

SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE IN THE SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA

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During the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth, it was customary to speak of two main schools of biblical exegesis in the Early Church, the Alexandrian and the Antiochene. The former used the allegorical method, taken from Hellenism and first used to interpret Scripture by Philo.¹ This method was described as doing away with the literal sense and making Scripture say something else than what it really meant, and thus used to read in the Scripture arguments in favor of one's own theories.² The School of Antioch on the other hand paid more attention to the study of the literal meaning of the text. These views have now been overturned, thanks to the modern Patristic scholars, many of whom have spent years of tedious research in the original sources especially in the writings of Origen and of St. Didymus of Alexandria. Names of such figures as Danielou, de Lubac, Hanson, Van Balthasar, Gogler, Gruber and Tigcheler have revolutionized our understanding of the hermeneutic principles used by the Alexandrians.³

Alexandrian Christians and the Bible

Theologians of the School of Alexandria were not serious Bible students for the sake of achieving scholarship in it. Rather, they looked at it as an essential part in their spiritual life and in the life of the Church. It was stated that no other life has been so entirely devoted to Scripture as Origen's.⁴ He studied it during the night; during the day he either delivered his homilies or dictated his commentaries on the Word. For St. Didymus, study of Scripture was combined with his experience of worship, rather than philosophical theory, as the foundation for his faith.

Alexandria laid the basis for scientific Bible study, and this is true in all three areas of textual criticism, literal exegesis, and spiritual interpretation.

Textual Criticism

The work of Origen on biblical criticism was only surpassed in modern years. His *Hexapla* was the first piece of critical work ever undertaken on the Old Testament. Before him, the Septuagint was the only version the Church knew. He searched for all available versions and was not satisfied with the Greek but studied Hebrew in

order to compare them to the Hebrew text. He assembled the whole material in six columns (*Hexapla*) for the whole OT, and eight columns (*Octapla*) for the Psalms.

The work on the texts of the Bible went beyond the Greek and Hebrew, because it was in the School of Alexandria that the Bible was translated into Coptic. A longstanding tradition in the Coptic Church attributes this to the work of Pantaeus and Clement.

Origen gave his opinion about the canon of the OT, acknowledging all the books accepted by most churches now. The NT canon was the fruit of the work in the School of Alexandria, and it was not without significance that the 27 acknowledged books of the NT were first sanctioned by St. Athanasius in his Paschal letter for AD 367. Some of the books that took centuries to be accepted by other churches like the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Apocalypse were stated to be canonical more than a century earlier by Origen.

Literal Exegesis

Nothing is more unhistorical than to say that the literal sense of the Bible played a minor role in Alexandria. Origen's commentaries and homilies show how he uses his utmost skills in philology, etymology and grammar to explain key words in each verse. Every word is sacred for him, it is a medium for the incarnation of the divine Logos, and hence it is worthy of reverence and close study. He advises to treat the word of Scripture in the same way the Body of Christ is treated in the Eucharist, as he says,

“You know how carefully you receive the Body of the Lord and reverently make sure that no particle drops to the ground, lest any of the consecrated gifts be lost....But if you exercise such concern in taking care of his body -- and indeed with every right-- how can you think it a lesser crime to neglect the Word of God than his Body?”⁵

St. Didymus, no less than Origen, gives respect to the biblical text. Before discussing its spiritual meaning, he first examines what it says, its logic and structure, then he enquires into its historical or factual reference in the outside world. He does this before he proceeds to discuss any figurative meaning.⁶

Spiritual Interpretation

Alexandrian interpretation of Scripture is characterized by its fidelity to tradition. Jean Danielou insists that the method they use, which he calls '*typology*' a term which has a sense different from that of the confusing word '*allegory*.' It is the same method used by the NT and by the earlier Fathers--Hippolytus, Justin, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. Danielou gives an example from one of the homilies on Josua (2:1) on the death of Moses and adds, “Here Origen is summarizing and systematizing the whole body of traditional teaching then existing in the Church. Examples could be quoted from Paul (1 Cor. 10:4, 11; Heb. 8:5; Col. 2:16-17), Bar-

nabas, Justin and Irenaeus for every one of his symbols. It is typology at its most traditional, with its full dogmatic value, typology as an essential part of the Church's deposit.⁷

