

Konstantin Nikolakopoulos



Das Neue Testament in der Orthodoxen Kirche

Grundlegende Fragen einer Einführung in das Neue Testament

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In the German cultural space, where the Orthodox Church has been constantly growing, a textbook devised as an Introduction to the New Testament is certainly a necessity¹. This is the first *Introduction to the New Testament* in the German cultural space and, we could argue, the first complete Introduction to the New

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¹ The latest surveys of the Conference of Orthodox Bishops in Germany show that there are 1.5 million Orthodox believers in Germany.

Testament (NT) written by an Orthodox author in an international language.²

Das Neue Testament in der Orthodoxen Kirche. Grundlegende Fragen einer Einführung in das Neue Testament (The New Testament in the Orthodox Church. Fundamental Questions of an Introduction to the New Testament), recently published by Konstantinos Nikolakopoulos, Professor of the New Testament Department of the Orthodox Theology Institute in Munich³ is dedicated to the students of this institute and opens the new textbooks series for the study of Orthodox Theology.⁴

Even though the textbook contains as many as fifteen chapters, (the table of contents covers five pages, pp. 7-11), their titles are clear and show that they could be divided into two main parts, which might constitute a general introduction to NT (ch. I-V) and a special one (VI-XIV).⁵

The general introduction deals with the terminology specific to an introduction to NT (ch. I), text interpretation (ch. II), the biblical canon (ch. III), the linguistic structure of the NT (ch. IV) and issue related to the apocrypha writings or the unwritten words (Agrapha) of Jesus (ch. V).

Despite the author's modesty about the Orthodox position regarding these topics, he passes everything through the filter of an Orthodox who is well-rooted in the tradition and does not miss the opportunity to report from the beginning (ch. I), that "the Orthodox biblical study (die orthodoxe Bibelwissenschaft)" does not use only the purely historical and philological methods of interpretation of the Scripture, because of its double, teandric character (p. 21).

Recognizing the vital need for a scientific introduction to the writings of NT (p. 21), the author emphasizes that it was sometimes totally "autonomized" in the West⁶ (völlig verselbständigt, p. 20), that it is a "human science" (menschliche Wissenschaft, p. 18) and "must continue to serve exegesis" (p. 16) and the spiritual treasure.⁷

² There is also the *Introduction* in several volumes written in English by P. N. TARAZI, but it does not cover all the books of the New Testament either.

³ Prof. Nikolakopoulos has lived in Germany since 1984 where he studies theology; since 1998, he is Professor of NT and between 2003 and 2011 he led the Orthodox Theology Institute in Munich. As of 2006 he has been the editor of the *Orthodoxes Forum* review.

⁴ LSOT = *Lehr- und Studienbücher Orthodoxe Theologie*.

⁵ This division is suggested by the author in his preface p. 13-14.

⁶ The author refers to the fact that, in the West, besides introductory courses of NT there are also professor specialized in the introduction to the study of the NT, or even on a certain branch of this complex subject (p. 15), as the history of the text or methods of interpretation, etc.

⁷ "Not to discuss the credibility of several details in the NT" (p. 21).

This firm position of the Orthodox Church is welcome in the ecumenical context of Germany, but the specialized reader will not find in this textbook a thorough debate; it is just clearly stated, according to the tradition of most Orthodox churches.

One of the strong points of the first chapter is the four pages long list containing Orthodox bibliography on the *Introduction to the NT*. This has the advantage of providing the researcher with quick access to the literature in the field, written in Greek, Russian, English and Romanian.⁸

Moreover, this *Introduction* dedicates an entire chapter to the history of the NT text and text interpretation (ch. II, p. 27-44). The information included is just a summary of the classic studies written by ALAND & ALAND⁹, which is nevertheless of great value to the student struggling to find a way among the hardships of the incipient stage of his endeavor. In this chapter as well, Prof. Nikolakopoulos correlates the science of text interpretation with the patristic era, exemplifying with *Origen's attitude* before the several text variants.¹⁰

