

Illuminating the icons

Theologian Eve Tibbs's book on Eastern Orthodox iconography is accessible, enlightening, and beautifully illustrated.

by [Scot McKnight](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
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In Review



Seeing the Gospel

An Interpretive Guide to Orthodox Icons

By Eve Tibbs
Baker Academic

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Along the flat highway that approaches the mountains of Meteora, Greece, on the second floor of offices, is a family-owned workshop of Byzantine icons. Father Pefkis, the iconographer, serves locally as a Greek Orthodox priest, and on a typical day he produces at least one icon. The studio serves double duty as a museum of icons, the most famous of which for this iconographer is the Holy Family icon he made for the Vatican. Each of his icons is painted on aged wood and uses traditional colors with gold sheets. I was there with a group of doctor of ministry students, and nearly everyone in our group bought an icon from him.

For those of us who have grown up on Western paintings and European frescoes in cathedrals, it can be challenging to make sense of Eastern icons, informed as they are by layer after layer of Orthodox theology. Eve Tibbs, who teaches theology at Fuller Theological Seminary and published *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology* in 2021, offers in this beautiful new volume a brief explanation of Orthodox iconography, accompanied by brilliant photos.

Tibbs opens with overviews of Orthodox theology, the visual culture it has created for understanding the biblical language (which she calls a “visual biblical worldview”), and the iconoclast controversy. Then she walks us through icon after icon, illuminating both the biblical texts and the icons that deepen moments in the lives of Jesus, Mary, and other New Testament figures. The colorful pictures that accompany her text demonstrate that icons are more than what meets the eye.

Although they were once controversial, icons are theologically justified by the incarnation of God in Christ, who took on human, material form. Tibbs quotes Paul Evdokimov: “The visible humanity of Christ is the icon of [God’s] invisible divinity.” Icons appear to many in the Western tradition as “strange and flat.” This is intentional: iconographers want the uniqueness of Christ’s nature and the revelation of the invisible God in material form—the icon—to transcend natural lines, perceptions, and angles. Tibbs contends that icons are not merely religious art but are instead “a form of visual interpretation or a hermeneutic through which,” in the power of the Holy Spirit, “the gospel message can be read.” Icons, Tibbs explains, have didactic, dogmatic, and liturgical functions. Scripture interprets the icon as the icon opens the scriptures.

What has struck me in viewing icons has been the abundance and brightness of the gold, which Tibbs explains as the light of revelation surrounding the holy images. Icons never depict a source of light, such as the sun or a lamp, because the light of the gospel is itself the subject. Instead of lines opening into the far horizon’s vanishing point, icons direct lines toward the observer, creating an inverse perspective that draws the person into the scene. Much is exaggerated—for instance, mountains might look like the formations at Giant’s Causeway in Northern Ireland—and nothing in an icon is without symbolic significance. Hands and feet tell a story. Wings communicate messengers, whether they are angels, John the Baptist, or an apostle.

In the scene of an icon, time moves from left to right. Color matters. Sometimes Christ wears an inner robe of red and an outer one of blue: red for humanity and blue for divinity. Most icons have a nimbus around Christ’s head which contains a cross-shaped set of lines with three letters: the Greek omicron, omega, and nu, spelling *ho ?n*, the One who is, or the “I AM” of Exodus 3:14. Often, an icon of an event (such as the annunciation) becomes paradigmatic, serving as a genre form for all future icons of that event.

Tibbs explains how Orthodox icons are accorded “the same honor as the four written Gospels because they proclaim the same truth,” noting that, in Orthodox theology, icons “generate the same outcome in the believer” as scripture. Protestants may object that when an icon is regarded as the major companion to an event in the life of Jesus, its limitations may deafen the interpreter’s ability to hear a fresh word about the biblical text. The synergy of the gospels and the icons, however, is hard to deny once one has immersed oneself in reading a gospel text along with the icons formed out of that text.

The gospel icons on display in Tibbs's exceptional textbook are deeply shaped by themes in Orthodox theology, such as the deity of Christ and the magnitude of God's revelation. This emphasis on divinity, Protestant readers may notice, overshadows the particularities of the Jewish life of Jesus and the social realities of his kingdom vision, such as economic justice. Put simply, the aspects of Jesus so dear to many Western Christians today are difficult to find in these Orthodox icons. Nevertheless, the beauty of this book's photographs and the capacious guidance provided by Tibbs make it worthy of use by a broad audience, whether as a textbook in seminary gospel classes, a companion to Sunday services, or a devotional guide for individuals.

I returned home from Greece with an icon of Christ that I bought from Father Pefkis. It sits staring at us—which icons have the powers to do—in our living room. I've long been fascinated by Orthodox icons, but my understanding of them has been as two-dimensional as the figures they depict. *Seeing the Gospel* has illuminated this icon for me.