Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church

The earliest Christian groups were galvanized by the power of the ancestral Scriptures. They found in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings constant vindication of their experience of a religious conversion. The gospel event was a call to a new understanding of their ancestral tradition of faith, the risen Jesus drawing them, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to a new reading of the Torah. It was in "searching the Scriptures" that they reached to the ground of their inner transformation as disciples of Jesus. It was in a hermeneutical context, that is, in interpreting the Scriptures, that their encounter with Jesus was producing an unpredictable renewal of their identity as believers.

The venerable Scriptures read anew by Christ's first witnesses exercised such a power that when they began to articulate the Scripture's personal implication in the Jesus event, all became gospel for them. Paradoxically, while the Scriptures seemed old in the immediate context of the Christ event, these same Scriptures were vehicles of a new message. In nascent Christianity the founding self-identification of true discipleship proceeded through a coherent rewriting of the whole salvation history of Israel. Thus among the proto-Christians old Scripture generated a sacred literature of a new kind, centered on the figure of Jesus as the messianic culmination of all times, the Son of God whose mission was to inaugurate the events of the end. The narratives and testimonies that were to fill the future writings collected as the New Testament are founded on a hermeneutical conversion within their ancestral tradition. In the broader cultural and religious background of the first two centuries of Christianity, the production of what became the New Testament is forever linked with the reading of the old Scriptures in the life and thought of the tenuous string of Christian communities around the Mediterranean world.

The First Two Centuries

During the first two centuries no attempt was made to present a proper exegesis of the Bible, nor was the Bible as such seen by the earliest Christians as a classic calling for its own commentary. The contrast between the learned and rich Jew of Alexandria, Philo (20 B.C.–A.D. 50), a contemporary of Jesus, who wrote one treatise after another on the Torah as a monument of cultivated exegesis, and the many illiterate minorities among earliest Christians could not be more stark. For Jesus' disciples of the first two centuries, the appeal of the Scriptures was a more immediate call to conversion rather than to an intellectual analysis. The Bible remained for them what it was expressly for Paul and the Gospel writers, a power of the Spirit, capable of transforming their minds in giving them a new sense for their own religious past, a divine authority of revelation legitimizing their claim of faith in Jesus.

Rather than scholarly exegesis, the earliest literary activity of the Christian churches, apart from the New Testament, was the so-called apocryphals of the New Testament and similar writings, all of which espoused literary forms of a biblical type. That productivity witnessed the per-
sistent centrality of the Old Testament in the earliest circles of Christian converts. One of these writings is the Ascension of Isaiah, a Jewish apocryphal interpolated by Christians before the end of the first century. In it the vision of the gospel event is filled with apocalyptic motifs, in the description of the transcopnic descent and ascent of the Savior, which was supposed to have been contemplated by the prophet of old.

In the Jewish-Christian community of Rome, also before the end of the first century, the Roman elder Clement (fl. c. 96) tried his skills in the style of ancient wisdom literature when he wrote a Letter to the Corinthians. There is little doctrinal overtone from Paul’s letter, but the author cites exclusively from the Old Testament. One or two generations later, also in the Jewish-Christian community of Rome, a layman called Hermas fused traditional wisdom literature and apocalyptic elements when he composed his ambitious synthesis, The Shepherd of Hermas, on the debated question of the forgiveness of sinners in the church.

The call on the Old Testament was not without ambiguity in these works. While Christian leaders, vocal in the name of their communities of recent converts, remained eager to keep the literary standards of the ancient Scriptures, their true focus was the Christian experiment. However, whether in Corinth, Rome or elsewhere, their public testimony was still pervaded by the symbols and the authoritative power of the Old Testament. Even in the case of Pseudo-Barnabas, a Christian zealot of the later second century whose work is often disfigured by anti-Jewish bigotry, the same is true: he denounces in such “biblical” terms the practical implications of the old covenant that his work, like that of Hermas, could be considered as belonging to Scripture. Hermas’s Shepherd and the Letter of Barnabas enjoyed a special status in liturgical use until the fourth century.

Apologists

From the middle of the second century a new category of writers emerged, the so-called apologists. J. Quasten enumerates twelve of these Greek-speaking intellectuals from pagan backgrounds. Most significant is Justin of Rome, martyred in 165 after having served in his community as a teacher of philosophy, or religious truth.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) announces a decisive shift in the Christian use of the Old Testament during the second century. Having found Christ as the most valid response to his longing for absolute truth, Justin elaborated a rational demonstration of that validity. Therefore he inaugurated a methodical use of Scripture. Against the pagan unbelief and the hostility of the rabbis, he wrote two Apologies and later a Dialogue with Trypho, which may well be more than a literary fiction. Each time Justin explained Christian faith in constant reference to Scripture. Acknowledged as the first of the Christian authors, he calls explicitly on the written text of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, citing them from memory (1 Apology 15-17, 62, 66).