The particularity of this chapter is the author's long commentary on the major types or families of biblical text, to focus then on the latest type of text named by specialists the majority text or *textus receptus*. Prof. Nikolakopoulos deals with it in a special subchapter, in which he refuses to use the conventional Western name and supports the usage of *church text* („der kirchliche Text“) because the Church has always been using it. Despite pleading for this text, the author regrets that "unfortunately, this text has never been examined critically enough to this day".¹¹ Special attention to this *church text* - says the author - would bring many advantages to the Orthodox Church, including the uniformization of the biblical texts in the Euchologion with those in the text of the Bible or of the readings in the service books, which has never been accomplished.¹²

⁸ The Russian titles are translated into German.

⁹ See Kurt ALAND & Barbara ALAND, *Der Text des Neuen Testaments. Einführung in die wissenschaftlichen Ausgaben sowie in Theorie und Praxis der modernen Textkritik*, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, ²1989.

¹⁰ Origen was aware of the fact that the text of the NT contained errors made by scribes, corrections of a philological and theological nature. See commentary on Matthew in *PG* 113, 1293 A on p. 35, n. 8.

¹¹ Prof. Nikolakopoulos highlights years 1904 and 1930 as when works dealing with this issue were published. See p. 38.

¹² In relation to the reconstruction of the NT text by means of the patristic texts, we note that besides the well-known project *Biblia Patristica* in Strassbourg, there are several other similar projects in Thessaloniki under the guidance of Prof. Ioannis Galanis. See p. 44.

Leaving aside the information about the Canon of the NT¹³, we note the author's dissertations in the next chapter, dedicated to the language of the NT (ch. IV, p. 57-66). Here, Prof. Nikolakopoulos reminds his readers that research into the NT is dependent on the study of the Greek language, that specific to the Hellenistic era (*koine*, p. 58); the NT language is "far from the sophisticated classical Greek" (p. 60), is the language of the people (Volksdialekt, p. 60). This belief led the author to conclude that the NT language "is not a phenomenon which fell from heaven, with supernatural dimensions" (p. 66), thus implicitly argues for the translation of the text, so that the people might understand it.¹⁴

The short chapter which concludes the first part (ch. V, p. 67-72) displays some information about the apocryphal writings and the "hidden" or "unwritten" words of Jesus. One of the most important contribution to this field is the last fragment dealing with the existence of certain "Agrapha" in the liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church.¹⁵ The author's liturgical experience as a cantor contributed to the identification of an "agraphon" in the prayer after the second reading from the Epistles during the service of the Holy Unction, where it is written: "for You are the One who said, every time you fall, rise and you shall be redeemed."¹⁶ Even though he admits that this is the result of the fantasy of the prayer's author, Prof. Nikolakopoulos argues that this sentence is part of the treasure of extra-canonical words of Jesus.

The second part (p. 73 and the following) deals separately with every book of the NT. It is remarkable that the Nikolakopoulos includes for each book of the NT, besides notes on its author, addressees, etc. compact information organized in three subchapters, which is a *unique feature* among textbooks in the field. Namely:

1. A bibliographical list for each book of the NT with references to *a)* patristic commentaries¹⁷; *b)* commentaries written by Orthodox

¹³ The author himself admits that there are no significant differences between the opinions of western and eastern theologians. See ch. III, p. 45-56.

¹⁴ On p. 60 there is statistical information related to the number of languages in which the NT has been translated so far. This position is remarkable especially from an Orthodox perspective, where, in many cases, the Bible is not read liturgically in the living language of the people.

¹⁵ „Agrapha”, in liturgischen Texten der Orthodoxen Kirche”, p. 72.

¹⁶ The prayer after the second reading from the Holy Gospel. (Σὺ εἶ ὁ εἰπών. Ὁσάκις ἄν πέσης, ἔγειραι, καὶ σωθήσῃ).