Another significant characteristic of the Alexandrian system is its consistency. Although allegory in the strict sense was occasionally used, yet the Bible was always looked at as a whole. Events and even words were followed and compared in different places of Scripture in order to form single doctrinal units. Whether in the OT or NT, words have the same theological meaning. To give one example from Origen, water always refers to Scripture. In the Homilies on Genesis, Scripture is the 'living water' which the angel showed to Agar (Gen 21:19). To its wells Rebecca came daily.⁸ Actually the brides of the Patriarchs Isaac, Jacob and Moses encountered their husbands for the first time at wells (Gen. 24:62, & 29:17; Ex. 2:15). Origen finds in this the union of the soul with Christ which can only occur through instruction in Scripture.⁹ The wells dug by Abraham and Isaac refer to the books of the OT and NT (Gen 26:18-22).¹⁰ In the Homilies on Exodus, bitter waters of Marah stand for the Law in its literal understanding; it became sweet through the mystery of the Cross. The springs of Elim refer to the NT;¹¹ the same is true of the water coming from the rock.¹² In the commentary on John, Origen says that 'the well of Jacob is the whole Scripture'.¹³

This sense of scriptural unity is felt more in the writings of St. Didymus, who follows different texts, which may seem unconnected, with one guiding principle-how each points to Christ.¹⁴

Different Spiritual Senses

Origen made one unit of the various spiritual senses known before him. For him all Scripture, whether the OT or NT, is Christ, the incarnated Word. The ultimate spiritual meaning of every text is Christ. This Christological interpretation carries at least four interconnected levels of meaning, as many as there are aspects in Christ, the Word:

- 1 The preexistent, eternal, divine *Logos*.
- 2 *Christ* as the incarnate Son of God, who suffered, died, rose and ascended to the Father where He intercedes for us till He appears again at the end of the world when He reigns in glory
- 3 The eternal word as appearing, or *incarnate* as Origen says, *in the words of Scripture*, both OT and NT.
- 4 The *mystical Christ* in the whole Church, his Body, living in her Sacraments, or dwelling in and espoused to each separate member.¹⁵

All these levels of spiritual interpretation were used in Alexandria, as well as in the NT. But clearly dominating was the mystical sense, especially in the relation of

Christ to the individual soul. This is frequent in Clement, Origen and Didymus. With Origen, this meaning includes all the others. For him, and this is evident even in his homilies, we encounter the real eternal Christ in Scripture which is a true Sacrament that unites us to him.

Origen inherited and frequently reported Philo's idea that there are three meanings in Scripture—the literal, moral and spiritual, corresponding to the three divisions of the human person—body (soma), soul (psyche) and spirit (pneuma). In practice, he only used the basic letter-spirit schema.¹⁶

In a recent monograph on Origen's method of exegesis it was shown, by examples from his writings, how he leads the hearer to an encounter with Christ, the real Teacher; Christ is actually made present through his teaching. In each verse, the hearer is carried vertically from the grammatical-historical sense, to the spiritual sense in general and to the life of today in particular. Simultaneously, while the hearer or reader moves from verse to verse, he progresses in a horizontal movement in the spiritual sense itself. This ascending movement corresponds to the stages of progress of the soul in the spiritual life under the tutelage of the Logos.¹⁷

After Origen, different, and rather confusing, terms were used for the various spiritual senses. These were carried to the West through John Cassian who, quoting the Egyptian monk Abba Nestor the Great, has three spiritual senses:

- 1 The *allegorical* or Christological
- 2 The *tropological* or moral or anthropological
- 3 The *anagogical* or eschatological

The example supplied by Cassian is 'Jerusalem' which in the literal sense is a historical city; allegorically it refers to the Church of Christ; (Ps. 46:4,5) tropologically it stands for the human soul (Ps. 147:1,2,12); anagogically it stands for the heavenly city of God (Gal. 4:26; Heb. 13:14).¹⁸

Role of Spiritual Interpretation

The early Church resorted to spiritual exegesis for an apologetic reason against three classes of people who took the OT only in its literal sense. These were mentioned in detail by Origen in his fourth book of *De Principiis* which is considered a systematic statement of his hermeneutic principles.

- 1 *The Jews*: Those refused to accept Christ as the Messiah because they were expecting the literal fulfilment of their prophecies. Also, they insisted that Christians should follow the OT rites if they consider it their book.
- 2 *The Gnostics*: Those refused to believe in the divine origin of the OT that attributes to God some anthropological passions like anger (Deut 32:22), jealousy (Exod. 20:5), and evil deeds (Is. 45:7; Amos 3:6; 1 Samuel 18:10).