In 1 Apology 31 Justin offers historical information about the making of the Septuagint, the Greek translation realized in Alexandria. In 1 Apology 33-53 he follows closely the Gospel narratives. In his Dialogue with Trypho he quotes Matthew abundantly and Luke more occasionally, always with the purpose of citing the literal content of written sources. In Dialogue with Trypho 29, he indulges in an abrupt reply to his rabbinic counterpart: “They [the controverted words in the Old Testament] are contained in your Scriptures, or rather not yours, but ours.”

Another important apologist is Theophilus of Antioch (late second century), whose homeland was in eastern Syria. Deeply versed in Hellenistic learning, Theophilus had undertaken a careful study of the Prophets and other biblical texts before taking over episcopal ministry in
the imperial city of Antioch. Shortly after 180 he wrote the Apology to Autolycus, in which he is the first Christian leader to quote primarily from the New Testament, including the Pauline letters, which like the Gospels are cited as “divine word.”

In the context of Gnostic debate, Theophilus succeeded in formulating the principle of a creation of the world out of nothing, a novel definition characteristic of the way in which the rationality of Greek thought was interacting with biblical beliefs in Christian circles. With a stringent display of logic the bishop elaborated on the philosophical evidence in complete assumption of what he understood to be the deepest biblical intent of Genesis. In a culture very different from the culture of the biblical author, this Christian bishop concentrated all the intellectual tools at his disposal to argue that all things depend radically on God.

Melito (late second century), bishop of Sardis in what is modern Turkey, is another distinguished author among the apologists. In his Homily on Passion and its recital of the gospel message we hear the tones of a sophisticated culture dominated by literature and rhetoric. While its real significance is doctrinal, the Homily demonstrates how the christological focus of the canonical gospel narratives perdured intact throughout this Hellenizing shift of the Christian movement into the high culture of late antiquity. In Melito’s poetic homily, delivered from the pulpit as a psalmodic song, the passion and death on the cross of the Messiah are rendered with passionate emphasis.

With his anti-Gnostic bias Melito also illustrates how the literary celebration of the central evangelical message reached the congregations of his time, strongly framed by a theological system: God as such, the Father, one with the Son and Holy Spirit, operates our salvation in Jesus Christ. Naming God as Trinity, Melito still understood deity according to the Yahwism of biblical faith, as Unique Principle, in Greek Monarchy. Thus his use of Scripture complies with monarchian theology. As was the case in Semitic thought, principally in the New Testament itself, the shift of the gospel into Hellenism opened a new space for the metaphysical imagination. Once again Scripture, and only Scripture, was able to secure the appropriate resources for the Christian creativity in that cultural odyssey leading from the milieu of the gospel to Melito and from Melito to *Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-c. 254).

Gnostic Crisis

The Gnostic crisis of the first two centuries after Christ produced profound changes in all major churches during the third century. Scripture was the strategic issue in that crisis, one of the distinctive features of all leading Gnostic teachers being to reject the Old Testament as received in the churches. Hence the need to reformulate the relevance of Scripture for a Christian doctrine of faith was all the more urgent as most Gnostic teachers were spreading their views inside Christian communities. At the grassroots level it was sometimes difficult, even impossible, to distinguish between Gnostic and non-Gnostic trends. A sure criterion for the needed discernment was provided by Scripture. For instance, insofar as the Odes of Solomon, a superb piece of poetry from the second half of the second century, present a psalmic analogy with old Scripture free from polemical overtones against Israelite faith, the odes should not be labeled Gnostic, even if their mystic enthusiasm and symbolic imagery are akin to Gnostic spirituality.

The Gnostics’ rejection of the creation story in Genesis and their declared war against all forms of biblical faith were motivated by a pessimistic prejudice about the human condition on earth and about the very fact of a material cosmos. While church leaders denounced the
arbitrary and abusive appropriation of scriptural verses in Gnostic circles, the Valentinian school of Gnosticism, originating in Alexandria, challenged traditional interpreters of Scripture in laying down the first elements of a proper method for systematic exegesis, as can be seen in Heracleon’s *Commentary on John*, known only through its refutation by Origen.

The clarification resulting from the Gnostic crisis inside the main churches was a new foundation for the appropriation of Scripture. Against Marcion’s (d. c. 154) attempt to compose a canon of Scripture in conformity with his anti-Jewish bias, the churches consolidated and almost completed the building up of a collection of Old and New Testament writings unanimously accepted. Against the Gnostic claim of a religious faith based on the mostly secret teaching of individual masters, the churches maintained a strict distinction between what they called the apostolic tradition of faith and any kind of exegetical initiative launched by individuals. Tradition as such became normative as an institutional vehicle for transmitting the legacy of the first disciples of Jesus and for entertaining a public unanimity among highly diversified churches. In short, in reaction to Gnosticism the Christian churches established their oldest form of catholicism, based on their mutual agreement to be linked by the rule of faith, by a common possession and interpretation of old Scripture and by a shared willingness to celebrate the gospel event in symbiosis with high culture.

