HOW THE BIBLE HAS BEEN INTERPRETED IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

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Christianity was born in the midst of a people who already possessed scriptures. Although the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was not yet fixed, there was general agreement as to a basic list of books regarded as authoritative. From the very beginning, the early Christian community laid claim on these Hebrew Scriptures as its own. Eventually, there would be debates between Christians and Jews, as well as among Christians, about exactly which of these ancient books—if any—should be considered "Scripture." Yet even before such debates erupted it became clear that the vast majority of the people of Israel would not accept the Christian understanding of Hebrew Scripture. Christians claimed that Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified by order of the Roman Empire, was the Christ, the Messiah. Most Jews rejected that claim. Such divergent understandings of the Hebrew Scriptures forced Christians to interpret the texts anew, in order to show how they pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. Thus it is true, as Rowan Greer has said, that "basic to the task of the formative period is the transformation of the Hebrew Scriptures so that they may become a witness to Christ."[1]

On the other hand, Christians were not the first to face the task of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures. On the contrary, from the very beginning the people of Israel were constantly faced with the need to interpret the events of their history and the writings that spoke of them. When the Hebrew prophets looked at the exile and return from Babylon, they saw those events in the light of their ancestors' bondage in Egypt and their liberation from that bondage. Later, when they had to struggle against Syrian and Greek power, they saw that struggle in the light of both the exodus from Egypt and the return from exile. Thus the Hebrew Scripture that Christians claimed for themselves contained much of the history of its own interpretation—indeed, much of it was the record of that history.

The same is true of the part of the Bible that we now call the New Testament (NT). The writers of the NT did not consciously set out to write Christian scriptures parallel to those the church had in common with Israel. Rather, they interpreted the events of Jesus' life and of the life of the church, in the light of the ancient scriptures of Israel. In doing so, they provided the earliest Christian interpretations of the Bible, and these in turn came to form part of the Christian Bible—just as the prophets' interpretations of the exodus came to form part of the Hebrew Bible (HB).

This article deals only tangentially with NT interpretations of Hebrew Scriptures, centering attention on the history of Christian interpretation outside the

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[1] James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 111.

NT. Yet, it is important to remember that what we are retelling is not a history that began after the writing of the NT, or apart from it, but a history that actually continues the very process by which the entire Bible—Old Testament (OT) as well as NT—was written.

THE EARLY CHURCH

In a way, the most important and urgent question the early church had to face regarding biblical interpretation was that of the continuity or discontinuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian gospel. This was the major point at issue in the early conflict between Christianity and traditional Judaism, at least as the book of Acts depicts it. Brought before the Sanhedrin, first Peter and then Stephen claim that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the fulfillment of Hebrew Scripture, and that any who oppose Christian preaching are to be counted with those who in ancient times also opposed the will of God. This the leaders of the Sanhedrin cannot accept, and it is for that reason that Peter and John are flogged and Stephen is stoned. Two main points are at issue here: the resurrection of Jesus (or his glorification, for Stephen speaks of Jesus' being at the right hand of God, and not literally of his being resurrected) and the interpretation of Scripture. Clearly, the leaders of the Sanhedrin cannot accept the claim that Jesus has been raised from the dead. But closely tied to this is the fact that in order to accept such a claim they would also have to agree to a particular interpretation of Scripture; one that claims Jesus as indeed the Messiah announced by the prophets and anointed by God for the salvation of Israel. Thus the debate is not only about Jesus and his resurrection, but also about the meaning of Scripture. The first Christians—who are also Jews—claim that Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture and that there is a clear continuity between the biblical tradition and their own teaching; the traditional Jews reject that claim, seeing a radical discontinuity between their Bible and what the Christians preach.

Even among Christians, however, the issue was not simple. It was not just a matter of reading through the entire OT and clearly seeing Jesus and his message in every line. As any preacher or Sunday school teacher knows, much in the OT is not easy to relate to the Christian message. There are commandments to annihilate entire cities, destroying everyone and everything in sight. There are instructions for worship and sacrifice that hardly seem relevant. There are lists of names that are not even interesting. What are Christians to do with all that, and many other similar materials?

A radical but rather simple solution was to reject the OT altogether. The most famous early Christian leader to take this position was Marcion. The son of a Christian bishop and a firm believer in Paul's message of grace, Marcion came to the conclusion that the god of the OT is not the same as the Father of Jesus Christ. It is not that the OT is false or is a human invention that passes for a divine word, but rather that it is the revelation of another god than that of the Christian gospel. Indeed, the good news according to Marcion is precisely that—far above the vindictive, jealous, punctilious god of the OT, who has made this world—there is the gracious, loving, forgiving God of Jesus and Paul, by whose grace we are forgiven.[2] Therefore, although the OT is trustworthy in the sense of being a true revelation of a truly existing god, it is not authoritative, since the one who is revealed in it is not the supreme, loving God of the gospel.

This interpretation of the OT and its contrast with the Christian message is based on a similar contrast between cosmology and soteriology—between Marcion's view of the world and his understanding of salvation. Marcion sees no good in the physical world, which to him is nothing but a prison in which spiritual reality—namely, human souls—is entrapped. The god of the OT, the merciless Jehovah, is also a god whose values are so twisted that after making this world he "saw that it was good." It is a god who grants spiritual significance to material things, and for that reason requires bloody sacrifices and burnt offerings. Jehovah's jealousy and vindictiveness is all of one piece with his having created this physical world, in which our souls are deceived and entrapped. In contrast to this god of creation stands the God of salvation, whose message is one of pure love and grace. This is the God of Jesus and of Paul, but certainly not of the OT, who therefore must be rejected, not as false, but as radically discontinuous with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jehovah is the creator and thus the god of this world, but above him stands the Father, the "foreign God" whose message Christians must proclaim.

Oddly enough, this manner of interpreting the OT and its relationship to the gospel, while having a strong anti-Jewish element, agrees with the Jewish claim that there is no real continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and what Christians proclaim. Marcion and Judaism agree that Christianity and Judaism are different religions, so that one is not a legitimate outcome of the other. Their point of disagreement—and an all-important one—is which of the two is legitimate.

Marcion's views were not entirely original or unique, for others, particularly among the Gnostics, also disparaged the OT. Earlier in the second century, a certain Cerdo, who probably met Marcion in Rome c. 140, taught that the god of the OT is characterized by a sort of vindictive justice that is contrary to grace. The Ophites (from the Greek ὄφις *ophis*, "snake") made the serpent the hero of the creation story, who helps humankind advance from the ignorance to which the creator god had subjected them. Similar views were held by other Gnostic sects of which little is known, such as the Naasenes, the Cainites, and the Sethites.

The very number of people and sects holding to such negative views of the OT shows how attractive they were. That attraction is easy to understand; if one believes that the OT is the revelation of a different god, or of a power of evil, one is excused from the need to interpret it. All the difficulties disappear. It no longer matters that Jehovah ordered all the people in Jericho to be slaughtered, or that there are strange laws and rituals in Leviticus and Numbers, or that Jehovah boasts of being "a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me." It is now possible to start anew, without any burdensome baggage of ancient scriptures.

This seemingly easy solution to the problem of OT interpretation, however, creates new problems. Marcion's strongest critic was Tertullian, who combined theological perspicacity with a keen sense of humor. Making fun of Marcion's dichotomy between creation and redemption, Tertullian complains that Marcion's God has not made even a miserable vegetable, while the supposedly inferior god was making and ruling all of this world. Where was Marcion's God all the while? Centuries later, Esnik of Colb, an Armenian who lived in the fifth century, posed a similar question: "Why did the Stranger not take pity on mankind till twenty-nine generations were in Hell?"[3]

The point of such criticism should be clear: To deny all validity to the OT is to turn Christianity into a religion that has nothing to do with human history and to make its God a Johnny-come-lately whose supposed love for humanity is thereby implicitly denied. Furthermore, Marcion's "solution" was unacceptable to the vast majority of Christians for several other reasons. It denied the doctrine of creation and, by implication, of providence. By making the physical world evil, it tended to imply that the Savior could not have come in the flesh—Marcion himself appears to have denied the physical birth of Jesus. For similar reasons, such a view had difficulties with the doctrine of the final resurrection, so cherished by Christians. For all these reasons—and many others—the early church was not ready simply to discard the OT. It was precisely this decision to claim a body of Scripture written centuries earlier and under different circumstances that made it necessary for Christians to find ways to interpret the OT.

Before turning to that matter, however, it is necessary to point out another contribution Marcion made to the history of the Christian Bible and its interpretation: the very idea of a NT. From the beginning the Christian church had adopted the OT as Scripture. Although from an early date specifically Christian writings used as authoritative were in circulation—in particular the Gospels and the letters of Paul—apparently no one saw the need to compile and define a list of such specifically Christian Scriptures. It was Marcion who saw that need, made urgent for him by his rejection of the OT. If the OT is not revealed Scripture—or if it is the revealed Scripture of the wrong god—Christians are left without any scripture at all, unless they can take some of their earliest writings and declare them to have the authority of inspired scripture. This was precisely what Marcion did. Since he was convinced that no one had understood the gospel of grace as well as Paul, the Pauline epistles were the core of his canon. To this was added the Gospel of Luke, on the basis that it was written by Paul's faithful companion. Naturally, in order to be consistent, Marcion had to expunge from this canon all references to the OT, which he declared to be Judaizing additions to the original text. The main point, however, is that, having rejected the entire OT, Marcion was forced to develop an alternative list of authoritative books, and thus offered the first canon of the NT.

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[2] For this reason, the subtitle of Harnack's classical work on Marcion is particularly appropriate: *The Gospel of the Foreign God*. A. von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1960).

[3] J. M. Schmid, *Marcion and His Influence*, trans. E. C. Blackman (London: SPCK, 1948) 70.

In any case, the early church had to interpret the OT so as to relate it to the church's message and its own life. This process obviously started the very day the church was born, for initially all its members were Jews, who, therefore, sought to understand the events surrounding the life and death of Jesus, and their own life as a community, in terms of the Hebrew Scriptures. The entire NT stands as a witness to that process, for its various authors are constantly relating their message to the sacred texts of the Hebrew people. Sometimes the process and the issues it raises take center stage, as in Paul's letter to the Romans, where the issue is precisely how the message of Christianity relates to the revelation of God to Israel. Yet, even when this question does not appear at the very center of theological discourse, all the authors of the NT agree that there is a close relationship between the OT and the gospel they proclaim. On this matter, as on many others, the early church followed the lead of the NT writers.

Even after one has agreed that the OT, just as much as the NT, is Christian Scripture, the question remains: How is the OT to be interpreted so as to show and understand its relationship to the gospel? That was the central question of biblical interpretation for the first generations of Christians, and we will explore it in the next few paragraphs.

