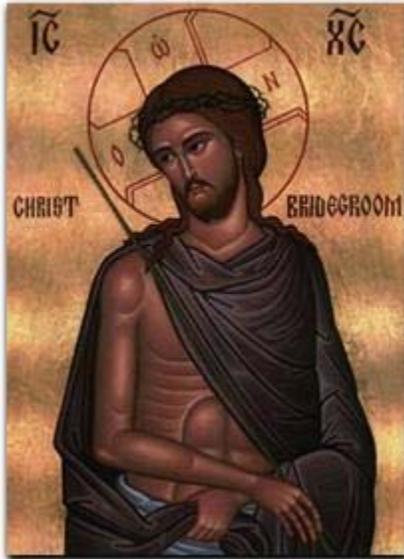


## The Bible and Ancient Liturgy: Good Friday Texts in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

By Virginia M. Kimball



### How did Christians study the Bible in the early centuries?

What was Bible study like in the early centuries of Christianity (from the 4<sup>th</sup> century until the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century)? No one had a printed Bible as we do today, with footnotes, maps and study helps. Few people knew how to read and write, and textual work was carried on mainly in monasteries. How then, were the Christian faithful able to reflect on biblical passages or even to become familiar with the Bible?

In the early days of the Christian community, the faithful encountered the Bible in worship. As Christian **liturgy** developed, it centered upon texts from both the Jewish scripture, such as the psalms and prophets, and the New Testament. The word “liturgy” is derived from the Greek, meaning “the work of the people,” including not only the recitation of words, but a fuller engagement by the faithful provided in ritual. Often, the chanted hymns are led by **psaltes**, who were similar to the ancient Jewish cantors. **Icons** depicting biblical saints and events accompanied the liturgy and symbolically added to biblical reflection. Sung responses were added to the psalms in the form of **canons, antiphons, odes, and kontakia**. Already, as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christian worship had formed a biblically-based **hermeneutic** for understanding and living the revelation of God.

### Biblical passages in Holy Week

Eastern Orthodox Holy Week, and the Good Friday service in particular, is a good way to grasp the centrality of scripture to Orthodox worship, as it is packed with biblical references. The week begins on Palm Sunday evening with the Service of Christ the Bridegroom and leads up to the moment of Christ’s rising from the dead early in the morning on Easter Sunday.

The principle of discovering a tradition of faith and biblical interpretation in ritual rests on the principle of: **lex orandi, lex credenda**, “the law of prayer is the law of faith.” This means that the incorporation of biblical texts into liturgy for 1500 years itself is a demonstration of faith. Christian ritual that included liturgical texts often pre-dated (and were different from) words of faith created at Councils, such as the Nicean and Constantinopolitan creeds. Those statements of faith are doctrinal, in contrast to liturgical texts, which are poetic in nature. The canonization of the Bible (decisions

about the list of inspired writings to be included in the Bible) occurred quite separately from liturgy and ritual.

Greek Orthodox liturgical biblical texts are taken from the New Testament and the **Septuagint Bible (LXX)**. The **Septuagint** was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by Jews in Jerusalem and the Diaspora in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The spoken language of the 1<sup>st</sup> century was Greek and Jews depended on the LXX translation. For example, when St. Paul writes a letter to his churches, he quotes the Septuagint.

A major characteristic of these liturgical texts as they interpret biblical texts is the use of the **typological** sense. This means that rather than fill the liturgical verses with dogmatic statements and doctrinal phrases, the chanted hymns are filled with images—often mystically poetic, dramatic, and beautiful—where comparison of types expresses an inner meaning. One example is the use of the word “tree” for the “cross” which integrally associates the cross of Christ with the tree in the garden in Genesis.

### **Holy and Good Friday Overview**

Holy Friday services begin in the evening on Holy Thursday (Eastern Orthodox Friday begins at sundown on Thursday.)

#### *Morning Prayer - Thursday evening*

This long service includes twelve readings of the **Passion Narratives**. Twelve **pericopes**, sections of all four of the gospels, are read throughout the service. The passages begin with the words of Jesus at the Last Supper (John 13:31-18:1), then include ten accounts of Jesus’ suffering from the four gospels, and conclude with Matthew’s description of the burial of Jesus and the sealed tomb (27:62-66)..