*Irenaeus* (fl. c. 180) was born in Smyrna (modern Turkey) and emigrated to Rome and then to Gaul, in what may have been a missionary impulse. He always kept ties with friends in his native province. At their request he brought together documentary data concerning Gnostic teaching, data that were processed in a synthesis entitled *Against the Heresies*. Irenaeus handled the polemical dossier with a deeply biblical focus in mind, crystallized in the following formula: One God, one Scripture, one salvation, one rule of faith in all churches. A man of the Bible, the bishop of Lyons moved through the Prophets and other sacred writings in hammering and chiseling all his arguments in accordance with Scripture. He was also the first Christian theologian who integrated Pauline doctrine systematically in the biblical texture of his own thought. Traces of Paul’s dialectics may be detectable in other second-century sources, such as the *Letter to Diognetus*, which is probably contemporary with Irenaeus; but it is the merit of Irenaeus to have first addressed Paul as a true theologian. Again there is proof of a creative response against Gnostic precedents, by which Paul’s teaching had been compromised. That Pauline theology began to flourish in the intellectual history of the Christian churches is in no small measure due to Irenaeus.

**The Alexandrian Tradition**

By the beginning of the third century, Alexandria, the intellectual capital of the Roman Empire in late antiquity, also took the lead in the history of biblical exegesis. There the Greek version of Hebrew Scripture, called the Septuagint, had been elaborated under Ptolemy II Philadelphus three centuries before Christ. That translation, completed with additional texts directly composed in Greek, served as the literary matrix for the writing of the New Testament.

Once it was couched in written form, the gospel found an access to universal culture. One of the highly developed elements of the Alexandrian legacy to this universal culture was the exegesis of the classic texts held in veneration in the ancient world. To speak of Alexandrian exegesis immediately evokes the term *allegorism*, and rightly so, since the foundation of its library, the learned contribution of Alexandria to classical culture, had been a methodical exploration of ancient poets, philosophers, and even nonwritten myths with a purpose of al-
legory. Allegory by definition means saying something different from what one reads in the written source, allowing a legitimate appropriation of the cultural tradition. Even in artificial word games and comparisons, foreign to our modern sensibilities, allegories nurtured the Alexandrian imagination. The task meant interpreting the sources not by paraphrase and imitation but by transposing mythical contents and obscure sentences into the rational discourse of contemporary Alexandrian culture. Gods and goddesses, including their sometimes scandalous behavior, offered to the Alexandrian interpreters symbols, best understood in reference to actual standards of ethics and society. Greek classics started a new life thanks to Alexandrian scholarship. Allegorism became part of the international success of Alexandria in the Hellenistic world, a world in which Christian exegesis was searching for its own proper cultural expression.

Generally labeled as the allegorical method of exegesis, biblical interpretation in Christian Alexandria went through many phases that militate against simplistic qualification. What may be properly called Christian exegesis started in Alexandria in response to Heraclitus, the disciple of Valentinus, in the late second century. The response to Heraclitus in the name of the Alexandrian church was formulated by *Clement of Alexandria (c. 160-215) and his pupil *Origen (c. 185-253/54), who combined allegorical methodology with far-reaching theological intuitions and with a passionate scrutiny of the text of Scripture. Origen is still acclaimed as the founder of biblical criticism in the church, the most influential Christian interpreter of Scripture and the founder of systematic theology.

Origen's basic distinction between the literal and spiritual sense of biblical statements fused christological typology, as inspired by Paul, with the presuppositions of Alexandrian allegorism. The sacred text, said Origen, even when otherwise making no sense, appeals to the inner self of the readers and teaches them something about their soul and destiny.

Backed by a Platonic anthropology and urged toward intellectual synthesis, Origen set out on his lifelong mission as a Christian interpreter of Scripture. He worked for more than fifteen years on the Hexapla ("Six Columns"), trying to establish a corrected text of the Septuagint by comparing the Hebrew original and its transcription in Greek with three other Greek versions. Inspired by Philo's treatises on the Torah, he wrote innumerable commentaries on both Testaments. When in his forties he was ordained a priest, he preached countless exegetical sermons, of which a few are preserved in the original Greek and more are saved thanks to Latin translations.

From the mid-third century on, Origen's accomplishment radiated over all provinces of the empire. After him, disciples and admirers produced a whole exegetical literature in the Origenian style: *Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-c. 339), the founder of church history, who became a biblical scholar in his own right; *Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397) and Hilary of Poitiers (300-367), who introduced him to the Latin West; the Cappadocian bishops, *Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390) and *Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395), who glorified his method of exegesis in their own commentaries, even when repudiating some of his philosophical premises; and many others.