¹⁷ For example, see the Gospel According to Matthew, where Prof. Nikolakopoulos makes references to the classic commentaries of ORIGEN *PG* 13: *BEP* 13.14, 1957-58; *SC* 162, 1970; EPHREM THE SYRIAN *SC* 121, 1966; JOHN CHRYSOSTOM *PG*. 57 and 58; THEODOR OF MOPSUESTIA *PG* 66, 705-15; CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA *PG* 72, 365-474;

authors in the modern period¹⁸ and c) modern studies written by Orthodox authors;¹⁹

2. A short chapter on patristic tradition on the authorship of NT writings and other theological issues contained in that particular book;²⁰ and
3. A few words about the liturgical use of the book, or of some passages in it, in the Orthodox Church (see e.g. for the Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 259-260).

For the Gospel According to John, the bibliographical references are longer than one page (p. 169-170) and thus show the intense preoccupation of the Christian East with this gospel. The advantage of these lists once published in the Orthodox textbook written in German are more easily accessible to international researchers and enable the students to make use of the information required for a patristic approach to the biblical text.

A subject that will certainly raise questions in the ecumenical context of Bible studies in Germany is the question of the authorship of the epistles called in the West "Deutero-Pauline". After demonstrating awareness of the debates upon this subject, the author concludes:

Anyway, the Orthodox do not get stuck in the questions about authenticity, but they also consider their canonicity transmitted (through the tradition) as a key factor for the authenticity and the faith limits of these writings within the Church (p. 220).

THEOPHILACTUS OF BULGARIA *PG* 123, 144-488; EVTIMII ZIGABEN *PG* 129, 112-766; PETER OF LAODICEA, ed. By G. F. G. Heinrici, Leipzig, 1908.

- ¹⁸ For the Gospel according to Matthew: Varth. GEORGIADIS, *Ἑρμηνεία τῶν τεσσάρων Εὐαγγελίων*, Athens, 1883, ²1992; N. DAMALAS, *Ἑρμηνεία ἐκ παραλήλου τῶν τριῶν πρώτων Εὐαγγελίων*, (*Ἑρμηνεία ἐκ τῆν ΚΔ*, vol. 2-3), Athens, 1892; F. KONTOGLOU, *Τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον ἅγιον Εὐαγγέλιον ἐξηγημένον τὸ κατὰ δύναμιν διὰ τοὺς ἀπλοθετέρους*, Athens, 1952; P. TREMPERAS, *Ἰπόμνημα ἐκ τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον Εὐαγγέλιον*, Athens ²1958; Ch. VASILOPOULOS, *Ἡ Ἁγία Γραφή ἐξηγημένη. Τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον Εὐαγγέλιον*, Atena, 1978; JUSTIN (Vater), *Kommentar zum Hl. Evangelium nach Matthäus*, in the *Bote* review 3-4:1986, translated by Bishop Mark of Munich in articles in the next notebooks.
- ¹⁹ For the Gospel According to Matthew: *Τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον Εὐαγγέλιον. Προβλήματα μεταφραστικά, φιλοσοφικά, ἱστορικά, ἑρμηνευτικά, Θεολογικά*, *Vorträge der 7. Konferenz der orthodoxen Bibelwissenschaftler in Bukarest*, September 1993, Athens, 1996; S. AGOURIDIS, *Ματθαῖος ὁ Εὐαγγελιστής (Διδάσκαλος τῆς Ἀρχικῆς καὶ τῆς Σημερινῆς Ἐκκλησίας)*, Athen, 2000. Prof. Nikolakopoulos cites these patristic and modern Orthodox authors in the short presentation of the NT. The author makes almost no reference to western, protestant or Catholic literature in this *Introduction*, because this is already available for all students in Germany, and thus he focuses on Orthodox contributions.
- ²⁰ For example, for the Gospel According to Matthew, this contribution has four pages (p. 85-89).

We cannot overlook the ease with which Prof. Nikolakopoulos solves this issue, and the lack of footnotes which is regrettable especially in the cases of key statements.²¹ But we must also not forget that the *Introduction* is only a handbook for students.