- 3 *The 'simpler members of the Church'*: Those believed in the divinity of Scripture, but they accepted literally every word that described God.

While accepting every word of Scripture as inspired, Origen explained how the OT events were shadows of the New, while the NT events were shadows of the Kingdom that is to come. The Law was a preparation for the Gospel. Persons, things and events in the OT were types or figures of Christ, his Church or the human soul. Prophets were lamps that fade before Christ, the Sun of righteousness. Sacrifices ceased when the true Lamb came and offered himself.¹⁹

The Spiritual Interpreter

However, the main reason for the spiritual interpretation frequently stated by Origen was not an apologetic one. He was always hastening to go beyond the letter, and even beyond the lower spiritual meaning, in search for food for his soul and for his hearers. The central theme of his homilies was the soul's attainment of unity with God.²⁰ Origen's work was the single most significant influence in shifting the concern of biblical interpretation, not only in Alexandria but in the Church as a whole, toward becoming a way for the individual soul to attain the knowledge of God. By spiritual interpretation the soul participates in the divine pedagogy, a process that purifies, instructs and transforms it.²¹

The Alexandrian Fathers did not separate their study of Scripture from their whole spiritual life. Henry Chadwick says of Origen, "In his capacity for combining as a unity in himself intellectual passion with warm personal devotion to God in Christ and the practical virtues of a Christian, Origen is perhaps unique among the Fathers"²² However, this statement ignores the other Fathers of the same school.

Palladius described St. Didymus as leading the life of an ascetic in his cell inside Alexandria.²³ He is still described as a pious monk who did not base his faith on philosophical theory, but on his study of Scripture and his experience in worship.²⁴

This life of worship was essential for the Alexandrian Fathers in order to receive the grace needed for understanding Scripture. St. Gregory the Wonderworker describes the way Origen handled Scripture, "I have never known or heard of one who had meditated as he had on the pure and luminous words and had become so expert in fathoming their meaning and teaching them to others. I do not think he could have done that unless he had had the Spirit of God in him." In his homilies, Origen frequently asked for God's help and for the prayers of his hearers in order that the Holy Spirit may open difficult texts for him. In the homilies on Genesis (7:6), he says, "We must take care, for we are often beside the wells of running water-God's Scriptures-and yet we fail to recognize them for what they are...We must be always weeping and begging the Lord to open our eyes. The blind men sitting by the roadside at Jericho (Matt. 20:30) would not have had their eyes opened unless they had shouted at the Lord."²⁵

The Antiochene Reaction

By the fourth century, spiritual exegesis was securely established in the Church. In the last decades of the fourth century and during the fifth century a vigorous reaction against allegorism was led by theologians in Antioch, mainly Diodore of Tarsus (d.c. 390), Chrysostom, (d. 407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) and Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d.c. 466). However, closer study by modern patristic scholars has shown that the different approaches of the Alexandrian and Antiochene Schools are complimentary rather than conflicting.²⁶ Jean Danielou concludes,

“Both (schools) were equally typological. The difference between them was not, as has been said, that one was literal and the other allegorical. The exegesis of both was typological and the one was as Christological as the other; but at Antioch theologians concentrated on the catechetical tradition and laid particular stress on the part of it relating to the sacraments while the Alexandrians concentrated on what Tradition had to say about the spiritual life and put the stress on the mystical side. Both were equally rooted in Tradition.”²⁷

Against *allegoria*, the Antiochenes used the word *theoria* (=contemplation or insight.), a term found in Didymus of Alexandria²⁸ and for all practical purposes is a close equivalent of the Alexandrian *allegoria*.