Origen's admirers did not always content themselves with emulating his allegorical explanations but were moved to produce biblical interpretations of their own in response to the challenges of their time. Such a response is clear in the writings of *Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296-373), who held the most powerful episcopal office of Alexandria from 328 to 373. Political circumstances and personal commitment trapped Athanasius in the heat of an ecclesiastical turmoil, chastening the greater part of his forty-five years in office. Between five exiles,
and even when he was banished, he became a writer by duty and necessity. A first essay, *On the Incarnation of the Divine Word* (c. 335), was soon followed by more lengthy *Orationes Against the Arians* and other polemical essays, linked with the crisis around Arius and in defense of the synod of Nicaea in 325. Each year, whenever possible, Athanasius sent a circular letter to the churches under his leadership. After 356 he wrote the *Life of Antony*, the earliest Christian biography. Athanasius’s use of the Bible is atypical for an Alexandrian in that he did not compose a biblical commentary as such. Rightly acclaimed as someone steeped in Scripture, he abstained from exegesis proper and ignored the Alexandrian orchestration of allegorism. His reading of the Bible was less conditioned by a preconceived system of philosophical ideas about the human self, as in Origen, than linked with his practical experience of faith and church.

Following conventional directions of school rhetorics, Athanasius draws on Scripture in order to highlight the issues at stake, all the time couching his thoughts in a vivid narrative style. He makes no formal distinction between a literal and a spiritual sense of Scripture. The *Letter to Marcellinus on the Psalms* demonstrates the inner dynamic of his biblical hermeneutics: he does not analyze semantic levels and multiple senses in the Psalter verses; he rather wants the psalms to speak for themselves in the context of Marcellinus’s experience of life and faith. He encourages his friend to contemplate the different circumstances in which psalms verses could be most appropriate. In the kind of advice he offers his sick friend, we can glimpse some autobiographical accents of the bishop’s own experience, which underlines the fact that the pastoral ministry of the church was for Athanasius the proper arena of biblical experience. Experiencing the active presence of Christ’s salvation all around him meant for Athanasius the constant verification of God’s action described in both Testaments. Hence his comments on the events in which he was involved read as a realized analogy of what one reads in Scripture. The great biblical saving actions are to be celebrated constantly in the now of the church.

In contrast to Athanasius, *Cyril of Alexandria* (c. 375-444), bishop from 412 to 444, expressed his relationship to Scripture essentially in writing commentaries. In this fifth-century bishop, biblical exegesis and episcopal ministry nearly coincided. Prior to Cyril, the learned exercise of biblical interpretation by *Didymus the Blind* (313-398) had attracted much attention in Alexandria. Didymus, who had been appointed a private teacher under the ruling of Athanasius, reiterated Origen’s project in a more systematic way. In addition to public teaching, he distributed more esoteric lessons to the inner circle of his disciples in conformity with strict Origenism. He died in 398, while Cyril was eagerly studying theology in the city under the supervision of his uncle Theophilus, the local patriarch, whom he would succeed. When he was installed as a powerful pontiff of the Alexandrian hierarchy in a position of wealth and comfort, Cyril produced a biblical exegesis presenting all the marks of a magisterial teaching: solemn diction, a display of vast knowledge and rhetorical skills, a constant affirmation of doctrinal correctness. Verse by verse, Isaiah, the Psalms, the Gospels of John and of Matthew and other books were commented on, the mass of Cyril’s prose filling thousands of pages in a modern edition. In his doctrinal works Cyril discussed scriptural passages with much scholarly pathos, but one may suspect that ordinary church people were no longer the primary addresses, as they had been in Athanasius’s similar writing. School procedures determine Cyril’s exposition of well-organized exegetical works in which the author grasps readers by the hand and, with eloquence and erudition, leads them to the spiritual sense. Christological typology is applied in full confidence: the whole Scripture leads straight to the Christ the Pantocrator of Byz...
antique mosaics. A substantial content of doctrine inside the exegetical frame assured Cyril's works an afterlife of many centuries in Eastern and Western traditions.

After Cyril, the exegetical tradition of Alexandria lost its impetus. In the anti-Chalcedonian camp, Severus of Antioch (c. 465-539), a leading Monophysite who found refuge in Alexandria under the emperors Justin (c. 450-527) and Justinian (482/483-565), wrote 125 cathedral homilies. They are filled with traditional Alexandrian allegorism, balanced with a careful attention given to the letter of Scripture, as had been the case with Cyril.

The Latin West

There is a reference to the earliest Latin translation of Scripture in the Acts of the Martyrs of Scilli (modern Algeria): "Books and Letters of Paul" were in the hands of the accused in July 180, when they stood in front of the proconsul Saturninus before their condemnation to capital punishment. Christian proselytes coming from Greek-speaking churches, some of them with Jewish backgrounds, sooner or later rendered their message in Latin. Early translations of Scripture from the second and early third century can still be identified by a careful scrutiny of biblical quotations in the works of *Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225) or Cyprian (d. 258). In particular, Tertullian felt free to quote Scripture at his convenience on the basis of different translations, when he did not translate directly himself. While Cyprian adopted a more consistent line of quoting, suggesting that an old Latin version of the Bible was then emerging with some distinctive authority, *Augustine would later feel free to quote different translations. The status of biblical exegesis in the West would be marked forever by its Eastern provenance. Rendered in Latin, the principles and methods of interpreting Scripture would keep their original profile, mainly determined by the initiatives of the Alexandrian interpreters.