Before we tackle that exploration, however, it is important to remember that the early church posed and experienced this question very differently than we do today. To us, it seems quite obvious that the writer of Leviticus or Isaiah deals with questions of his time, very different from those of the early centuries of the Christian era or from those of our own time. Our tendency, therefore, is to begin by trying to understand the original meaning of a text, in its historic setting, and then ask how it relates to our setting—or even if it relates at all. That was not the attitude of the early church as it approached the OT—nor of any of the ancients, as they approached any authoritative text whatsoever. They took for granted that the text belonged to their community and referred to it, and from that premise moved on to explore what the text actually said to them. Rowan Greer has expressed these contrasting approaches:

> To the modern reader, early Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures appear to be transformations of the biblical text that alter its meaning. We tend to think of an original sense, understood historically, and to regard theological interpretation as a departure from the true meaning of the text. Nothing could be farther from the point of view of religious writers in late antiquity. Pagan, Jew, and Christian were united in assuming the general correlation of sacred texts with the beliefs and practices of religious communities. Scripture represented the authority for those beliefs and practices, but at the same time the religious convictions of the community unveiled the true meaning of Scripture. Far from supplying a new meaning, the transformations of sacred books disclosed their true significance.[4]

This point is crucial if we are to understand early Christian biblical interpretation. If we forget it, it may appear to us at times that the ancients are not taking the text seriously, but are interpreting it according to their convenience, without regard for its historical setting and original meaning. Were we to level such an accusation at them, we might be surprised to hear them respond that it is we who do not take the text seriously, for we seek to analyze it as an objective, lifeless reality, when in truth it is a living text, whose significance is precisely in its relationship to a living community of belief and practice.

Having raised that caveat, we may now explore the various manners in which early Christian writers interpreted the biblical text. In this regard, it has become customary among modern scholars to classify such interpretations according to three categories: prophecy, allegory, and typology. That classification is a valid tool, as long as one is not too rigid about it. Indeed, although the ancients did distinguish in theory among these three methods of biblical interpretation, in fact they often passed almost imperceptibly from one to the other, and no ancient Christian writer is entirely consistent in their use. Again, they were not as interested in the theory of biblical interpretation as they were in helping the community hear the word of Scripture. Therefore, when we today seek to systematize their hermeneutical principles and procedures, we must be careful lest we forget the living faith and the living community in which those principles and procedures were or were not applied.

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[4] Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 126.

Prophecy. Let us look first at prophecy, which is the ancient method of biblical interpretations that modern readers will find less foreign, since it is often applied to this day. Although in the Bible a "prophet" is not necessarily nor primarily one who foretells the future, but rather one who speaks in the name of God, in most early Christian literature the term *prophecy* is already used, as it is today, in the sense of prediction. That is what is meant by most ancient Christian writers, and by modern historians of biblical interpretation, by a "prophetic" method of interpreting scripture. Briefly stated, this method sees in the words of an ancient text an announcement of something that would happen in the future—most commonly at the time of Christ, but also at the time in which the interpreter is living. This method is found throughout the NT, although not as often as one might think. (As we shall see further on, much of what we tend to read as prophecy may have been intended as typology.)

Prophecy is certainly a preferred method of reading the OT in the Gospel of Matthew, where the theme of the fulfillment of prophecy appears repeatedly. According to Matthew, the birth of Jesus "took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet" (Matt 1:22 NRSV), and the same is true of his birth in Bethlehem (Matt 2:5-6), the flight into Egypt (Matt 2:15), the slaughter of the innocents (Matt 2:17-18), the decision to settle in Nazareth (Matt 2:23), and a host of other events.

The same method was employed by other early Christian writers, both in the NT and outside of it. Very soon lists of prooftexts seem to have developed—what scholars call lists of Testimonia—for it is clear that different authors, some of whom do not seem to know each other's work, are quoting the same texts in a similar sequence. Whether such Testimonia were actual written lists of texts and their interpretation, or were transmitted orally through preaching and teaching—much as today's preachers borrow illustrations from each other—is not clear. The discovery of a Jewish list of testimonies at Qumran would seem to indicate that, even before the advent of Christianity, there were such written lists, some of them defending or promoting particular positions within Judaism, and that Christianity took up and adapted, if not the lists themselves, at least the practice of developing and employing such lists.

Prophecy had the decided advantage that it was a fairly simple and straightforward method of showing the continuity between the religion of Israel and Christianity. Significantly, early Christian writers used prophecy, so to speak, "in both directions": They used it, much as it still is used today in some circles, to argue that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and that, therefore, if Jews are to be true to their Scriptures, they must accept him as such. But it was also used against Marcion and others who denied the authority of the OT, in order to prove that the OT was indeed the word of God—if Isaiah, for instance, predicted the virgin birth, this proves that Isaiah must have been truly inspired.

One of the fullest ancient discussions on the interpretation of the OT as prophecy referring to Jesus and his followers is to be found in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*. In this work Justin depicts himself as debating the meaning of the OT with a Jewish scholar. According to Justin:

> Sometimes He [the Holy Spirit] uttered words about what was to take place, as if it was then taking place, or had taken place. And unless those who read perceive this art, they will not be able to follow the words of the prophet as they ought. For example's sake, I shall repeat some prophetic passages, that you may understand what I say. When he speaks by Isaiah, "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and like a lamb before the shearer," He speaks as if the suffering had already taken place.[5]

Strictly speaking, this is what is meant by an interpretation of the OT as prophecy. Note that, according to Justin, the words in such prophetic utterances did not refer to either the prophet's own time or to the past, but rather to the future—and this is true even when they are in the present or the past tense. In this sense, then, a "prophecy" is a word or saying whose true meaning is not revealed until its fulfillment in a future event.

While this method of biblical interpretation proved to be a powerful tool for early Christian polemics, it clearly had its shortcomings. These are mainly two. The first is that, although this method makes sense of a number of passages, which then become favorite prooftexts, there are numerous other passages for whose interpretation it is utterly useless. Were we to read the entire OT, marking every single passage that could be considered prophetic by any stretch of the imagination, still most of the OT would remain unmarked. Lengthy legal and ceremonial sections, historical narratives, genealogies, poetry, and other materials are part of the OT, but they cannot be interpreted as prophecy. What, then, do we do with such passages? Do we simply declare that, because they do not foretell the future, they are not part of God's revelation? Do we simply ignore them, declaring that they are no longer relevant? The reading of the OT as prophecy, although applicable to some passages, is useless for most others.

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[5] *Dialogue with Trypho* 114.1 (ANF, 1:256).

The second shortcoming of a reading of the OT as a series of prophecies is that it makes the authority and the applicability of the text depend on its fulfillment, and be limited to it. If what Justin says is true, and the Holy Spirit directly inspired a prophet to utter words that referred, not to the prophet's own time, but to events seven or eight centuries into the future, the clear implication is that the words themselves made no sense and had no value to the prophet, nor to all the intervening generations until their fulfillment. Taking Justin's example of Isa 53:7, if the "sheep led to the slaughter" is Jesus and none other, what meaning could these words possibly have had for the prophet and his contemporaries? What meaning could they have had for a devout Jew living in the fourth century BCE? Or one could illustrate this difficulty with an example of some of the modern interpretations of the book of Revelation. According to one of those interpretations, quite popular a few decades ago, the "beast" in Revelation whose number is 666 was none other than Soviet communism. Does that mean that this particular passage had no meaning for those first readers in Asia Minor to whom it was addressed? That it had no meaning for the many generations of Christians who have lived between the first and the twentieth centuries? That it had to wait for Stalin and communism in order to become significant for the church?

Allegory. Precisely such difficulties as these made other methods of biblical interpretation necessary. One of these other methods was allegory. Christians did not invent or create the allegorical method of interpretation, just as they were not the first to read the OT as a series of prophecies. On the contrary, allegorical interpretation of sacred and other ancient texts had been common practice in the Mediterranean basin long before the advent of Christianity. Among the Greeks and those who shared their cultural inheritance, it had become customary to interpret the ancient myths, particularly the poems of Homer and Hesiod, as allegories referring to various virtues or to the truths expounded more systematically by later philosophers.[6]

The same procedure had become popular among Jews. Some of the material discovered in Qumran, as well as a number of rabbinic writings of the same period, already provide examples of allegorical interpretation of ancient texts. However, it was particularly in Alexandria that this method of biblical interpretation flourished among Jews who sought to show to their pagan neighbors that the Hebrew Scriptures were not as "barbaric" as might otherwise appear. Already in the second century BCE, a certain Aristobulos wrote an *Exegesis of the Law of Moses,* whose purpose was to demonstrate that "Moses" had stated in allegory the same truths that the Greek philosophers later expounded, and therefore that whatever there was of value in Greek philosophy had been taken from Jewish Scriptures. Along the same lines, Philo of Alexandria, who was roughly a contemporary of Jesus, wrote extensively on the true meaning of sacred scripture, interpreting it as a vast allegory, and thereby making it compatible with what he and his contemporaries considered the best of Greek philosophy.

Allegory thus had the advantage that it allowed exegetes to respond to those who objected that the biblical narratives were too crass and "unphilosophical." According to those who interpreted Scripture allegorically, in such cases the crassness resides not in the biblical text, but in the objection itself, which does not realize that the Bible speaks in a "spiritual" sense.

> For who that has understanding will suppose that the first, and second, and third day, and the evening and the morning, existed without a sun, a moon, and stars? and that the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? And who is so foolish as to suppose that God, after the manner of a husbandman, planted a paradise in Eden, towards the east, and placed in it a tree of life, visible and palpable, so that one tasting of the fruit by the bodily teeth obtained life? and again, that one was a partaker of good and evil by masticating what was taken from a tree? And if God is said to walk in the paradise in the evening, and Adam to hide himself under a tree, I do not suppose that any one doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance, and not literally.[7]

Probably the best way to communicate the essence of the allegorical method of biblical interpretation is to examine the hermeneutical method of that master of allegorical interpretation who wrote those words, Origen of Alexandria. Numerous allegorical interpretations of various passages of the OT had been given by Christians before the time of Origen. At some point in the second century, the author of the so-called epistle of *Barnabas* made ample use of allegory—although not exclusively. Later, just before the time of Origen, Clement of Alexandria likewise provided a number of examples of such interpretations. But none of them equalled Origen, the great teacher who flourished in Alexandria early in the third century.