In the Eastern Orthodox service, every account of the suffering and death of Christ is read. To some it may seem reiterative and laborious. For many Christians, however, the experience of hearing and seeing the scene of the crucifixion from each evangelist’s perspective is deeply moving. After each of the readings, participants sing: “Glory to your longsuffering, Lord. Glory to You!”

After the sixth Passion reading are the Beatitudes from both Matthew and Luke. Short chanted hymns after each one tie the beatitude to Hebrew Scriptures and interpret them in light of the suffering of Christ. For example, here is a short hymn that followed “Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.”

The whole creation, O Christ, trembled in beholding your crucifixion. The foundations of the earth were shaken for dread of your might. The stars went into hiding and the veil of the Temple was torn. The mountains quaked and rocks burst asunder, as the believing thief cried with us unto You, Savior, “Remember me!”<sup>1</sup>

Such a response creates a reflection, joining praise of the creation as is often hymned in the psalms with the event of Christ’s death.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a translation of the Greek Good Friday Service: *Greek Orthodox Holy Week and Easter Services*, compiled and translated by Father George L. Papadeas (South Daytona, Florida: Patmos Press, 2007), 242.

All in all, this part of Holy Friday celebration is over two hours long. Although some might consider it tiring, many worshippers are cast into meditative reflection on the meaning of Christ's death through the reading of the biblical texts and the sung responses in ancient antiphons. Such ritual action is, in itself, a form of interpretation.

*The Great and Holy Hours – Holy Friday morning*

The day begins with “the Great Hours.” Psalms are at the core of this particular service and include: Psalms 5, 2, 21, 34, 108, 50 (the well known prayer of repentance), 53, 139, 90, 68, 69, and 85 (LXX). Originally, the Psalter (Book of Psalms) was the Jewish prayer book. Jesus, himself, as a practicing Jew would have prayed these psalms.

The Psalter provides Hebrew poetry of remorse for sin and loneliness from God, praise for the Creator of the earth, and happiness for the coronation of a king and even wedding songs. It is interesting to note that the first three days of Holy Week interpret Christ as “the Bridegroom.” It was evidently natural for Christians to want to keep the poetic and mystical use of these hymns which have such beauty.

They are neither proof-texts for a messiah, nor standard prophetic passages. But as the early Christians continued to pray the psalms, they regarded many of them as parallels and typologies of Christ. Although many interpreters find it quite surprising to think of the psalms as Christological, the early Christians and patristic writers (early theologians) understood the psalms as filled with Christ. The Prologue to John's gospel states that Christ is God and has always existed (“In the beginning was the Word...”). For Orthodox (and other) Christians, if the psalms are “God's word” then Christ is present in them.

Here is an example of an ode that connects the psalms to Christ's death. In ancient theological writing the psalms were often seen in this kind of **Christological** manner:

Today is hung upon the cross, He who suspended the Earth amid the waters. A crown of thorns crowns Him, who is the King of Angels. He, who wrapped the heavens in clouds is clothed with the purpose of mockery. He, who freed Adam in the Jordan, received buffetings. He was transfixed with nails, who is the Bridegroom of the Church. He was pierced with a lance who is the Son of a virgin. We worship your passion, O Christ. Show us also your glorious resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps, one can see how Eastern Orthodox Christians find a Christological sense in the following verses of Psalm 68 (LXX), read just prior to the ode above:

Let not a storm of water drown me, neither let the deep swallow me up.  
Nor the well enclose its mouth upon me. Hear me, O Lord, for Your mercy is good; according to Your abundant compassion, look upon me. (vss 16-

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<sup>2</sup> Based on: *Greek Orthodox Holy Week and Easter Services*, 322.

17) ... They gave me gall for my food. And they gave me vinegar for my drink. (vs. 22)<sup>3</sup>

### *Holy Friday – Mid-afternoon*

The biblical readings for this service of Holy Friday include the account of Joseph of Arimathea going to Pilate to ask permission to bury Christ and the taking down of Christ's body from the cross, reenacted at the front of the church. The figure of Christ is carefully removed from the cross and wrapped in a cloth. At the end of the service, an icon of the crucified body of Christ called the **epitaphios** is brought to the front of the church and placed in a **kouvouklion**, a covering representing the tomb: a carved wooden covering or a large table which is beautifully decorated with flowers.