The Antiochene Fathers were not, however, unanimous in rejecting allegorism. In fact, only Theodore did that. He accepted only four psalms as referring directly to Christ. He refused to acknowledge many of the OT prophecies and types which have Christological interpretations, and considered the Song of Songs a human love-song. Theodoret was actually nearer to the Alexandrian school than his master Theodore. While opposed in Christology to his contemporary St. Cyril of Alexandria, Theodoret differed from him surprisingly very little in his exegesis.²⁹ As a pastor oriented toward finding spiritual benefits for his flock, as well as a bishop engaged in apologetic argumentations against the Jews, Theodoret often rejects the literalist confines of Theodore’s interpretations. In many OT places he finds a direct prophecy of Christ or the Church (e.g. Amos 9:11, Zech 9:10, Micah 4:1 ff, Micah 5:2).³⁰

Spiritual Interpretation in the History of Exegesis

Spiritual exegesis dominated in the whole Church, both east and west and was adopted by such Fathers as Sts. Gregory of Nyssa, Hilary, Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great. Antiochene exegesis had little lasting influence. With the condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret in the 553 AD Council of Constantinople, the Antiochene heritage was looked on with suspicion. With few exceptions, spiritual interpretation was the rule during the Middle Age, and was used extensively by both Protestants and Catholics after the Reformation.³¹

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen the triumph of literal exegesis in the form of the historical critical method which deals with the human authorship of Scripture. This method succeeded in exploding our knowledge about the Bible. However, modern biblical scholars have found it spiritually barren and have called for *more-than-literal exegesis*, which deals with Scripture as the word of God and what it means to man today. Some scholars, like De Lubac, Danielou and Hanson have called for the return to the spiritual exegesis as practiced by the Fathers. Others preferred to use new terms like *Biblical Theology*, the *New Hermeneutic*, *Christian Interpretation of the OT*, the *Sensus Plenior*, and the *Typical Sense*.³² In one way or the other, each treats Scripture using one of the different Spiritual senses described in Alexandria more than seventeen centuries ago.

References and Notes:

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- 3 Trojesen KJ: *Hermeneutic Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1986: 5-12
- 4 Danielou J: *Origen*. Translated by Mitchell W. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955: 131.
- 5 *Exodus Homilies* 13, 3. In *Spirit and Fire*, by von Balthasar HU. Tr. by Daly-RJ, Cath. Univ. of America; Washington, 1984; 263
- 6 Young F: *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983: 88
- 7 Danielou J, *op. cit.*, 147, 148.
- 8 Origen: *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, 7:6 & 10:2 Tr. by Heine RE. Washington: The Cath. Univ. of America, 1982:134, 160
- 9 *Ibid.*, 10:5 (P. 166).
- 10 *Ibid.*, 13:2,3 (P. 186-192).
- 11 *Ibid.*, *Exod. Hom.* 7:1,2 & 3 (P. 300-305)
- 12 *Ibid.*, 11:2 (P. 356, 357)
- 13 Origen: *Jo Co* 13:5. Tr. in *Spirit and Fire*, *op. cit.*: 112
- 14 Young, *op. cit.*: 87.
- 15 Danielou, *op. cit.*: 161, 162. *Spirit and Fire*, *op. cit.*: XIV
- 16 Danielou, *op. cit.*: 161. *Spirit and Fire*, *op. cit.*: XVI
- 17 Trojesen, *op. cit.*: 133, 135.
- 18 Cassian: *Conferences*, 14:8. In *NPNF*, second series, Vol. XI; 437-38. Brown RE: *Hermeneutics*. In *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Englewood, NJ, 1968, 71:41.
- 19 Details of this are given by Danielous (*op. cit.*, 144-173), with reference to many of Origen's works particularly his commentaries on Matthew, John and Song of Songs, and his homilies on Exodus, Leviticus and Josua. Danielou concludes that the Law prefigures the Gospel in Origen's exegesis. However, this view has been recently challenged by Trojesen (*op. cit.*, 6) who finds that Origen really says that these OT passages figure the coming of Christ, not the NT.
- 20 Trigg JW: *Origen*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983; 179.
- 21 Trigg JW: *Biblical Interpretation*. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988: 24, 26.
- 22 Chadwick H: *Alexandrian Christianity*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954: 186.
- 23 Palladius: *Lausaic History*, 4. Translated by Meyer RT. Maryland: Newman Press, 1965: 35.
- 24 Young, *op. cit.*: 91.
- 25 Danielou, *op. cit.*: 158-159.

- 26 Trigg: *Biblical Interpretation*, *op. cit.*: 31.
- 27 Danielou, *op. cit.*: 164
- 28 Young, *op. cit.*: 86
- 29 Trigg: *Biblical Interpretation*, *op. cit.*: 33-34.
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- 31 Brown R: *Hermeneutics*, *op. cit.*: 40-44
- 32 *Ibid.* 45-79.