Origen approached Scripture as both a devout Christian and a Platonist. As a Christian, he was convinced that God spoke through the sacred text and that such speech demanded obedience. It is easy to underscore the freedom of interpretation that results from Origen's allegorical method so that one forgets that he was a true and faithful son of the church, ready to seek martyrdom at an early age and never teaching anything contrary to Christian tradition. On the other hand, as a Platonist, Origen yearned for eternal, immutable truth, the sort of truth that cannot be perceived by the senses, and he expected every text of Scripture to yield that sort of truth. He was also convinced that, just as the physical world points to spiritual realities, so also do the words of Scripture point to a deeper truth beyond their literal sense.

A parallelism between the tripartite composition of human beings and the meaning of Scripture stands behind Origen's theory of the triple sense of Scripture. According to him, a scriptural text usually has three meanings: a literal or physical meaning, a moral or psychic meaning, and a spiritual or intellectual meaning. The reference to the tripartite constitution of a human being, as body, soul, and spirit, is obvious. These various meanings are hierarchically ordered, just as body, soul, and spirit are hierarchically ordered. And, just as body, soul, and spirit are all God's creation, so also are all the various meanings of a text true and valid, although one should always seek the higher meanings.

This is at least the theory behind Origen's exegetical method. In truth, he seldom expounds a particular text according to its threefold meaning. On occasion, he declares that a text is clearly metaphorical, so that a strictly literal interpretation would be wrong. Such is the case, for instance, of John 15, where Jesus speaks of himself as a vine. At other times, Origen grows enthusiastic with the manifold meanings he can discover in a text, so that rather than three he expounds four, five, or even more meanings. Most often, however, he simply elucidates two senses, the literal and the spiritual or allegorical. As R. P. C. Hanson, one of his foremost interpreters, has said, "On the whole the 'moral' sense plays no significant part in Origen's exegesis, not because he had no occasion to draw edifying or devotional lessons from the text of the Bible but because in the practical work of expounding Scripture he found it impossible to maintain the distinction between the 'moral' and the 'spiritual' sense, and the former became absorbed in the later."[8]

In any case, what is important for our purposes is that Origen usually approaches a biblical text seeking to discover a meaning hidden behind the obvious words, and couched in allegory. In this general approach, he was no innovator, for Jewish and Christian scholars alike had long found it expedient to interpret the difficult passages allegorically. The author of the so-called epistle of *Barnabas,* for instance, could make no sense of a literal interpretation of the prohibition of eating pork, and therefore declared that what this precept means is that believers must not associate with people who remember their Master only when they are in need, as pigs do when they are hungry.[9] Likewise, the commandment regarding circumcision referred to what Paul calls the "circumcision of the heart," and it was an evil angel that led Jews to take it literally.[10] What Origen did add to this approach, already quite common in his time, was the thorough and systematic manner in which he applied it.

To Origen, the entire Bible is an allegorical document, and its unity is such that the entire document must be used to interpret each of its parts. This is a rather common hermeneutical principle, often expressed in our days in statements like "The Bible is its best interpreter," or "A text must be read in the light of its context." When Origen applies this principle, however, what he means is that, since every word has a hidden meaning, one must search throughout the Bible in order to find that meaning. R. P. C. Hanson has collected a few of the hundreds of words to which Origen thus assigns an allegorical meaning:

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[6] On this point, see Robert M. Grant, *The Earliest Lives of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1961) 45-46.

[7] Origen, *De principiis,* 4, 1, 16 (ANF, 4:365).

[8] R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM, 1959) 243.

[9] *Barn.* 10.3.

[10] *Barn.* 9.4-5.

> "Horse" in the Bible usually means "voice"; "today" means "the present age"; "leaven" means "teaching"; "silver" and "trumpet" mean "word"; "clouds" . . . mean "holy ones"; "feet" mean "the counsel by which we tread the journey of life"; "well" means "the teaching of the Bible"; "linen" means "chastity"; "thighs" mean "beginning"; "unmixed wine" means "misfortune"; "bottle" means "body"; "secret" and "treasury" mean "the reason."[11]

A second hermeneutical principle to which Origen refers repeatedly is that "nothing is to be said of God that is unworthy of him." In practical terms, this means that any passage whose literal reading implies something unworthy of the Godhead must be interpreted only in a "spiritual" sense. Obviously, it also means that no allegorical interpretation must imply anything unworthy of the divine. Such "unworthiness," however, must be understood not only in the moral sense—God can do no evil—but also in the metaphysical. In this sense, anthropomorphisms, or any hint of change in the Godhead, must be rejected as unworthy of God.

Finally, a most important hermeneutical principle for Origen is that the interpreter must be subject to "the rule of faith." Scripture is to be interpreted within the community of faith, as that community's book, and not as a private hunting ground for the exegete. Origen's understanding of "the rule of faith" was rather wide; therefore, he felt free to speculate on such matters as the preexistence of souls and the existence of past and future worlds. Even so, he considers himself subject to "the rule of faith," and will not knowingly contradict it—on occasion he warns his readers that a particular interpretation, while not contradicting the doctrine of the church, goes beyond what that doctrine has established and must be taken as his own personal speculation.

Origen's understanding of the Bible as belonging to the church, and of his own task as an interpreter as bound by the rule of faith, is crucial. Without such restraints, Hanson's dictum would be true, that Origen "transforms the Bible into a divine cross-word puzzle the solution to whose clues is locked in Origen's bosom."[12] Hanson is correct in that Origen never gives sufficient reason for coming to such conclusions as *horse* means "voice," and that *linen* means "chastity." In that sense, it is true that the solution to the apparent puzzle of the meaning of Scripture is locked in Origen's bosom. What is not true, however, is that Origen is ready to interpret Scripture according to his own personal whim, as if he stands alone before the sacred text. On the contrary, he makes it very clear that the text belongs to the community and that it must be interpreted on that basis.

Even though Origen considered himself a faithful exponent of Christian truth, many of his contemporaries disagreed and considered him a heretic. After his death, some saw in his teachings the germ of a number of controversies and heretical doctrines that greatly distressed the life of the church. By the sixth century, many of his more extreme views—and some that he probably never held, but that were generally ascribed to him—had been officially condemned as heretical. Throughout that process, many people believed that the source—or at least the justification—of Origen's most outlandish views was his allegorical interpretation of Scripture, which allowed him to pour into the biblical text whatever doctrine he later wished to extract from it. For that reason and others, although allegorical interpretation continued to be quite common, it was distrusted.

Compared with prophecy, allegory had the advantage of being able to find meaning in any and all texts of Scripture, while prophecy served only to interpret those texts that could somehow be shown to be fulfilled in later events. On the other hand, it had the decided disadvantage of making the interpreter master of the text and its meaning, rather than vice versa. The methods also coincide in that the stress is on the *words* of the text, rather than in the events to which a text refers. It is important to stress this fact, for modern readers might be inclined to think that an allegorical interpretation makes the words of a text less important, when in fact the opposite is true. Since the sense of a text is to be found in the hidden meaning of its words, every word is of utmost importance. It is for this reason that Origen devoted so much effort to establishing the exact text of Scripture, as witnessed by his monumental Hexapla. It is also for this reason that, when two parallel texts differ, he feels constrained to consider them altogether different—as in the case of the Lord's Prayer, where Origen declares that the two texts that appear in the Gospels refer to two separate occasions.

The main difference is that, while prophecy takes the words quite literally, allegory takes them as profound metaphors needing to be elucidated. Also, while prophecy usually looks to the fulfillment of a particular prediction in a particular event, allegory tends to relate the text not so much to events as to eternal and moral truths.

Typology. The third method of biblical interpretation that was current in the early church is typology. This method is discussed by Justin Martyr in the same text that has been partially quoted above, in which he compares and relates it to prophecy: "For the Holy Spirit sometimes brought about that something, which was the type of the future, should be done clearly; sometimes He uttered words about what was to take place, as if it was then taking place, or had taken place."[13]

In this brief passage, it is important to note the contrast Justin makes between "words" *(logoi)* and "types" *(typoi)*. The first refer to what we have called prophecy; there are words in the sacred text that refer to future events—particularly the events of the life of Christ and the birth of the church. In the "types," by contrast, what the Holy Spirit directs is not the actual words of the writer, but the events of which the writer speaks. Both point to the future, but in one case what points to the future is the text itself, and in the other it is the event of which the text speaks.

This may be clarified by means of some examples from Justin himself:

> The mystery, then, of the lamb which God enjoined to be sacrificed as the Passover, was a type of Christ; with whose blood, in proportion to their faith in Him, they anoint their houses, i.e., themselves, who believe in Him.[14]
>
> And the offering of fine flour, sirs, . . . which was prescribed to be present on behalf of those purified from leprosy, was a type of the bread of the Eucharist, the celebration of which our Lord Jesus Christ prescribed.[15]
>
> Hence also Jacob . . . being himself a type of Christ, had married the two handmaids of his two free wives, and of them begat sons, for the purpose of indicating beforehand that Christ would receive even all those who amongst Japheth's race are descendants of Canaan, equally with the free, and would have the children as fellow-heirs.[16]

In these three quotations, Justin actually uses the word *type*. What he means by this is that there are past events and commandments ordained and ordered by God so as to point to a future event—most often to Jesus Christ and the Christian life. To a modern reader, such interpretations may seem as far-fetched as the most capricious of Origen's allegories. To the ancients, however, there was an important difference: While an allegorical interpretation does away with the historical meaning of the text, a typological interpretation sees the meaning in the earlier event itself, whose historicity it does not deny. Justin does not say that the Jews were not supposed to sacrifice the paschal lamb, or that to understand the passage in the OT as referring to an actual lamb is a misinterpretation. On the contrary, he asserts that God commanded that the paschal lamb be sacrificed, and that God did this in order to have that lamb point to Jesus and his sacrifice. This was what the ancients meant by "typology," and they often insisted that it was very different from a mere allegorical interpretation. In typology, the stress lies on the event itself—and not on the words—prefiguring other events. This was stated quite clearly by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons late in the second century: "It is not by means of visions alone which were seen, and words which were proclaimed, but also in actual works, that He was beheld by the prophets, in order that through them He might prefigure and show forth future events beforehand."[17]

Although some of Justin's typological interpretations of events and commandments in the OT, as quoted above, may appear artificial and even capricious to most modern readers, they are in fact based on a coherent view of history. Justin does not believe that he is bringing to the text or to the biblical narrative an element foreign to it, but rather that he is uncovering the relationship of that narrative to the entire course of human history, ever since creation. For Justin, as for Irenaeus and other early Christians, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are not merely the result of historical circumstance. They are not even God's last-minute remedy to the human condition. They are, rather, the very goal of history, for which God had planned from the beginning and to which all of creation and all of history point. According to Irenaeus, the Word incarnate in

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[11] Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 247-48.
[12] Ibid., 248.