### *Holy Friday night*

The drama throughout this day builds with all this biblical reading, chanting of the psalms and hymns, and sensory experiences of incense and flowers—all meant to bring the faithful to repentance and reflection on the death of Christ and the glory of his rising. Finally, Holy Friday culminates with a memorable reenactment of the lamentations and the entire congregation's participation in a long burial procession, chanting and carrying lighted candles.

The service begins with six psalms, psalms that are often chanted on a daily basis in the **Daily Hours** of every day (Psalms 3, 37, 62, 87, 102, and 142. LXX).

At the end of this service the **epitaphios** has been carried in procession and placed on the flower-laden **kouvouklion**. In many ways, this hearkens to the funeral procession of ancient days. Even the lamentations are commentary on the crucifixion and its meaning. Here is one verse of many, chanted by everyone under the leadership of the psaltis:

It is right to magnify You, the Creator of all, for by your sufferings we are freed from suffering and delivered from corruption.

Just after the stroke of midnight on Easter Sunday morning, in a darkened church, a lighted candle is carried out from the altar representing the Rising of Christ. This light then lights candles held by everyone in the congregation. The church bursts into light and the famous hymn of St. Chrysostom resounds: "Christ has risen from the dead, trampling down death by death itself, and bestowing life to those in the tombs."

Those who have endured the long and somber hours of Great Holy Week, and in particular the Good Friday services, can now experience the joy of Easter in a profound and wonderful way. The chanting of psalms and the many scripture readings in this way, for many, become a true experience of Christian joy. In all, it is a ritual hermeneutic of the Bible.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), from Psalm 68 LXX.



*This image shows the centrality of the Bible in Holy Week services and the decoration of the Epitaphios, which is venerated as representing Christ's tomb.*

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## Glossary

**antiphons** – The original meaning is “alternate utterance,” a verse taken from a psalm and repeated by two cantors or two choirs to give special emphasis on a particular idea. Gradually, they became merely responses.

**canons** – Probably originally from Syrian poetry, they are chanted usually in the Daily Hours or in Lenten services. The canon takes its theme from the feast on which it is sung.

**Christological** – Referring to Christ.

**Daily Hours** -- A liturgy of the Christian church which encompasses special hours for various times of day to be prayed daily.

**epitaphios** -- Represents the crucified body of Christ. This is an icon embroidered upon a fine piece of cloth.

**hermeneutic** – This refers to a way of interpreting the scripture’s meaning.

**icons** – An image of Christ, the events of Christ’s life, or the saints that are made in traditional ways with spiritual and symbolic meaning.

**kontakion (kontakia, plural form)** – This word originally referred to a leather roll of liturgical prayers wound on a piece of wood. Now, a kontakion signifies a hymn in several stanzas.

**kouvouklion** – Represents the tomb of Christ. This is often a carved wooden frame covered with flowers that holds the *epitaphios*.

**lex orandi, lex credendi** – The principle of knowing how a congregation of people believe is ascertained by their prayers and the hymns they sing.

**liturgy** – From the Greek word “leitourgia,” a form of public worship. The original word indicates a participation of the people (Greek: *laos*, people and *ergos*, work).

**LXX** – The Septuagint version of the Bible, translated from Hebrew into Greek in various stages from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. It is the Bible used in Eastern Orthodox liturgy and the Holy Week services. Legend tells of 70 rabbis translating the Hebrew scrolls, thereby giving the name in Roman numerals “LXX.”

**ode** - A liturgical hymn originally based on the nine biblical canticles. They are composed of a beginning stanza (the *heirmos*) and followed by stanzas called troparion.

**Passion narratives** – Those passages of the gospels which describe the passion of Christ, his suffering, death and resurrection.

**pericopes** – These are independent literary units, individual passages found within the gospels that all have a distinct beginning and an end.

**psaltis** – The singer or cantor.

**typology** – A technique of representing a theological meaning by describing comparative types. Often this technique is also used to compare elements of the Hebrew Scriptures with New Testament people and events.