of the divine message through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The author concludes that “any language may dare to encompass the eternal truth in itself... to encompass in its poetry... the doxology of God”.⁶

The vows, the covenants and the Decalogue are identified as the structures referring to the Law in the Old Testament, an identification from which the relevance of these elements to the mission of the Church is

clarified. In this context, the author inserts fragments from the Book of Genesis, fragments that he regards, in the light of the patristic interpretation, as fundamental for the missionary theology.⁷

We may also observe an interest in a series of problems having to do with the canon, the canonicity, the genesis and the historicity of the Pentateuch, all of which are meant to outline certain fundamental guidelines for a correct reading of the revealed texts. One of the strong points, with the view of a correct reading, is the conviction regarding the revealed character of the Scripture, “to admit that the text is of a revealed nature that a concrete act of revelation stands at the foundation of its formation as a written message, a reading in the sphere of faith following after this moment”.⁸ From here, an attempt of set the mind on the truth and the *il-logicality*⁹ of God follows and not an adaptation of the revealed truths in the categories of human logics, the author confesses. Thus, a transition takes place from the historical-critical method, from the sealed universe of historicity, to the metahistorical logic, from the search of sequential veracity to noticing the general truth. The author motivates in this way the trans-confessional, trans-religious dimension of the Pentateuch: “...however developed the philological or historical research may be, it would be impossible for the revealed level of the expression to be exceeded by the human mind, even if it appears as an *il-logical* structure, that in the case of the biblical text the main author is God, who reveals Himself through His prophets, that the revealed text is addressed to all of creation. From this perspective, it could be said that the text of the Pentateuch is susceptible to a trans-confessional, trans-religion exegesis”.¹⁰

We may notice one particular study tackling a subject that is less developed within biblical studies: *Ger – the stranger in the Old Testament’s biblical revelation*, which begins by the interrogative search of the point of reference in relation to which strangeness can be established. Starting from this interrogation, one can get by passing through several statement-points to the prime point of reference, the theological statement: “the stable point of reference, in relation to which strangeness is established: God [and] he who is out of communion... is burdened with the attribute of ‘stranger’...God is no stranger to His creatures”.¹¹ Moving on to the sphere of the created, the fall signifies the start of the man-God hiatus, and the Babel event is another beginning of geographic-ethnic scattering that makes strangeness be defined by means of placement as the center of a group the other. In search of the initial question, the author holds that “the entire corpus of the revelation through the unity and the uniqueness of the Scripture will give a pertinent answer”.¹² Starting as a motif from the episode of Abraham’s philoxenia at the oak of Mamre, a profoundly theological theme is developed, that of the feast of the master and the stranger.¹³

The prophetic corpus is represented especially through the study dedicated to the fragments related to the *anastasis*, *Isaiah* 9; 11; *Ezekiel* 37; *Daniel* 7, which begin with the noting of several possible types of reading the biblical text (informative reading, historical-philological-critical reading, theological reading and mystical reading). In this way, one is able to reach the reality that transcends the text. We may also notice the messianic waiting encountered in those prophets whose act “unites the historical with the transcendent when they talk about everlasting realities”.¹⁴

The anthropological preoccupations developed throughout the volume lay stress on the person's *anastasis*-related component, in an attempt to draw nearer to man's identity, to his ontology, “to his depth”, called “human essence” in philosophy. The author points out a *language* limitation,¹⁵ which is why he resorts to portrayals “meant to decipher the language structures”. Man is seen as a special mystery, as the insertion of the spirit in the material nature, as spirit ramified in flesh, but the perspectives are far from coming to an end here. The limitation of the language is obvious in the sense that a mystery cannot be exhausted in words, but it can be understood in The Word. In this way, man becomes an image of resurrection (*morfi* of resurrection) in Christ. The *anastasic* telos (man's purpose to take part in the resurrection of Christ) is an essential coordinate of the Christian way of thinking. It finds its support in the fact that man is created “image, likeness and person or has an orientation towards *koinonia*”,¹⁶ qualities of the human being that are presented in the Book of Genesis, which the author develops extensively with patristic arguments from the reflections of Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Gregory of Nyssa or father Dumitru Stăniloae. It is worth reminding that man has received not only existence, but also incorruptibility, immortality and the capacity of knowing God. The potential of going to (wards) eschaton is developed by the above-mentioned Saints and starting with none other than Paul the Apostle with the term *epektasis*, which the author understands as a continuous process of striving for the things ahead, over the edge that man wants to cross.¹⁷

In the ending, we may distinguish a study faithful to the interpretative line developed starting from the type-antitype binomial, *Prefigurative Old Testament Types for a Pauline Ecclesiology*, because, in our times, a change of the meaning of the sacred space as a sign of eternity in time is thought to be necessary. The author theologically circumscribes the concept of *sacred space* starting from the historical vectorial that is immanent to its doxological essence. Moving on to concrete types, the creation is *oikia tou Theou*, its telos is an ecclesial one that can be accomplished due to the image (Logos) and through man's participation as an *antropos leiturgos*.

The book is the result of a type of theological vision by the Romanian biblical school in which expectations of various sorts are met, from

profound themes of the Christian reflection (such as the theme of the logos/Logos), to themes stirred up by the cultural hype (the theme of the apocryphes or that of the canon) or by the trans-confessional hype. The first part can be a true beginner's guide for reading the Old Testament and an introduction to the theological study of the Scripture to theology students. The studies that deal with the Holy Scripture, apart from the value of their being archived, give important data on the specific features and literary value of each edition. In the theological studies, points of reference can be identified along with fundamental starting points for other theological disciplines, substantial clarifications regarding literary and extraecclesiastical philosophical points of view, but the unique style of the exposition can raise some understanding problems to most of the readers that are not familiar with the theological terminology. Probably the most valuable parts of the book are the original touches to the interpretation, the interdisciplinary, interconfessional and interreligious connections, as well as the consistency of the message that is addressed to the contemporary man.

Notes:

¹ Father Professor Ioan Chirilă is a teacher at the Old Testament department of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Cluj-Napoca and the dean of the same institution since 2004. He is the author of the following books: *Philonian Exegetic Fragmentarium II, Nomothetics – Exegetic Points of Reference for the Decalogue* (2003), *Philonian Exegetic Fragmentarium* (2002), *Exegetic Fragmentarium* (2001), *Qumran and Mariotis – Two Ascetic Syntheses – Places of Spiritual Enrichment* (2000), *Messianism and Apocalypse in the Qumran Writings* (1999), *Homo – deus* (1997), *Echoes in Babel* (2000), *The Book of Osea. Breviary for a Gnoseology of the Old Testament* (1999).

² Ioan Chirilă, *Sfânta Scriptură – Cuvântul Cuvintelor (The Holy Bible- The Word of Words)*, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renașterea, 2010), 143.

³ Chirilă, 57.

⁴ Chirilă, 58.

⁵ Chirilă, 59.

⁶ Chirilă, 59.

⁷ Genesis 1, 28-30.

⁸ Chirilă, 176.

⁹ Refers to what stretches beyond human deductive reasoning.

¹⁰ Chirilă, 179.

¹¹ Chirilă, 181.

¹² Chirilă, 184.

¹³ Chirilă, 193.

¹⁴ Chirilă, 204.

¹⁵ Chirilă, 209.

¹⁶ Chirilă, 212.

¹⁷ Chirilă, 213.