[13] *Dialogue with Trypho* 114.1 (ANF, 1:256).
[14] Ibid., 40.1 (ANF, 1:214).
[15] Ibid., 41.1 (ANF, 1:215).
[16] Ibid., 140.1 (ANF, 1:269).

[17] *Adv. haer.* 4.20.12 (ANF, 1:492).

Jesus was the model that God used in creating Adam and Eve. And according to Justin, all of creation is patterned after the cross, which he sees in the shape of sails and ploughs, and even in the human body:

> For consider all the things in the world, whether without this form they could be administered or have any community. For the sea is not traversed except that trophy which is called a sail abide safe in the ship; and the earth is not ploughed without it: diggers and mechanics do not do their work, except with tools that have this shape. And the human form differs from that of the irrational animals in nothing else than in its being erect and having the hands extended, and having on the face extending from the forehead what is called the nose, through which there is respiration for the living creature; and this shows no other form than that of the cross.[18]

Thus typology involves an entire view of history and of the gospel within it—as do also prophecy and allegory.[19] Allegory tends to look for eternal, perennial meanings in a text. Its interest lies, not in history, but in eternal truth. Therefore, it reads the text as a shadow or a sign of changeless realities beyond—much as Platonism looks at the physical, changing world as a shadow of the intellectual, changeless world. It is for this reason that "very often even when Origen defends the historical truth of a passage it appears to be quite unrelated to what he regards as its true meaning."[20] Prophecy focuses on the historical fulfillment of a text and in this sense places history closer to the center, but it still sees no meaning in history except as the occasion on which someone was guided by the Spirit to speak words relating to the future. Typology, however, goes beyond prophecy in that it focuses on events at both ends of the equation; it is a matter of events pointing to events. Although past events did point to Jesus Christ—or to the life of the church—they did have meaning in themselves, for they were part of God's guidance of history towards its goal.

Thus a single passage from the OT might be interpreted differently by Christians, while still relating it to their own situation. Take for instance the well-known passage from Isaiah 53:7: "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent" (NIV). Interpreted prophetically, this passage clearly refers to Jesus and to none other. Before the time of Jesus, it had no meaning or applicability, except in pointing to the future. After the time of Jesus, its only significance is in confirming that Jesus is indeed the one announced by the prophet. If one interprets it allegorically, one tries to find hidden meanings in words like *lamb* or *slaughter,* and one may come to the conclusion that the passage means, for instance, that true virtue, like a sheep, does not defend itself, but is willing to give of itself to others, as a sheep goes before the shearer in order to give up its wool, which will warm and comfort others. If one interprets the passage typologically, one will agree that the passage refers to Jesus, but that this is so because God has so ordered history that the just are repeatedly killed and persecuted for the redemption of others. On this basis, it is quite possible that the passage, although correctly applied to Jesus, originally referred to the prophet himself or to Israel or to a particular leader. Also, since history continues along the same pattern, it is also possible to apply the passage to ourselves without thereby denying that it refers primarily to Jesus; when the church suffers, the pattern of which the prophet spoke, and of which Jesus is the supreme instance, appears once again.

These three methods of biblical interpretation—prophecy, allegory, and typology—were widely used in the early church. Virtually every ancient Christian writer made use of prophecy, both because it was fairly simple and straightforward and because there was a tradition of such interpretation. Prophecy, however, did not apply to most of the OT; therefore, ancient Christians had recourse in varying degrees to both allegory and typology.

Of these two, the most common in the very early church seems to have been typology, which appears repeatedly in the NT. Paul employs it, for instance, when he refers to "the spiritual rock that followed them [the ancestors in the desert]" and then declares that "the rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:4 NRSV). He also applies the same method, although he calls it an allegory, in Galatians 4, where he compares the son of the slave to the son of the free; he does not mean that those events narrated in Genesis did not actually take place or that their significance lies in some hidden meaning of the words themselves, but that the events were a prefiguring of the present situation of Christians. Even some passages that at first sight appear to be cases of prophetic interpretation could also be typological in nature. For instance, when Matthew declares that the flight into Egypt took place in order "to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son' " (Matt 2:15 NRSV), does he mean that the words were exclusively prophetic in nature, with no reference to the Exodus, or does he mean that there is a typological relationship between Israel's flight to and return from Egypt, and similar events in the life of Jesus? Given the brevity of the text, it is impossible to tell.

In any case, typology continued to be the most generally employed method throughout the second century. The epistle of *Barnabas,* probably written in the middle of that century, and often quoted as a prime example of early allegorical interpretation, also makes ample use of typology. Jesus "was to offer in sacrifice for our sins the vessel of the Spirit, in order that the type established in Isaac when he was offered upon the altar might be fully accomplished."[21] And, "what do you suppose this to be a type of, that a command was given to Israel, that men of the greatest wickedness, should offer a heifer, and slay and burn it? . . . The calf is Jesus."[22] At about the same time, bishop Melito of Sardis wrote a paschal homily in which he declares of Jesus: "This is he who in Abel was slain, in Isaac was bound, who in Jacob dwelt in a strange land, who in Joseph was sold, who in Moses was cast out, in the lamb was sacrificed, and in David was hunted, in the prophets was dishonoured."[23] Other examples abound in the writings of other second-century writers, such as Justin, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria.

With Clement, however, and especially with Origen, Christian allegorical interpretation came to the foreground. It was in Alexandria that Philo had earlier proposed and developed an allegorical reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, which he used to show that they were compatible with the best of the Platonic tradition. Clement and Origen followed the same path, although now attempting to show the compatibility between Platonism and Christianity. Since Platonism sought eternal, changeless truths, it was that sort of truth that these Christian Platonists also sought in Scripture, and they did so by means of allegorical interpretation.

In Origen himself, allegory showed both its versatility and its great dangers. Therefore, while many followed Origen's method of allegorical interpretation, others blamed Origen's "deviations" from Christian doctrine on that very method. In fact, however, even those who criticized the allegorism of the great Alexandrine would on occasion apply the same method. Such was the case, for instance, with Methodius of Olympus, one of Origen's most vocal critics late in the third century and early in the fourth, who nevertheless wrote several treatises whose hermeneutical method is very similar to Origen's. Others, such as Jerome and Augustine, were fascinated with the allegorical method at an early age, but later abandoned it—or at least tried to limit its more fanciful flights. In the preface to his *Commentary on Obadiah,* Jerome tells us that in his youth he wrote a small work (now lost) on that prophet, in which he interpreted the text allegorically. He bemoans having done so and offers this new commentary as a corrective. Augustine followed a similar path. He had been greatly aided by the allegorical interpretations of Ambrose, which showed him that the Bible was not as inelegant as his rhetorical training made it seem, nor as crude as the Manichees claimed. One of his earliest writings, *On Genesis Against the Manichees,* makes use of that insight, seeking to refute Manichean doctrine by means of an allegorical interpretation of Genesis. This, however, did not prove satisfactory, since the Manichees rejected all allegorical interpretation. When, years later, Augustine took up again the task of commenting on Genesis, he was much less inclined to interpret it allegorically. The very title of his last commentary on that book of the Bible, *De Genesi ad litteram* ("On Genesis, literally") shows this trend in his thought. This evolution in hermeneutical method was paralleled by a similar evolution in his theology. At first, immediately after his conversion, Augustine wrote a series of treatises in which the influence of Neoplatonism is so marked that some interpreters have even doubted that they can truly be called Christian. But later, particularly as his duties as a bishop and a teacher of the church forced him to hold more closely to traditional Christian doctrine and to avoid speculation that might lead others to err, Augustine was more inclined to pay closer attention to the biblical narrative, and to the text embodying it, than to possible hidden meanings behind the text itself.

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[18] Justin *I Apology,* 55.1 (ANF, 1:181).

[19] This is a subject I have discussed elsewhere. See *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 65-76.

[20] M. F. Wiles, "Origen as Biblical Scholar," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible,* 3 vols. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1963-70) 1:472.

[21] *Barn.* 7 (ANF, 1:141).

[22] *Barn.* 8 (ANF, 1:142).

[23] *Hom.* 69, in *The Homily on the Passion by Bishop Melito of Sardis,* trans. Campbell Bonner (London: Christophers, 1940) 176.

Both Jerome and Augustine spoke Latin and were brought up in the Latin-speaking West. Meanwhile, the leaders of the church in the Greek-speaking eastern half of the Roman Empire continued the ancient ways of interpreting Scripture, well aware of the differences and even tensions among various hermeneutical approaches. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, was very much influenced by Origen, and repeatedly followed his lead in interpreting the Bible allegorically. In his treatise *On the Life of Moses*, Gregory follows Origen's principle of different levels of meaning in a text to the point of telling the entire story twice—first from a literal standpoint and then interpreting the entire life of Moses as a vast allegory referring to the mystical ascent of the soul to God. Gregory's older brother, Basil of Caesarea—commonly known as Basil the Great—followed a different course, pointing out the dangers of allegory and insisting on a literal and historical interpretation of the text. When, after Basil's death, Gregory decided to complete the work that his older brother had been composing on the six days of creation, he also decided quite consciously to avoid the allegorical interpretations he so loved and to be faithful to his brother's intent by not departing from the literal and historical meaning of the text.

The most consistent and coherent opposition to allegorical interpretation, however, came from the school of Antioch. This was a city where Christianity had flourished from an early date, if we are to believe the witness of Acts. It was also, according to the same witness, the place where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. The church in that city had a very clear and strong sense of history, not only because its own history went back to NT times, but also because most of the events narrated in the Bible were purported to have taken place nearby. Traffic between Antioch and Palestine was constant. The Jewish population was numerous and was firmly connected to its historical roots in Palestine. As a result, Antiochene Christians were not as inclined as were the Alexandrines to think of "the Holy Land" as an allegorical way to refer to heaven.

As a result, Antiochene exegesis had long been suspicious of allegory. At least two of its earlier exponents, Paul of Samosata and Eustathius of Antioch, had been condemned as heretics, and in both cases Origenists played no small part. That system's last great teacher before the time of Constantine, Lucian of Antioch, was later credited with having been the real originator of Arianism—although that is a matter that scholars debate. What is certain is that Lucian was one of the ablest biblical scholars of his time, that his corrected text of the Septuagint (LXX) on the basis of the Hebrew original gained wide acceptance, and that he was adamantly opposed to allegorical interpretation. By the middle of the fourth century, the leading figure of this school was Diodore of Tarsus, most of whose works have unfortunately disappeared. We do know, however, that they consisted mainly of Bible commentaries, and that in them he insisted on a grammatical analysis of the text in order to reach its historical meaning, much as Lucian had done, and to reject allegory as a means of biblical interpretation—except in those cases in which the grammatical and literary analyses show that the historical meaning of the text itself is allegorical. Later, two of his disciples would become famous: the preacher John of Antioch, whom posterity has dubbed Chrysostom (the golden mouthed) and the biblical scholar and commentator Theodore of Mopsuestia, later known as "the Interpreter."