Roman Africa retained its pioneering role during the second and third centuries, the well-established rhetorical traditions of Carthage favoring among Christians a special interest in the way of handling sacred Scripture. In response to liturgical and polemical needs, there were collections of Testimonia, quotations from the Old Testament organized around specific issues.

The rhetor and advocate Tertullian (II. 200), born in Carthage of pagan parents and known as a jurist in Rome, converted to Christianity about 195. A critic of society with a sharp tongue and a passionate eye, the new convert turned against his pagan compatriots in two major essays, *To the Heathen and *Apology. Soon followed The Testimony of the Soul, The Prescription of Heretics (namely, Gnostics), the monumental Against Marcion, the treatise Against the Valentinians, another On Baptism, one on The Flesh of Christ and finally the more metaphysical Against Praxeas when Tertullian had joined the Montanists. In his interpretation of Scripture, he essentially followed Irenaeus's anti-Gnostic stance. More explicitly than Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200), Tertullian opposed the attempt made by Marcion to impose a scriptural canon of his own. He held divine inspiration in high esteem. Except for a few traces of allegorism (e.g., Tertullian Against Marcion 2.25; 3.16; 5.1), he read biblical narratives in a realistic way and always applied the juridical bias of his professional past. In letting Scripture explain itself his basic rule was to proceed from clear passages to the more obscure. He argued that a sound explanation of difficult passages was always secured by Christ and the apostles. The ancient prophets announced parables and allegories (Tertullian Against Marcion 3.5) and contemplated past events as future.

Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200-210-258), a famous and rich master of eloquence in Carthage before he converted, was promptly chosen as priest and elected bishop by the local community
in 248/49. His literary legacy includes a commentary On the Lord's Prayer, the first exegetical essay in Latin produced as a separate work, each verse of the Gospel text being applied to different aspects of the Christian experience. To Quirinus: Three Books of Testimonies provided riches of biblical quotations for Latin authors of later times.

While Augustine of Hippo ranks above all intellectual leaders in the Latin West, two great bishops played a decisive role in shaping Latin exegesis before the ascendency of Augustine: Hilary of Poitiers, bishop from 350 to 367, and Ambrose of Milan, bishop from 373 to 397. Both men succeeded in their careers as biblical interpreters thanks to what they learned in reading Origen's works.

Hilary spent five years in banishment among Eastern bishops, which gave him an opportunity to become fluent in Greek. First, in On the Trinity, he produced a massive scriptural argument against Arianism. Then he imitated a lost commentary of Origen in his own Commentary on the Psalms. Written in a style remarkably dense and consonant with classical sources, that vast explanation of all the Psalms remains a masterpiece of ancient Christian literature. It illustrates the status of biblical hermeneutics in the Western churches, while the mystical and thematic inspiration comes from Origen, the enculturation of the sacred text is based on major Latin classics.

Before his exile, Hilary wrote a short Commentary on Matthew, the first of that sort preserved in Latin. In search of the deeper meaning of main episodes into the Gospel narrative, he found it by stressing their symbolic significance: how they were announcing salvation, the church or the hostility of the Jews. Close to Tertullian and other Latin predecessors, Hilary revealed himself at once as a gifted writer, a strong leader and a man of solid convictions, rooted in the classical tradition.

After his return from exile, Hilary composed a Book of Mysteries, in which he explained figures and names of the Old Testament as prefigurations of God's incarnation in Christ, a thoroughly Origenian exercise.

Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397) found his first model of biblical exegesis in Philo, who had originally served as a role model for Origen as well. A former rhetor and governor of the province of Liguria in his early thirties, Ambrose was baptized in the same week as he was consecrated a bishop. He was equally at home in both cultures, Greek and Latin, being one of the last Christian leaders in the West to be bilingual. A man of intense learning and immense reading, he appropriated Scripture with ascetic fervor. He introduced the best of Origen's legacy into Western culture and enjoyed the philosophical circles of Milan.

Ambrose's contribution to biblical exegesis, mainly based on preached homilies, witnesses a special interest on Genesis: On the Six Days (Hexameron); On Paradise; On Cain and Abel; On Noah; On Abraham; On Isaac and the Soul; On Jacob and the Happy Life; On Joseph; On the Patriarchs. He found in Genesis essential foundations for a Christian way of life, and he communicated them in a brilliant synthesis of allegorical styles inherited from Philo and Origen, fused with the ethical wisdom of Cicero, Virgil, Seneca, Livius and other classical sources.

