

Holy Scripture and the Church

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following article was written in 1914,¹ when St. Hilarion was an archimandrite and a professor of the Imperial Moscow Spiritual Academy. Its message is especially pertinent for our times, when there is widespread confusion and ignorance about the true nature of Christ's Church and about the right approach to Holy Scripture. It can provide invaluable help to Orthodox Christians in understanding their Faith more deeply, and in defending and giving an account of it when confronted with heterodox—especially Protestant—claims. At the same time, it can serve as a wake-up call to Protestants, who separate the Bible from the Church, as well as to those Orthodox Christian scholars who have been unduly influenced by the modern "higher criticism" of the Bible which originated within German Protestantism—the fallacies of which are profoundly demonstrated by our modern-day Orthodox apologist, St. Hilarion.*

IN THE Church there are no stone tablets with letters inscribed by a Divine finger. The Church has the Holy Scriptures, but He Who established the Church wrote nothing. Only once, in the Gospel of John, was it said of Christ that He stooped down and wrote something; but even this one time Christ wrote with his finger and on the ground. It may even be that He did not write any words at all, but merely drew with His

¹ Archimandrite Hilarion, *Svyashchennoye Pisaniye i Tserkov'* (Holy Scripture and the Church) (Moscow: Printing House of A. I. Snegireva, 1914) (in Russian).

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finger pointing to the ground. And yet the Church has Scripture, which is called by her Holy and Divine.

Christ did not write anything. It seems that if one reflects enough on this fact, one can somewhat understand the very essence of the work of Christ. As a rule, other religious leaders of humanity, founders of various philosophical schools, have written readily and in abundance, and yet Christ wrote nothing at all. Does not this mean that in its essence the work of Christ has nothing in common with the work of any of the philosophers, teachers, or leading representatives of the intellectual life of mankind? Furthermore, has the Church herself ever viewed her Founder as one of the teachers of mankind? Has she ever considered His teachings as the essence of His work? No, with the utmost exertion of her theological strength, the Christian Church has defended as the greatest religious truth that Christ is the Only-begotten Son of God, One in essence with God the Father, Who became incarnate on earth. For that truth, the greatest Fathers of the Church labored to the point of blood. They were unbending in the battle for this truth. They did not yield a single inch to their adversaries, literally not even a single *iota*, which in the Greek language differentiates *homoiousion*, “of similar essence,” from *homoousion*, “coessential.”² “Those who call these men [i.e., Arians] Christians are in great and grievous error,” writes St. Athanasius the Great.³ Thus did this adamant of Orthodoxy argue definitively about the impossibility of being a Christian while denying the Incarnation of the Son of God, Who is coessential with God the Father.

But was the Incarnation of the Only-begotten Son of God necessary only in order to write a book and entrust it to mankind? Was it absolutely essential for Him to be the Only-begotten Son of God just to write a book? If the Church insisted with such determination on the

² A reference to the Arian controversy. The fourth-century heretic Arius (ca. 250–336) contended that the Son is a created being not of the same essence as the Father, in opposition to the Church’s teaching that the Son is uncreated and of the same essence as the Father.—ED.

³ St. Athanasius the Great, *Against the Arians*, Discourse I.1.

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Divine dignity of her Founder, then obviously she did not regard writing to be the essence of His work. It was the Incarnation of the Son of God that was necessary for the *salvation* of mankind, and not a book. No book is able, nor could it ever have been able to save mankind. Christ is not the *Teacher* but precisely the *Savior* of mankind. It was necessary to regenerate human nature, which had become decayed through sin, and the beginning of this regeneration was laid by the *very Incarnation* of the Son of God—not by His teaching, not by the books of the New Testament. This truth was expressed with the utmost resolve by Church theologians as early as the second century. As is well known, beginning in the middle of the second century, Marcion⁴ and his followers put forward a sharp distinction between the Old and New Testaments. They even taught that the two Testaments originate from different gods. Thus, according to their opinion, the New Testament contains in itself a *new teaching* which is directly opposed to the teaching of the Old Testament and therefore abolishes it. But Christ Himself and the Apostles and the Church from the very beginning recognized the Old Testament Scripture as authoritative. The teaching of Marcion was immediately met with appropriate rejection by Church writers. In the dispute with Marcion, the theologians of the second century showed in detail that the New Testament does not abolish the Old one; on the contrary, the whole of the New Testament is already foretold in the Old. The new covenant was “known and preached by the prophets,”⁵ writes St. Irenaeus of Lyons.⁶ “Read with earnest care that Gospel which has been conveyed to

⁴ Marcion of Sinope (ca. 85–160): A Gnostic heretic, who proposed rejecting the Old Testament and severely editing the New Testament to remove its dependence on the Old.—ED.

⁵ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* IV.9.3 (Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF] 1, p. 472).

⁶ St. Irenaeus of Lyons († ca. 202): Bishop of Lugdunum (present-day Lyons in France), born probably in Smyrna (today’s Izmir in Turkey), Asia Minor. One of the most important Church Fathers, he was best known for his apologetic writings against the doctrines of the Gnostics, where he asserted the Apostolic authority of the Ecumenical Church through the succession of her bishops.—TRANS.

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us by the Apostles, and read with earnest care the prophets, and you will find that the whole conduct, and all the doctrine, and all the sufferings of our Lord, were predicted through them.”⁷ Thus, with regard to teachings, the New Testament does not in essence offer anything *completely new*. Those inclined to look upon Christ primarily as a Teacher would of course be somewhat confused by such arguments and the logical conclusions drawn from them. Nonetheless, the greatest theologian of the second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, who according to the words of St. Epiphanius of Cyprus,⁸ was “anointed with the heavenly favors of the true faith and knowledge,” dispels this confusion. He points out that the purpose and the essence of Christ’s coming is not in a new teaching. He writes: “If a thought of this kind should then suggest itself to you, to say, ‘What new thing then did the Lord bring to us by His advent?’—know ye that He brought *all [possible] novelty, by bringing Himself Who had been announced. For this very thing was proclaimed beforehand, that a novelty should come to renew and quicken mankind* [emphasis added].”¹⁰

The renewal of humanity is therefore the fruit of the very advent, the very Incarnation of the Son of God. St. Irenaeus expressed this idea especially clearly in his recently discovered work, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*: “Others do not ascribe any significance to the descent of the Son of God and the dispensation of His Incarnation, which the Apostles proclaimed and the prophets foretold, that *by it must be accomplished the perfection of our humanity* [emphasis added].... And such men should be counted among those who are lacking in faith.”¹¹ Thus the perfection of our humanity, according to the teaching of St.

⁷ Op. cit. IV.34.1 (ANF 1, p. 511).

⁸ St. Epiphanius of Cyprus (ca. 310–403): Bishop of Salamis on Cyprus and Metropolitan of the whole island. He is best known for his encyclopedic work *Panarion* (Medicine Chest), in which he gives a recapitulation of the heresies that existed up until that time.—TRANS.

⁹ *Panarion* 31.33 (tr. Frank Williams [New York: E. J. Brill, 1987], p. 189).

¹⁰ Op. cit. IV.34.1 (Sources Chrétiennes [SC] 100:846; cf. ANF 1, p. 511).

¹¹ Op. cit. 99 (cf. tr. John Behr, *On the Apostolic Preaching* [Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997], pp. 100–101).