Although his knowledge of Hebrew appears to have been limited, Theodore of Mopsuestia was well aware that there were disagreements between the Hebrew text and the commonly accepted Greek translation—an awareness that had earlier led Lucian of Antioch to work on a corrected version of the LXX. In his writings it is clear that he is also aware that certain passages, and even entire books of the Bible, are much easier to accept as sacred Scripture if one is willing to allegorize them. A case in point is the Song of Songs, which many had come to interpret as a vast allegory regarding the love between the soul and God. Theodore read the text and came to the conclusion that it is an erotic love poem. Rather than interpret it allegorically, he would interpret it literally, and exclude it from the canon.

Unfortunately, Theodore's treatise *On Allegory and History* has been lost. All indications are that in it he attacked allegorical interpretation and expounded the theory behind typology. In any case, his extant works suffice to give us a clear idea of his own exegetical method, and perhaps even of its development during his own lifetime. In his commentary on Psalms, which seems to be one of his earliest works, he takes for granted that the one who speaks in the Psalms is always David, and that he does so as a prophet. While Theodore is aware that a number of psalms refer to events after David's time—which shows his historical perspicacity—this poses no major difficulty, for in such cases David was prophesying about events to come. One notable characteristic is that according to Theodore very few of these prophecies refer to Christ; most refer to events in the history of Israel, such as the Babylonian captivity or the struggles during the Maccabean period. Apparently, even at this early stage in his career, Theodore was already looking to the historical sense of a passage as the locus where its meaning is to be found.

This becomes even clearer in Theodore's *Commentary on the Book of the Twelve.* In general, Theodore places each of the minor prophets approximately in the historical setting in which modern scholars place them—except that he takes the story of Jonah as a historical account and seeks to relate it to the fall of Nineveh. Here, however, he departs from his assumption in the commentary on Psalms, that a prophet must speak about the future. On the contrary, most of the passages in the prophets refer to events in the prophet's own time, or shortly thereafter. He has no use for an interpretation that takes isolated verses or sayings from a prophet, and then decides that these sayings relate to Jesus, while others refer to Zerubbabel or to other events and people of the time. The prophets are speaking of their own time and to their own time. The only passages that are given a direct christological meaning are those that had long been defined as such by their use in the NT, and the last two verses in Malachi, where he sees an announcement of the coming of Elijah before the Second Coming of Jesus.

This manner of reading the prophets is grounded on Theodore's typological understanding of the way in which the OT relates to the NT and to the life of the church. He wishes to retain the relationship between the two testaments, and to affirm that the OT does have a message for the Christian church. But he is not willing to do this at the expense of the validity of OT passages within their own historical setting. Both prophecy—which he had earlier employed in interpreting the Psalms—and allegory—which he seems to have always rejected—fall short on this account; both make the OT relevant for Christians at the expense of denying its historical relevance for Israel. "He firmly believes that the Law foreshadowed Christ. But at the same time, while he believes that all of God's revelation is summed up in Christ, he refuses to allow that the revelation God gives of Himself in the Old Testament is meaningless apart from Christ."[24]

This is the reason why Theodore rejects both allegory and prophecy: Both deny ultimate revelatory significance to the historical events of which the text speaks. He makes this point in attempting to respond to those who argued that Paul himself had used allegorical interpretation, for in Galatians 4 he says that the story of Sarah, Hagar, and their two sons is an allegory. Theodore responds that in this case Paul is not using the term *allegory* in the same sense in which allegorical interpreters use it. Paul is denying neither the reality nor the significance of the story of Hagar and Sarah; rather, he is comparing events of the past in which God was active with events of the present in which God is similarly active, which is the very essence of typology. Thus, although Paul calls it an allegory, his interpretation is typological.

THE MIDDLE AGES

Jerome died in 420, Theodore in 428, Augustine in 430. Not only were the great interpreters of Scripture dying, but so was the ancient world. Ten years before the death of Jerome, Rome was sacked by the Goths. Soon the entire western portion of the Roman Empire would be divided among several Germanic kingdoms. In the centuries that ensued, when civil disorder, foreign invasion, and economic chaos were common occurrences, most of the science and wisdom salvaged from antiquity took refuge in the church and its institutions, particularly monasteries. As a result, for centuries the Bible was read through monastic eyes.

This was no longer an age of avid research. It was a time when much of the historical and linguistic knowledge of the past was forgotten, and when, therefore, the kind of exegetical study that Theodore of Mopsuestia had modeled was no longer possible. The main source of philological and historical knowledge that these centuries employed, the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, while compiling an enormous amount of material, were often more fanciful than factual.

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[24] Rowan A. Greer, *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Exegete and Theologian* (Westminster: Faith Press, 1961) 107.

Medieval Monasticism. Reading the Bible through monastic eyes meant two things. It meant first of all that the Bible was usually interpreted as a call to monastic renunciation and contemplation. Gregory the Great, the main authority through whom the Middle Ages received the legacy of Christian antiquity, read the Bible primarily as a manual on morality and asceticism. During Gregory's time, and in the centuries immediately following, there was much less doctrinal and theological debate than there had been at the times of Origen or Augustine. Only in the ninth century, during the brief revival in learning brought about under the Carolingians, was there a measure of theological debate—and in those debates the Bible was indeed used as the main point of reference for correct doctrine. But by and large, Gregory and his successors for five centuries did not have to cope with significant theological dissent. Their struggle was more against the temptations of "the world"—and it was as an aide in that struggle that the Bible was most often read and interpreted. This, in addition to the lack of adequate tools for historical and linguistic research, meant that the most profitable and accessible way to interpret Scripture was as a vast moral allegory. Not only the Song of Songs, but also the stories of Moses, Job, and Ezekiel are in fact parables or metaphors referring to the soul's ascent to God and the many perils and temptations it finds along the way. Therefore, reading the Bible through monastic eyes first meant reading it allegorically, even when—as was the case with Gregory—one repeatedly denounced the dangers implicit in fanciful flights of allegorical interpretation.

Reading the Bible through monastic eyes also meant reading it in the context of prayer and worship. What one must always keep in mind is that such use is in itself a form of interpretation. A reading of Isaiah 53 on Good Friday, for instance, is already an interpretation of that passage, even if no further words of explanation are added—and, as the same reading is repeated in the same liturgical context year after year, the interpretation implied by that setting becomes normative. Medieval monasticism, centering its life as it usually did on communal worship, developed its own traditions of biblical interpretation. Sometimes these traditions were expressed in treatises on the use of the Bible in worship, such as those of Bruno of Würzburg in the eleventh century; but most often they were tacitly accepted as the normative interpretation of particular texts. In any case, the influence of these traditions can be traced far beyond the confines of monasteries, for as theology and biblical interpretation found wider fields of activity, they continued much of the legacy they had received from monastic liturgical interpretation. (It has often been remarked, for instance, that Martin Luther interpreted the psalms christologically, as referring to Jesus. The reason why he did this, even long after leaving the monastery, is that when he was a monk he had grown accustomed to hearing and repeating particular psalms in specific settings of the liturgical year: Advent, Christmas, Good Friday, etc.)

The twelfth century brought about both a revival of monasticism and the beginnings of new conditions that would eventually lead to an alternative way of reading the Bible. The outstanding figure in the monastic revival was Bernard of Clairvaux, who brought the tradition of monastic biblical interpretation to its high point. Devoted as he was to the contemplation of the humanity of Christ, Bernard paid attention to the historical, literal meaning of the NT, particularly the Gospels. However, his main purpose in reading Scripture was not to inquire what the sacred text says in itself, or what it was intended to say when it was written, but to benefit the soul in its quest for union with Christ. Read in the context of the monastic community, the text could yield a variety of meanings, according to the needs of each soul. Since the goal of the reading of Scripture is not knowledge, but the love of God, every reading that leads to such love is true and faithful. It is precisely this spiritual purpose of union with Christ that gives Scripture its unity; therefore, Bernard and his followers felt quite free to interpret the Bible allegorically—particularly the OT, which must be read in such a way as to find Christ in every single page.

Thus, in spite of his deep respect for Scripture, Bernard could declare: "I no longer wish to listen to Moses, whom I find to be no more that a stutterer. Isaiah's lips are unclean. Jeremiah cannot speak, for he is but a child. Actually, all the prophets are mutes. Let me rather listen to Him of whom they speak."[25]

Cathedral Schools and Medieval Universities. On the other hand, the twelfth century saw a parallel development that would soon lead to a different way of reading the Bible. With the growth of cities, cathedral schools began to rival monasteries as centers of learning, and a number of them eventually developed into universities. In these cathedral schools, and later in the universities, one read the Bible mainly as a source of knowledge and as a means of settling intellectual disagreements and disputes. The earlier centuries of the Middle Ages had been remarkably free of theological controversy; those that did arise were often mere repetition of debates that had taken place during the patristic period and thus often could be solved on the basis of patristic authority. The main opponents of most monastic readers of Scripture in the early Middle Ages were the devil, the flesh, and the world. It was as a shield against these opponents that such monks read the Bible, seeking guidance, inspiration, and wisdom. Beginning in the twelfth century, and flowering in the thirteenth, a new mood arose, particularly in the universities. Although the devil, the flesh, and the world were still considered the great enemies of the Christian life, the scholastics read the Bible as a source of knowledge and of arguments against those who disagreed with them. Thus once again, as had been the case during the great theological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries, the Bible tended to become the great arbiter in theological debate, rather than the guidebook leading the believer in the paths of faith and righteousness. One could say that while traditional monasticism read the Bible in quest of wisdom, the scholastics read it in quest of knowledge—although such contrasts should not be exaggerated, since most scholastics were also monks.

Since the cathedral schools were the forerunners of the great medieval universities, it is to them that one must look for the historical background of scholastic biblical interpretation. One of the main activities of such cathedral schools was the development, compilation, and transmission of glosses to the biblical text. The master of a cathedral school would gather bits of information from earlier writers, which might clarify (or amplify) the meaning of a text, and would write such bits between the lines or at the margin of the text itself. Sometimes, although not usually, he would also add his own views or brief comments. Copied down by students and others, such glossae circulated widely among scholars. Since by their very nature they were compilations of previous wisdom, they influenced each other, so that the task of determining what comes from a particular master is almost impossible. Until the twelfth century, these various glossae were generally fragmentary, usually dealing with no more than a particular book or section of Scripture. Early in the twelfth century, however, Anselm of Laon, with the support and collaboration of several colleagues and students, set out to compile a gloss of the entire Bible. With constant addition and variation, this became known as the *Glossa ordinaria,* one of the main tools biblical scholars and commentators employed throughout the rest of the Middle Ages. Following its example and methodology, a number of these scholars produced fuller glosses on parts of Scripture, and these too became widely used. Most notable among them was the *Magna glosatura* of Peter Lombard on the Pauline epistles and the psalter, which was not quite as influential in later scholasticism as were his four books of *Sentences,* but it did influence the manner in which the rest of the Middle Ages read Paul's works. In any case, since such glosses were mostly compilations of earlier views, they did not add much to the interpretation of Scripture, except by establishing standard interpretations of particular texts.