The three levels of spiritual meaning, taken over from Origen, are called moral, mystical (focusing on the mystery of Christ and the church) and anagogical (leading to "upper," ana, transcendent, reality). Ambrose combines them according to pastoral needs and concerns in recreating the symbolic universe of Origenian allegorism, with a genuine focus on ethical issues proper to the genius of his Latin heritage. He also preached on a certain number of psalms, stressing their relevance in the social and political situation of his time. His only known

With *Jerome* (c. 340-420), an older contemporary of Augustine, biblical exegesis became a professional business, detached from episcopal ministry. Born in the late 340s at Stridon, on the border of Dalmatia and Pannonia, Jerome studied grammar and rhetoric in Rome, where Donatus was his teacher. With his friend Rufinus he went to the East, where he learned Greek and Hebrew. Ordained a priest by the pro-Nicene and ultraconservative Paulinus of Antioch, he enjoyed some lessons by Apollinaris of Laodicea. Although he was in Rome for a short time after the council of Constantinople (381), he returned to the East and traveled through Jerusalem and Palestine to Egypt, where he enrolled among the students of Didymus the Blind (313-398). Finally he settled in a Latin monastery at Bethlehem until his death.

In Rome, Pope Damasus (c. 304-384) had encouraged Jerome to revise an older Latin version of the Psalter in comparing it with the Septuagint. But in Caesarea of Palestine, Jerome had discovered the unique copy of Origen’s Hexapla, which convinced him to produce a Latin text of the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew. This task took him almost fifteen years. The occasional help of some rabbis, but mainly Jerome’s talent, made possible his reconstitution of the “Hebraic truth” (*veritas hebraica*), as he called it, in the freshness and clarity of classical Latin prose. He also created the reference books needed: a biblical Chronicle, a *Book of Hebrew Names* and a *Book of Place Names* (Onomasticon) in Palestine with their etymological significance, *Hebraic Questions on Genesis* on the Jewish traditions, and finally a handbook of patrology, *On the Lives of Illustrious Men* (*De viris illustribus*), a catalog of Christian writers until 393, which allowed him to advertise his own work. Jerome also wrote commentaries on Matthew, the Pauline letters, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, the Prophets, and other hagiographic or polemical essays. He took the care to edit 150 of his letters.

Jerome’s significance in the history of Christian exegesis remains tied to the fact that he radically changed direction from Origen. The latter focused on the Bible born in his native Alexandria in trying to establish a correct text of the Septuagint; Jerome turned his back on the Septuagint and decided to grasp the meaning of the Hebrew original. Thereby he not only produced the Vulgate, the Latin translation soon to become standard in the Latin churches, but also established a basic presupposition for modern exegesis—the focus on the original setting and the Semitic thinking behind the sacred texts.

A contemporary of Ambrose and Jerome, *Tyconius* (fl. 370-390), a lay scholar in Carthage, composed a Christian treatise of biblical hermeneutics, the first of its kind, titled *Book of Rules*: “There are certain mystic rules which obtain in regard to the inner recesses of the entire Law and keep the treasures of the truth invisible for some people,” he wrote. The rules are mystic because they are inner structures of divine Scripture. Tyconius hopes “to fabricate something like keys and lamps,” to help to understand the mystic rules. His treatise offers a dense and systematic analysis of seven such rules in focusing on their ecclesiological relevance. Tyconius was a Donatist who refused to be sectarian. The rules show that a pure church is a myth, antichrist is in our midst as long as we struggle for salvation. Augustine would be deeply impressed by that lesson.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430), one of the greatest interpreters of Scripture in the Latin West, comparable only with Origen, was a man of intense spirituality, vibrant with all the trends of contemporary culture, literary and philosophical. In reading Paul and discovering Isaiah he overcame the decisive crisis of his conversion in August 386. He spent his first five years as a
convert in reading Scripture and learning the Psalms by heart. Even when he was ordained a priest, he still felt himself inadequately prepared to articulate in biblical terms his innate longing for divine transcendency. As soon as he found himself invested with episcopal duty (396), his first major project consisted in planning an essay on biblical interpretation, the treatise On Christian Doctrine. It witnesses the fervent commitment of the educated pastor eager to harmonize the values of his personal philosophy with the pastoral need of a methodical explanation of Scripture. After a few months Augustine interrupted his writing, aware of his lack of a proper method for handling the peculiar obscurities of the biblical text. The Confessions, which he decided to compose thereafter, gave him a chance to use Scripture in his own way, as a vehicle for passionate prayer and self-awareness.

Augustine had hardly finished gathering and editing the final part of the Confessions (itself an attempt to practice exegesis in the frame of an intense subjectivity) when he engaged in a crucial experiment, trying to exercise his skills in strict conformity with the objective content of Scripture. The Literal Interpretation of Genesis would become Augustine's hermeneutical laboratory for a lifetime. He termed such a methodology literal because he dared this time to take the letter of the biblical statements as the starting point of his inquiries. Rarely did a rational genius exhaust its own resources as Augustine did in this enterprise. The still inexperienced interpreter of Scripture discovered thereby the priceless value of accepted ignorance. A renewed future opened for him as he plunged once more into a relentless preaching on sacred texts: the Commentary on John delivered in 124 sermons, the Commentary on the First Letter of John in 10 sermons, the lifelong Exposition of the Psalms. In addition, 500 other sermons testify to Augustine's constant immersion in the Scriptures, whether exhorting to the Christian way of life, castigating heretics or celebrating the mysteries of faith.