Nevertheless, there is a detailed outline for every book. There are two texts of the Holy Apostle Paul, which, contrary to the classic interpretive tradition, are assigned by Prof. Nikolakopoulos original titles. The first one is Romans 9-11²², and the second Ephesians 2:11-22²³, about which we argue that the titles the author chooses for them match in an original way their content and the current western European hermeneutical consensus.

If the pastoral epistles were written by the Holy Apostle Paul (p. 255), in the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews the author of the *Introduction* is "surely" not Paul, but he deals with it within the section dedicated to the Pauline writings closing the subject with a quotation from Origen, who concludes that: "only God knows who wrote this epistle" (p. 259). The other epistles, as well as all NT books dealt with in the *Introduction* follow the canonical order, and not a chronological one, which is preferred today by all western authors.²⁴

After such details, which seem to set completely apart the paths of an Orthodox hermeneutics from a "western" one²⁵, Prof. Nikolakopoulos

²¹ For instance, for the denial of the Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Ephesians Prof. Nikolakopoulos reminds the reader that "the reasons provided by these interpreters are arguments related to the content and style." (p. 238) However, he fails to mention the names of those interpreters or the stylistic arguments proper.

²² The author grasps the essence of ch. 9-11 in Romans, when he gives them the title "the future of the Jewish people" and especially through the subtitle "the final salvation of Israel, who temporarily rejected Jesus; through this rejection, the Gentiles found their way into the Church." Such Pauline affirmations belong to the "proclamation of the soteriological optimism "of the Epistle to the Romans (p. 223) and correct, or even "replace" the Apostle's reflections about God's plan for Israel outlined in the Epistle to the Galatians (p. 225). The German text sounds as follows: „Die Zukunft des jüdischen Volkes (Kap. 9-11). Die Endgültige Rettung von Israel, das Christus vorläufig ablehnte; damit fanden aber auch die Heiden Eingang in die Kirche.“ See p. 221.

²³ The same happens with the ecclesiological text in Ephes. 2:11-22, Prof. Nikolakopoulos speaks of the "unification (Vereinigung) of Israel and the Gentiles through the Christ's conciliating work" (p. 237), even though patristic tradition walked many times on the path of a theology of substitution.

²⁴ P. N. TARAZI, even if he is an Orthodox, prefers the chronological order, beginning his *Introduction* with a first volume dedicated to the Holy Apostle Paul and to the Gospel According to Mark.

²⁵ The "west" is a generic name for a Protestant or Catholic reality, or both. Moreover, the "west" is for our author, the space in which, through his *Introduction*, the

presents in the concluding section an excursus on the Orthodox interpretation and the historical-critical method (p. 303-317) in which he pleads – as many other Orthodox authors he cites – for a "convergence" of western and eastern exegesis, which is "possible and absolutely required, especially because ecumenism is inconceivable today without the scriptural foundation" (p. 304). Prof. Nikolakopoulos comes to the conclusion that western biblical research is generally "analytic" while the eastern one is mainly "synthetic" (p. 306) and that the two must work together.²⁶ The details related to this current and challenging topic shall definitely raise the interest of many scholars in this field of research.

The textbook written by Professor Nikolakopoulos proves to be a relevant tool, not only for the students of the Orthodox Theology Institute in Munich, but also for the communication among Orthodox and non-Orthodox biblical scholars. Given the fact that the Orthodox churches are divided by nationality and these differences are based primarily on the language of each country, the publication of such a textbook in an international language will facilitate communication and mutual understanding among Orthodox biblical scholars, but hopefully it will also be a positive impetus for the Orthodox and will encourage them to publish their work in languages that can be understood by western researchers as well.

Orthodox Church (i.e., the "east" par excellence) becomes more visible. The east-west polarity should be understood here as purely functional, freed from any exclusivist or polemical inflections.

²⁶ Prof. Nikolakopoulos speaks of a "harmonic synthesis of both hermeneutics" (p. 316) and their "convergent use"(p. 317).