Some of the masters of cathedral schools also produced commentaries on entire books of the Bible. By the middle of the twelfth century, there were numerous commentaries on most of the books of the Bible, and their number was growing rapidly. Greatly dependent on the glossae as they were, and written at a time when individual scholarship and authorship were not particularly prized, there is much repetition and similarity among these various commentaries. They were generally intended as an aid to preaching and teaching; therefore, their tone is often homiletical and hortatory.

It has been pointed out that one of the main difficulties the authors of these commentaries found was the ancient tradition that distinguished between a "literal" and a "spiritual" sense in Scripture.[26] By then, partly as a reaction to the excesses to which extreme allegorization could lead, it had become generally recognized that one should pay particular attention to the "literal" meaning of a text. This included not only grammatical commentary but also an exposition of the meaning of the text within its original historical setting—to the degree that such was possible with the often scant knowledge of history that the Middle Ages possessed. Such "literal" meaning could not be bypassed in favor of the "spiritual." Nor should the two be confused. Therefore, the master was expected to give clear indication of when he was interpreting a text "literally" or "spiritually." The "spiritual" interpretation provided the master opportunity to apply the text to the religious and moral life, often by means of typology or of allegory. Most often, such spiritual interpretation was in truth a moral exposition, exhorting the student or the reader to greater effort in the pursuit of virtue.

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[25] Bernard *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 2.2.

[26] Beryl Smalley, "The Bible in the Medieval Schools," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible,* 2:214-16.

The difficulty was that, while the early scholastic commentators felt compelled to follow the traditional distinction between the literal and the spiritual, they had no clear theological framework to guide them in the application or evaluation of that distinction. On the one hand, the "literal" sense must govern all interpretation and must never be ignored, while, on the other hand, the "spiritual" was considered to be more valuable, for it dealt with permanent truth rather than with transitory events or things. Thus the early scholastic commentators found themselves at an impasse produced by the unavoidable tensions between their insistence on the value of the "literal" sense and their reliance on a Platonic metaphysics and epistemology. To them, true knowledge must be the knowledge of eternal, changeless reality, and such knowledge does not come through the senses. At best, sense perception leads to a pale imitation of eternal truth. At the worst, it leads to self-deception. How then can the "literal" meaning of Scripture lead to the "spiritual"?

It was left to Thomas Aquinas to propose a way out of this impasse—which he conceived in terms of his own Aristotelian metaphysics and epistemology. Thomas believed that the senses played an important and necessary role in knowledge, which was based on the knowledge of concrete, historical reality. He was, therefore, quite ready to admit that the author of a biblical text could not know all that the text itself would later come to mean in God's providence, as history unfolded. That original meaning is the "literal" sense. It is normative and must never be abandoned or contradicted. Later interpreters, being in a relatively privileged position because they know later history, can and should interpret the text according to the meaning learned from that history and from their present circumstances. This is the "spiritual" meaning of the text. The use of a text in order to derive such "spiritual" meanings is quite legitimate and even necessary, for without it the text would remain in the past, and not directly apply to different circumstances. Yet only the "literal" meaning has final authority, in the sense that it requires acceptance by all and can thus serve as the basis for theological argument.

> The literal sense was defined as the sacred writer's full original meaning. It included the whole message which he meant to convey at the prompting of his inspiration for the benefit of his public whether present or future. . . . The spiritual sense was defined as the meaning which God, the chief author of Scripture and of the events it describes, had put into sacred history. The sacred writers, who took part in it, could not understand a significance which had not yet been revealed. Their successors would discern it in the light of subsequent revelation. Thomas deduced from his premise that no argument could be drawn from the spiritual interpretation, but only from the literal. The spiritual could be used for edification of the faithful, but not for proof.
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> The Thomist definition gained general acceptance, hesitating at first in some quarters, but later carrying conviction. It disposed of the difficulties arising from metaphor and prophecy and focused interest on the writer's original meaning. It restricted the use of moralities in political propaganda, where they caused most muddle. . . . On the other hand, lecturers made free with Thomas's permission to use the spiritual senses for edification. What master would have cared to deprive his pupils of instruction in the technique of preaching? Allegories and moralities, no longer "higher" or "nobler," remained indispensable. They would last in exegesis just as long as the medieval sermon lasted.[27]

It was not only in commentaries, sermons, and glossae that the scholastics used the Bible. As has been indicated above, one of the characteristics of scholasticism was that it tended to read the Bible as a source of knowledge and theological argument, rather than as a book of edification, as was customary in traditional monasticism. The reading of Scripture in the context of theological debate, and as a source of knowledge and ammunition to be employed in such debates, was further stimulated by the scholastic method itself. The scholastic academic exercise *par excellence* was the *disputatio.* This usually dealt with a very specific question—for instance, "whether, as the eternal Word of God, the knowledge of Christ actually includes infinite objects."[28]

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[27] Ibid., 2:215-16.

[28] St. Bonaventure *Quaestiones disputatae de scientia Christi,* q. 1.

The question itself was sometimes chosen in advance, and sometimes at the very beginning of the "disputation," depending on the nature of the exercise. There followed a process whereby those present—often including the public—were allowed to list arguments both for a positive and for a negative answer. These arguments, following the example of the glossae, usually consisted of brief quotations from Scripture, patristic literature, the philosophers, and other authorities. It was up to the teacher leading the exercise to come up with a solution that included not only his own answer, but also a response to all the objections raised in the previous section. The result was a literary structure that became characteristic of much scholastic theological literature: A question is posed, followed by two lists of arguments that seem to lead in contradictory directions, then by the author's answer to the question, and finally by a "solution" to each argument on the other side—a solution that cannot deny the authority of the texts quoted, but must interpret them in such a way as not to contradict the author's answer to the question.

As a result of such methodology, not only the Bible but all ancient authorities tended to be read and employed as sources for proof texts. There was no room for extended exegesis of a passage, nor for its use in edification, consolation, or moral exhortation. The quote would be brief and must be employed to prove a point. If there is any consideration of the context—which is seldom the case—this appears only in the author's "solution" to the objections, in which sometimes it is argued that, in its proper context, the text quoted has a different meaning.

Finally, in order to complete the picture of biblical interpretation during the Middle Ages, a word must be added regarding the pursuit of what today we would call "biblical scholarship," particularly with reference to the study of the original languages of Scripture. The commonly held notion that the Middle Ages had no interest in such matters must be corrected. It is true that most medieval theologians and scholars relied exclusively on the received text of the Vulgate (Vg), and that Hebrew and Greek were not part of the normal theological curriculum. Yet that is not the entire picture. Jerome was commonly regarded as a paradigm of biblical scholars, particularly since he had produced the Vg. And Jerome himself had made it quite clear that the task of translation always involves interpretation. Therefore, the knowledge of the biblical languages, and of the customs and traditions that stand before them, was a common desire among medieval scholars, even though few attained such knowledge. Wherever anti-Semitic prejudice and violence did not preclude it, Christian scholars sought to learn from Jewish rabbis, not only the Hebrew language, but also the traditions and customs that might serve to illumine the meaning of the biblical text. This was particularly true in Spain, where centuries of social exchange among Jews, Christians, and Moslems had produced an openness that did not exist elsewhere in Europe—until, toward the end of the Middle Ages, Spain became as intolerant as the rest of Western Europe.

Nor is it true that medieval scholars were unaware of variants in the text of the Bible and in other ancient writings. In fact, there were lists of such variants and attempts at correcting various readings. What is true is that, lacking the printing press, and therefore a means to produce texts guaranteed to be identical, the task of spending long years of arduous work comparing manuscripts in order to establish a text, and then to entrust it to the same process of copying that had introduced the variants in the first place, seemed futile.

THE REFORMATION AND BEYOND

All of these currents were present in the sixteenth century. The traditional monastic reading of Scripture, as a source of wisdom and edification rather than of knowledge and doctrine, was typical of the monastic revival that centered in Spain around such figures as St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Fray Luis de León, and St. Ignatius of Loyola. Although all of them could on occasion make use of the Bible as a tool in controversy, their usual reading of the sacred text was as a guide for the life of monastic renunciation, rather than as a manual of theology.

Catholic Interpreters. The scholastic reading of Scripture, and even much of the scholastic method that was closely associated with it, continued in the work of a number of Catholic theologians, much of whose work was quite independent from anti-Protestant polemics, such as the great Dominican professor at Salamanca, Domingo Báñez (1528–1604). At the same university, another Dominican scholar, Francisco de Vitoria (1492–1546) applied the traditional scholastic method to an entirely new theological problem in his lectures *On the Indians.* Thomas de Vio Cajetan (1468–1534), who became involved in the issues regarding the Protestant Reformation because he was papal legate to Germany when the Reformation erupted, developed much of his theology along traditional lines. His *Commentaries on the Summa,* published from 1507 to 1522, in general reflect the same exegetical and hermeneutical methods that Thomas Aquinas had developed.

As anti-Protestant polemics came to the foreground in Catholic theology, the scholastic method proved particularly useful. Here was a method whose characteristic reading of Scripture was doctrinal and polemical. In its traditional form, it had developed subtle distinctions and had even created disagreement and debate where there was none, for the very sake of its method. Now that some of the central doctrines of Christianity were debated, most traditional theologians sought to refute the reformers by means of a similar method. In the polemical writings of theologians like John Eck (1486–1543), James Hochstraten (1460–1527), and James Latomus (1475–1544), one can see the scholastic method of reading Scripture, now applied to the task of refuting the doctrines of Protestantism.

It was the thrust of anti-Protestant polemics that led the Council of Trent (1545–63) to its two major decisions regarding the Bible and its authority.[29] (The Council also defined the canon of Scripture, but this was not then at issue between Protestants and Catholics; in any case, all that it did in this respect was to ratify the decisions of the earlier Council of Florence.)

