Cosmin Pricop

Die Verwandlung Jesu Christi: Historisch-kritische und patristische Studien
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The doctoral dissertation of Romanian New Testament scholar Cosmin Pricop entitled Die Verwandlung Jesu Christi. Historisch-kritische und patristische Studien was recently published in Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (2. Reihe). This book witnesses that the map of biblical scholarship in Europe is about to change in terms of stronger presence of biblical scholars from Orthodox backgrounds. This is certainly a result of the creative encounter of Orthodox scholars with the academic atmosphere of western biblical scholarship. Books like this one are essential for the Orthodox academic field, since only through this kind of high scholarly literature, the deeper hermeneutical consideration of Orthodox context of Scripture interpretation may be developed.

The goal of this book is to expound the (in)compatibility of the historical critical method with the patristic approach to the Bible (155-156). The author has chosen the best way to do it—namely by analyzing a specific biblical text. He has chosen the story of Transfiguration of the Lord (Mk 9:2-9par), a choice of text he explains with the great significance this text has in Orthodox Church and theology (6-11). However, the problem may be that the choice of text brings, from the beginning, a misbalance in the whole debate, since the scene of Transfiguration can hardly be the favorite text of historical criticism. The choice of text rather suggests the author’s certain preunderstanding. This text has, without a doubt, played an important role in medieval hesychasm arguments that are very important for the theological identity of the entire Orthodoxy world.

The book is divided into five thematic chapters. In the introduction (1-18), the author defines his own position within the frame of contemporary biblical scholarship and offers an overview of research of the topic he is going to deal with—the relation of patristic approaches to the Bible and historical criticism, by taking the story of Transfiguration as an example. In part II, the author analyzes the text in Mk 9:2-9par through methodological steps, by using historical critical methods: text criticism, description of the text with synchronic analysis, source criticism, form criticism, tradition and redaction criticism (19-125). After that, in part III, the author scrutinizes the place and the role of patristic exegesis in modern protestant biblical scholarship. He pays special attention to the reception of patristic interpretation of Scripture in hermeneutical concepts of U. Luz (127-149). In part IV, the author firstly describes the pathways of
reception of patristic heritage in the Orthodox biblical scholarship, and then he delivers the concept of patristic biblical hermeneutics according to Christina Metzdorf. Finally, he formulates his own method of investigation and explains his reasons for the choice of specific Fathers he is going to deal with (Origen, John Chrysostom, and Jerome) (151-170). Then come the parts devoted to the exegesis of the Transfiguration story by each Father in particular (170-326). In these chapters, the author shows a high level of literary and philological skills. His analysis of the Fathers discloses their exegetical devotion and their profiled methodology in interpreting the Scripture. These insights can be very helpful and indicative for widening the horizons of contemporary Orthodox scholars in their reception of present-day methodology (see 195-196). In chapter v, the author assumes and concludes the book with a few theses (326-332).

I would like to comment on just a few issues in this book which I consider important for future development of contemporary Orthodox hermeneutics. The author’s attitude towards historical criticism is somewhat ambivalent: “Aus der Bewertung der historisch-kritischen Exegese der markinischen Verwandlungserzählung durch die orthodoxe Perspektive lässt sich festhalten: Meines Erachtens kann die orthodaxe Exegese in allen hier durchgeführten Methodenschriften einige Elemente identifizieren, die übernommen werden können” (329). However, the work lacks closer reflection on the theoretical foundation of historical criticism. There is no reflection on different understandings of historical criticism by different exponents of it, which gives the impression that historical criticism is a monolith and unified phenomenon. Regardless of theoretical consideration of historical criticism, it is a fact that it primarily aims at finding or establishing original meaning of a biblical text. It was something that was strange to patristic hermeneutics. In this regard, the Fathers of the Church were the children of their own time: the ancient exegesists, for the most part, did not have any interest in original meanings of philosophical or religious texts. They were primarily concerned with πράγμα or res mediated through a text. Therefore, a text was not considered to be an object which has to be analyzed in order to reach out to its original or true meaning, it was only used to confirm an already existing truth outside the text. The text only confirms this truth. At this point, in my opinion, a crucial and maybe an insurmountable difference between patristic hermeneutics and historical criticism can be detected. The basic question posed by historical criticism to precritical exegesis would be the following: Does the πράγμα or res exist per se, and do the exegesists have no other task than to locate it, reveal it and display it, or does the exegesis indicate that the πράγμα or res is always available only in the form of human interpretation, and thus inseparable from it and thus previous to historical criticism? Secondly, the author’s insistence that an