Augustine had limited access to Greek but absorbed much of Origen, Athanasius, Basil and other Eastern predecessors through reading Ambrose and translations. Thus he keeps a traditional profile in his exegesis, with a basic distinction between the spiritual and literal senses of the Bible, christological typology, occasional allegorism and some attention given to the historical context in which Scripture originated. His originality in the hermeneutical task was to communicate a personalized language of biblical discourse and a doctrinal substance as a foundational legacy for the centuries to come in Western Christianity.

Antiochene and Syrian Traditions
The priest Lucian, martyred in 312, is considered the founder of the exegetical tradition of Antioch. Like Origen, he revised the Septuagint text, but he was more familiar with the Hebrew language. His revision was broadly adopted in the Eastern churches. He is said to have favored a literal interpretation of the sacred texts. One of his contemporary fellow Christians in Antioch, Dorotheus (c. 255-362), was also a studious reader of the Hebrew Bible.

In 323 or 324, Eustathius became bishop of Antioch. He wrote a tract, On the Witch of Endor Against Origen (1 Kings 28), still preserved, in which he denounced allegorical exegesis as depriving Scripture of its historical character. He also wrote a letter to Alexander of Alexandria with an exegesis reducing the figure of Melchizedek to that of an ordinary man, in close connection with the letter to the Hebrews. Some anti-Arian comments of Eustathius on Psalm 15, Psalm 92 and Proverbs 8:22 were published soon after Nicaea.

Apollinaris of Laodicea (c. 310-c. 390), condemned for heresy in the last decade of his life, was the most celebrated interpreter of Scripture at Antioch when Jerome enrolled among his
students in 371. Well-trained in classical rhetoric, he was imbued with Alexandrian theology, but his “countless volumes on the Holy Scriptures” (Jerome On Illustrious Men [De viris illustribus] 104) showed an independence of interpretation. Fragments survive on the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Hosea, Malachi, Matthew, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and Romans. Apollinarius did not perpetuate Origenian allegorism, nor did he formally adhere to the philosophical method of Antiochene exegetes, though his sharp remarks on the letter and the logic of the text were filled with moral applications and christological overtones.

On the island of Cyprus, Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315-403) wrote a biblical dictionary, On Weights and Measures, in which he discusses the canon of Scripture, the translations of the Old Testament, biblical measurements and the geography of Palestine. Another treatise, On the Twelve Precious Stones, offers allegorical comments on the breastplate of the high priest. This was composed by Epiphanius (394) at the request of Diodore of Tarsus. A Commentary on the Canticle of Canticiles, attributed to Epiphanius (c. 310-403), belongs to a Cypriot contemporary, Philo of Carpathia.

Diodore of Tarsus (d. 390) was the most distinctive theoretician of the Antiochene school of exegesis. He studied in Athens, presided for a while over a monastery and became bishop of Tarsus (378). He started teaching at a young age, and among his pupils were *John Chrysostom and *Theodore of Mopsuestia. He is said to have written sixty treatises, with commentaries on all the books of the Old Testament, all four Gospels, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians and 1 John. Only fragments survive. A theoretical presentation of his method stressed the need for philological and grammatical analysis in strong opposition to Alexandrian allegorism.

Diodore’s closest pupil, Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428), was born in Antioch and was trained in his hometown by the famous rhetor Libanius (c. 314-c. 394). Theodore was consecrated bishop in 392 and was widely celebrated for his learning and orthodoxy. Long after his death, he, like Diodore, was labeled a heretic, a fact that entailed the destruction of his literary legacy. Fragments exist of his commentaries on Genesis, Psalms, the Minor Prophets, Matthew, Luke, John and Acts. A Commentary on the Ten Minor Epistles of Paul survives in a Latin translation. Theodore also wrote on all the Pauline letters. Before becoming a bishop he also composed the treatise On the Incarnation, in which his thoughtful interpretation ignores Alexandrian allegorism but rests on sound theological judgment. Likewise his brother, Polychronius of Apamea, privileged historical and archaeological data proper to confirm the literal meaning in his biblical commentaries. He refused any allegorical explanation.