The most momentous declaration of Trent regarding Scripture had to do with its authority vis-à-vis the authority of tradition. In this regard, the Council decreed that on matters of faith and morals the books of Scripture were to be held "in equal devotion and reverence" with the tradition of the church. Almost one fourth of those present at the Council would have preferred the use of the word *similar* rather than *equal,* but they were outvoted. It also appears that most of those who voted for the final decree did not intend to say that tradition was an independent, or even a parallel, source of Christian doctrine, but simply that Scripture should always be interpreted in agreement with it. In any case, this decree left its mark on Roman Catholic biblical interpretation, at least until Vatican II reopened the issue. This, however, did not mean that all was settled, for it is quite clear that there are many different and even contradictory elements in Christian tradition; thus there was still ample room for argument and disagreement. What it did mean was that the theological and hermeneutical debate would often turn away from Scripture to the issue of what tradition actually held—theologians who disagreed on the meaning of a biblical text were to settle their differences, not exclusively or even primarily by examining the text itself, but by searching the tradition. It was also unclear how far that tradition extended. Most Protestant theologians agreed on granting at least a measure of authority to the patristic tradition, as illumining the meaning of the biblical text. But the Council of Trent, and particularly its more extremist interpreters, understood by "tradition" all the teachings and declarations of the church and its teachers, including those of the medieval scholastics and even the present magisterium of the church.

The second momentous decision of the Council of Trent was its declaration that the Vg edition of Scripture was to be "taken as authentic in public readings, disputations, preaching, and exposition." The Council issued this decree as a response to those reformers who based some of their arguments on the original Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible, and also to the proliferation of vernacular translations that seemed to undercut a number of doctrines based on the Vg. The mood of the more conservative elements in the Council was expressed by a Spanish cardinal who declared that vernacular translations were "mothers of heresy" and should, therefore, be forbidden—or at least limited to less dangerous books like Psalms and Acts. Although his extreme position did not win the day at Trent, soon many among the more conservative Catholics interpreted and applied the decrees of the Council along those lines.

Strictly speaking, the Council left much room for maneuvering: It did not determine which of the many variant Latin texts were to be regarded as authentic; it reaffirmed the authority of the Hebrew and Greek texts; and it neither precluded nor prohibited new translations. Yet, partially as a response to the concern of those who feared that vernacular

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[29] On Trent, its decisions, and how they were interpreted and applied, see F. J. Crehan, "The Bible in the Roman Catholic Church from Trent to the Present Day," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible,* 3:199-237.

translations would result in heresy, the Council ordered that such vernacular versions be published with explanatory notes. The main purpose of these notes was to ensure that the biblical text was interpreted according to the teachings of the church. (As a reaction to this policy, Protestant Bible societies developed their own policy to publish the Bible "without notes.") In practical terms, this conciliar decision tended to limit the freedom of biblical scholars and interpreters. As the Roman Catholic Church became more conservative, and its translations of the Bible into the various vernacular languages were based on the Vg instead of the original languages, Catholic believers throughout the world were placed at a decided disadvantage to Protestants.

This does not mean that biblical scholarship ceased. On the contrary, the quest for the original text and its meaning continued and even flourished after the end of the Middle Ages. The fall of Constantinople (1453) brought to Western Europe a flood of Greek manuscripts and scholars, which led to a revival in Greek studies in the West. The invention of the movable-type printing press made scholars increasingly aware of the degree to which manuscripts had been corrupted as they were copied and recopied, and for the first time provided the opportunity to produce multiple copies of an identical text. The result was a veritable flood of critical editions of ancient texts.

The scholar whose name has become indissolubly united with this movement is Erasmus of Rotterdam. He tended to read the Bible much as the earlier monastic tradition had done, as a source of wisdom and moral inspiration. Yet it was not his interpretation of the Bible, but his more scholarly work on its actual text, that proved to be most significant. His edition of the Greek NT, published in 1516, marked a new age in biblical scholarship. In 1520, a group of scholars at the university of Alcalá in Spain, under the direction of Cardinal Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros, published the Complutensian Polyglot Bible, which included texts in Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and Latin. Ximenes himself was aware of the impact such studies could have on theology, for on receiving the first volume of this Bible he declared that it "opens the sacred sources of our religion, from which will flow a theology much purer than any derived from less direct sources"[30]—a view that, had it been professed a generation later, would have been declared to be heretical. Even after the anti-Protestant reaction had made statements such as Ximenes' questionable, Catholic scholars continued this tradition of biblical scholarship. In 1568–72, Benito Arias Montano, at the behest of Philip II, published in Antwerp a polyglot Bible that included texts in Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac as well as a literal Latin translation. In 1597, the sixteen volumes of Alfonso Salmerón's *Commentaries on the New Testament* were published posthumously; Salmerón was one of the original companions of Ignatius in the founding of the Jesuits. Although the seventeenth century did not see an equal production of Catholic biblical scholarship, the tradition continued until it once more came to the foreground in modern times.

Protestant Interpreters. All of these traditions of biblical scholarship and interpretation merged and took new forms in Martin Luther. As an Augustinian canon, he had learned and always continued to practice the medieval monastic tradition of reading Scripture for wisdom and edification. As a doctor and professor of Bible, he was well aware and made use of the scholarly and philological work of Erasmus and his medieval predecessors. As a reformer, he soon found himself involved in controversies that forced him to read Scripture as a source of doctrine and knowledge—although he never did this after the manner of the scholastics.

The study and interpretation of the Bible was one of Luther's paramount concerns even before the beginning of the Reformation. Luther's other main concern, which soon coalesced with his biblical interpretation, was the quest for redemption and its meaning. A modern scholar has correctly assessed the importance of biblical interpretation for Luther in declaring that "it was as a Biblical theologian that Luther understood himself and wanted others, both his friends and his enemies, to understand him. . . . It was as a Biblical theologian that he took up polemics. In fact, it was as a Biblical theologian that he became the Reformer."[31]

Although Luther has become famous for his principle of *sola scriptura,* it is important to note that for him the "Word of God" was much more than Scripture. According to the Bible itself, the Word of God is none other than God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the

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[30] Quoted by Conde de Cedillo, *El Cardenal Cisneros, Gobernador del Reino* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1921–28) 1:195.

[31] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor,* companion volume to *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) 46-47.

Word was God" (John 1:1 NRSV). Furthermore, the Word is God in action. When God speaks, God does. "God said, 'Let there be . . . ' and there was" (see Genesis 1). What this means is that God's Word, more than mere information that can be contained in a written page, is action—creative and redemptive action. This action comes to us primarily in Jesus Christ, and comes to us through history. Although Christ is also the cosmic Second Person of the Trinity, it is in his historical act of redemption, and in the community of the faithful, that we come to know him. Thus the Word of God comes to us primarily as an act of redemption—even though that Word has already been active in the world since the very act of creation. For these reasons, although Luther held great respect for the Bible, insisting on its primary and unique authority, for him the Bible is the Word of God in a derivative sense, because it contains the record of the actions of the Word of God on our behalf.

This provided Luther with an argument against those who declared that, since the church had determined the canon of Scripture, the church had authority over the Bible. It is also the reason why many of Luther's statements regarding Scripture prove so shocking to those who hold to biblical inerrancy. As to the first, Luther simply declared that it was not the church, but the gospel, that produced the Bible. All the church did was to recognize the gospel in certain books, and not in others. Ultimately, the gospel—the redemptive action of God—is above both the church and the Bible. For the same reason, those who hold fast to the inerrancy of Scripture, even at the expense of the gospel, are themselves in error, for they read the Bible as a book of information about the world and about God rather than as a book of gospel and redemption. "Luther recognized mistakes and inconsistencies in Scripture and treated them with lofty indifference because they did not touch the heart of the Gospel."[32] It is for this reason that he can declare that James is "an epistle of straw," for he cannot find the gospel in it. It is also for that reason that he feels free to apply the methods of scholarship to the biblical text, with no fear that it will thereby lose its authority.

When reading the Bible for edification, and even for non-polemical theological argument, Luther's reading is often typological, and may even lapse into allegory. Yet he also agreed with Thomas Aquinas that when it came to theological debate only the literal meaning should be employed. Hence, "Luther's insistence that in a theological controversy, where proof rather than mere illustration was needed, only the precise meaning of a Scriptural text was to be used. He did not mean that it was altogether illegitimate to use Scriptural passages for the illustration of a point analogous to their meaning. His sermons and commentaries abounded with instances of just such use, some of them skillful, others humorous. But he put such use of the Scriptures into the same category as allegory. It was legitimate for illumination, not for support."[33]

Calvin also insisted on the need to ascertain the historical meaning of a text. Given his humanistic and legal training, he did this much more consistently, and with a more critical approach, than Luther. "Calvin like Luther was quite ready to recognize manifest error in the New Testament, in a citation from the Old Testament and in matters of chronology."[34] From the humanists, he learned the need to establish the original text, and to read it in its historical context, before seeking to apply it to contemporary debates. From the tradition of legal scholarship, he learned the principle of accommodation: God's revelation, like human laws, was always given in a way suitable to its historical and human context.[35] It was the interpreter's task to clarify its meaning, both in its original setting and in the interpreter's own setting.

Some of the lesser figures of the Reformation did insist on the absolute inerrancy of Scripture. Andreas Osiander, for instance, sought to reconcile the diverse accounts of particular events in the various gospels by claiming that every account that differed from the others in any detail must refer to a different event.[36] Since the Lord's Prayer in Matthew is different from that in Luke, Jesus must have taught two different prayers. And, since the number of fishes, loaves, and leftover baskets are not the same in any two Gospel accounts, Jesus must have fed a different multitude in each of those accounts.

The literalism of the Anabaptists proved a greater challenge than that of Osiander and others like him, for it had serious political and ecclesiastical implications. While the various Anabaptist groups differed on many points of doctrine, they all tended to agree that the practices of the church in the NT ought to be followed to the letter. This included not only believers' baptism, which soon became the trademark of Anabaptists, but also the relationship between the church and society at large. In the NT, the church is a persecuted community. Most theologians in the sixteenth century held the traditional view that this was a matter of historical circumstance. Not so the Anabaptists, who held that when Christians are truly faithful they will necessarily be persecuted, because their views, values, and mores will clash with those of society at large. The reason why believers' baptism became so important was precisely that baptism was supposed to indicate a radical break with that society, and infants were incapable of making that decision. Infant baptism takes for granted that those who grow up in a Christian society will be Christians. The Anabaptists did not believe that there was such a thing as a Christian society. The NT speaks of a church that clashes with the world, and that is, therefore, part of the very nature of the church. To claim otherwise would be to declare the NT to be no longer valid for the church.

By the seventeenth century, much of the freshness of Luther and Calvin had been lost. Given the emphasis the great reformers had placed on Scripture, it was unavoidable that their followers would develop detailed theories as to its inspiration and authority. The Protestant scholastics of the seventeenth century insisted on the "full" and "verbal" inspiration of Scripture. Full inspiration means that everything in the Bible—even those things that the authors knew by natural means—is directly inspired by God. Paul knew by natural means about the money sent by the Philippians. But the Holy Spirit inspired what he wrote to them about it, just as the Holy Spirit inspired what he had to say about the meaning of the cross. Furthermore, the Spirit inspired the exact words the authors were to use, and this is what is meant by "verbal" inspiration. If one notes a difference in style between various authors, this is due to the Spirit's taking such differences into account, and dictating to each author different words according to what would have been the natural style of each. By the early eighteenth century, Lutheran theologian David Hollaz claimed that the vocalization points in the Masoretic text of the OT were just as inspired as the Sermon on the Mount. Similar developments took place among theologians of the Reformed tradition, where François Turretin (1623–87) declared that not only was the vocalization of the OT inspired, but also the Holy Spirit had kept later copies safe from all error.[37]

Partly as a reaction to scholasticism, a series of movements appeared, emphasizing the need for personal piety rather than strict, cold orthodoxy. Pietists, Moravians, Methodists, and many who participated in the Great Awakenings in the United States were all convinced that the Bible should be read primarily as a guide to Christian life and piety. Most of them were orthodox in their beliefs and did accept the authority of the Bible in doctrinal matters. For them, however, the main reason why Christians should read the Bible was not so much to discover and clarify obscure points of doctrine, but to illumine their own lives. In some ways, the approach of many a Methodist to the Bible was reminiscent of the approach of a medieval monk: The Bible should be read in a disciplined fashion, in a context of prayer and devotion, and with the purpose of improving the quality of one's discipleship.

Typical of this approach to Scripture are the words of John Wesley in the Preface to his *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament:*

> If you desire to read the Scriptures in such a manner as may most effectually answer this end [of holiness], it would be advisable: (1) To set apart a little time, if you can, every morning and evening for that purpose. (2) At each time, if you have leisure, to read a chapter out of the Old, and one out of the New, Testament. . . . (3) To read this with a single eye, to know the whole will of God, and have a fixed resolution to do it. In order to know his will, you should, (4) Have a constant eye to the analogy of faith. . . . (5) Serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used before we consult the oracles of God. . . . (6) It might also be of use, if, while we read, we were frequently to pause and examine ourselves by what we read.[38]

Historical-Critical Study. Meanwhile, an entirely different way of reading the Bible had also been developing. Hearkening back to the time of the Renaissance, there were those who applied to the biblical text principles of literary and historical criticism similar to those applied to other ancient writings. Erasmus and others sought to restore the text itself. As time passed and the restraints of orthodoxy were removed an increasing number of scholars urged a more rationalist approach to the sacred text. At first, their aim was to show that the teaching of the Bible is eminently rational. Eventually, however, many came to the conclusion that much of what the Bible says is contradicted by science. Others applied themselves to the study of the text itself and of its historical, literary, and cultural background. The posthumous publication of *Apology for the Rational Worshippers of God,* by H. R. Reimarus (1694–1767), shocked the intellectual world of Germany by raising questions about the historicity of the Bible, and by explaining away any miracles found in biblical accounts. By the nineteenth century, such positions had become relatively common. In 1835, D. F. Strauss published a *Life of Jesus,* in which he argued that what is important in the NT is not what it says about Jesus, but the essential truth to which it points: the ultimate oneness of God and humanity. Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863), while less scholarly than Strauss's, had a wider impact, for "it was short, popular and sentimental."[39] Ever since, there has been a steady stream of publications, at both academic and scholarly levels exemplified by Strauss and at the more popular level of Renan, that have nurtured an ongoing discussion on the historical origins of biblical texts.

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[32] R. H. Bainton, "The Bible in the Reformation," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3:12.

[33] Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, 112.

[34] Bainton, "The Bible," 13.

[35] J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 97-100.

[36] Bainton, "The Bible," 13-14.

[37] On the theory of biblical inspiration of Lutheran scholasticism, see J. L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987) 261-63; on Turretin's, ibid., 276-77.

[38] John Wesley, "Preface to the Old Testament," in *John Wesley's Commentary on the Bible: A One Volume Condensation of His Explanatory Notes*, ed. G. Roger Schoenhals (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 20.

Since the early nineteenth century, much has been learned through the historical-critical method and its various byproducts. Today we know much more than ever before about the cultural, social, and linguistic background of the Bible. Cities long gone have been excavated. Lost languages have been recovered and have given us greater understanding of biblical Hebrew. Layers of composition in the text allow us to understand its significance at various points in its development. As part of the historical-critical enterprise, a number of methods were devised that have made a very significant contribution to our understanding of biblical texts.[40]

The historical-critical approach was not without its critics. In some cases, this method led scholars to postpone or ignore all questions regarding the use and authority of the Bible in the Christian community. In such cases, their work falls beyond the parameters of this essay, which deals precisely with such use and authority. On the other hand, many responded to the challenges raised by the historical-critical method by refusing to allow it a place in biblical studies. The Bible, they insisted, is a divine book, and is not subject to the scrutiny of such human methods. In response to the new methods and their findings, the more conservative gathered around the banner of the "fundamentals" of the Christian faith and brought the doctrine of biblical inerrancy to the fore. Thus the very advances of the historical-critical method evoked a reaction that tended to discount most of the achievements of that method.

The greatest challenges to the historical-critical method, however, did not come from its critics, but from those who employed that method in order to critique some of its earlier findings. As time passed, it became increasingly evident that much of what had passed for historical studies in the nineteenth century was in fact a projection of middle-class bourgeois perspectives, by which earlier times were judged and interpreted.[41] The most famous of the many works leading to this conclusion was Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus,* which clearly showed that much of what supposedly objective scholars found in Jesus was a reflection of their own values and times. Thus the stage was set for the "balanced conservatism"[42] that has characterized biblical historical scholarship during most of the twentieth century.

This is not to say, however, that theologians could now ignore the findings of the historical-critical method. The great contribution of neo-orthodoxy in this respect, and of Karl Barth in particular, was precisely to show that the results of historical and literary criticism of the Bible can and should be incorporated into theology. Commenting on Barth's impact in this regard, Alan Richardson has suggested: "It is Barth's demonstration of the fact that the historical-critical method is not necessarily bound up with the presuppositions of liberal theology which may well turn out to have been his most significant theological discovery."[43]

Barth's work, and his recognition of the results of historical inquiry into the Bible, gave new impetus to biblical theology. From ancient times, and particularly after the Reformation, there had been a general consensus that theology should be biblical. It was only as a result of the historical studies of the last two centuries, however, that scholars had become acutely aware of the distance between them and the biblical sources. Therefore, those who sought to develop a "biblical theology" were now faced with an unprecedented situation:

> No period of Christian theology has been as radically exposed to a consistent attempt to relive the theology of its first adherents. The ideal of an empathetic understanding of the first century without borrowing categories from later times has never been an ideal before, nor have the comparative sources for such an adventure been as close at hand and as well analyzed. There have always been bits and pieces of an appeal to the original meaning over against different later dogmas and practices of the church. . . . But never before was there a frontal nonpragmatic, nonapologetic attempt to describe OT or NT faith and practice from within its original presuppositions.[44]

How do we bridge the acknowledged gap between the times and cultures of the Bible and ours? Barth himself argued that the subject of the text itself, God, bridges that gap. Barth's epochal *Commentary on Romans* made the "otherness" of God the connecting point between Paul and his contemporary readers. Others, notably Rudolf Bultmann, followed the lead of existentialism, claiming that the bridge that allows us to appropriate the message of the NT is self-authenticity and self-understanding—a position that tended to dehistorize the NT. Still others sought other points of contact and continuity, such as a particular understanding of time (O. Cullmann) or a theological motif (the Lundensians). Quite naturally, the debate among all these positions brought the hermeneutical question once more to the fore.

Meanwhile, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century, other concerns have affected the hermeneutical question. These have been basically two: the literary and the sociopolitical.

The literary concern has given rise to what Carl Holladay calls "the literary paradigm." Suffice it to say that in recent decades there has been a lively discussion in the field of literary criticism regarding the meaning and interpretation of texts, and that this discussion is being applied to the question of biblical interpretation. Thus one finds attempts to approach the biblical text on the basis of rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, deconstructionism, etc.

Finally, a word must be said about the sociopolitical concern in biblical interpretation. In recent decades, partly as the result of the growing dialogue with Christians in different social and political settings, we have learned that the social and cultural location of the reader and of the reading community have much to do with what one finds in a text. No one who approaches a text does so as a *tabula rasa.* We all bring our perspectives and presuppositions. Today, as we look back at the most recent centuries of biblical scholarship and interpretation, we realize the degree to which that tradition has been dominated by a particular sector of the human race and of the Christian church. As OT scholar Norman K. Gottwald has put it: "The massive datum is that biblical scholars of the last two centuries have been firmly located in the middle class and have synthesized their scholarly humanistic ideals with bourgeois capitalism and, furthermore, have done so with surprisingly little sense of the inherent tensions and contradictions in such a synthesis."[45]

What is true of class, as Gottwald so clearly states, is also true of gender, race, and culture. By and large, women have been excluded from the hermeneutic task, and biblical scholarship has been the preserve of white Western men. For this reason, many of the most significant discoveries being made today in the biblical text are the result, not so much of historical-critical inquiry, as of new perspectives from which the text is being read.[46]

Equipped with the tools and the results of historical and critical research, the believing community is now ready to undertake the task of a new reading of Scripture—and, therefore, a new reading of itself. This reading will take into account the contributions of many whose voices have scarcely been heard in the past, but whose insights are already proving to be both valuable and disturbing. The result could well be a theological upheaval and reformation rivaling those of the sixteenth century.

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[39] W. Neil, "The Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible, 1700–1950," *The Cambridge History of the Bible,* 3:281.

[40] See the article by C. R. Holladay, "Contemporary Methods of Reading the Bible," in this volume, in which he lists the following methods that have resulted from this approach to Scripture, or at least have been enhanced by it: textual criticism, source criticism, traditio-historical criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, composition criticism, audience criticism, and canonical criticism.

[41] "They could show . . . that such a picture of Jesus or of the OT prophets . . . told more about the ideals of bourgeois Christianity in the late nineteenth century than about the carpenter from Nazareth or the little man from Tekoa." (K. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* 4 vols. [Nashville: Abingdon, 1962], 1:418).

[42] S. J. De Vries, "Biblical Criticism, History of," in ibid., 1:417.

[43] "The Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible,* 3:322.

[44] Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," 425.

[45] Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979) 11.

[46] See in this volume the articles by Chan-Hie Kim, James Earl Massey, Carolyn Osiek, Fernando F. Segovia, and George E. Tinker. See also the chapter "Visions of the Word," in J. L. González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) 38-60.

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