John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), first attracted by eremitism and ascetic excesses, was ordained a priest (386) by Bishop Flavian. For twelve years he demonstrated his exceptional gift for oratory from the pulpit. Chosen to replace Nectarius, the patriarch of Constantinople (397), his reformatory zeal caused him much trouble—as much as did the animosity against him of Theophilus, the patriarch of Alexandria. His exegetical homilies on both Testaments, most delivered at Antioch, are among the best Christian literature of antiquity. Chrysostom is concerned about the literal meaning and the practical applications of the sacred text. He analyzes human behavior, with a constant emphasis on Christian ethics. In the year 400 he delivered fifty-five sermons on Acts, the only complete commentary on Acts dating from the patristic era. A deep admiration for the apostle Paul vibrates throughout his homilies. In the ancient church Chrysostom is the most eloquent commentator on Paul.

Severian of Gabala (d. c. 408) in Syria, hostile to Chrysostom at the court of Empress
Eudoxia (d. 404) and a pedastrian and sectarian representative of the Antiochene school of exegesis, used the Old Testament mainly as a textbook for natural science. Fragments of a Commentary to the Epistles of Paul witness his dependence on Diodore of Tarsus.

Niles of Ancyra (modern Ankara), abbot of a monastery in the early fifth century, considered Chrysostom as his teacher, but his Commentary on the Song of Songs positions him more closely with Origen. His allegorical interpretation identifies the bride with the church and the human soul.

Mark the Hermit (d. c. 430), a contemporary of Niles and another disciple of Chrysostom, picked up the “law of the spirit” in Romans 7:14 and presented sayings titled On Spiritual Law, a complete code for monastic duties (201).

In the second half of the fifth century, Gennadius (d. 471), the patriarch of Constantinople, wrote commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, Daniel and all the Pauline letters, attesting that he belonged to the exegetical school of Antioch. Fragments survive.

Theodoret of Cyrus (393-588), born in Antioch, educated in its monasteries and a bishop for thirty-five years, wrote some of the best-known essays in line with Antiochene exegesis. He was a man of great integrity, moderate in his judgment. In a continuous Interpretation of the Psalms and a commentary On the Song of Songs he combined Origen’s exegesis with the historical analysis privileged at Antioch. A strongly anti-Jewish Commentary on Daniel, a Commentary on Ezekiel and another On the Twelve Minor Prophets followed. Theodoret’s Commentary on Isaiah, rediscovered in its entirety and published for the first time in 1932, clearly displays his exegetical method, which avoids the one-sidedness of some of Theodore of Mopsuestia’s views and admits allegorical or typological interpretations, in addition to a lucid philological analysis. Theodoret also wrote commentaries on Jeremiah and on the Pauline letters.

**Final Stage of Patristic Exegesis**

In the West, *Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville (d. 636) are the last fathers of the church. Gregory (d. 604) was an enthusiastic expositor of Scripture who interiorized the legacy of Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine concerning the spiritual sense of Scripture. His monastic piety reflected the medieval hunger for supernatural data in daily life, but his popular narratives continued to diffuse the distinctive principles of Christian ethics proper to the Latin tradition. Isidore of Seville (d. 636) wrote introductions to different biblical books that constituted an encyclopedic collection of data from earlier exegetes and that were popular among medieval scholars. He also wrote a set of homilies on Gospel quotations, limited in their use of allegories and attractive in their simplicity.

In the East, patristic exegesis ended with the creation of a new genre, the catenae, or collections of exegetical excerpts. Procopius of Gaza in Palestine (died c. 526) was the first to produce such a compilation. From one biblical book to another he added, by verse by verse, short citations from Philo, Origen, Basil (c. 329-379), Theodoret, Cyril and others. Symphonic commentaries of that sort were written in Palestine during the sixth century. The same compilatory technique prospered in Constantinople from the year 700 on. By quoting numerous sources lost in the meantime, the authors of catenae preserved substantial traces of interpretations otherwise unknown, due to Origen, Eusebius (c. 275-339), Athanasius, Apollinarius (c. 310-390), Didymus, Cyril of Alexandria, Evagrius (345-399), Hesychius (fifth century) and Theodore of Mopsuestia. The genre proliferated in the Byzantine world until the twelfth century. Near the end of the eleventh century, Nicetas of Heraclea still fabricated a valuable catena on the Psalms. Th...
Psalm. The last church father in the East, John of Damascus (c. 650-750), a Christian Arab who served under the caliphs before retiring to the monastery of St. Sabbas near Jerusalem, produced a similar compilation (*Sacra parallela*) of scriptural and patristic quotations. At least thirty-five such catenae survived. But during the Arab conquest in 638 the library of Caesarea was destroyed, and with it the main center of patristic compilations.

In Old Slavonic translation, the legacy of ancient Christian exegetes soon reached new cultural areas north of the Black Sea, and Chrysostom's works would be copied diligently in the monasteries of what would come to be Russia. A similar northerly migration of the traditional interpretation of Scripture occurred in the West, where the Venerable *Bede* (672-735) engineered almost single-handedly the Northumbrian renaissance of classical and patristic traditions. His commentaries on the Apocalypse, Acts, Luke, Mark and, sometime later, Genesis offer an intricate lacework of patristic quotations comparable only to the illuminated capitals on the front pages of the contemporary manuscripts.

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