

INTRODUCING Medieval Biblical Interpretation

The Senses of Scripture
in Premodern Exegesis

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In memory of my father,
Alan M. Levy

Contents

Preface	xi
Abbreviations	xiii
Introduction	1
1. The Age of the Fathers	7
2. The Early Middle Ages	41
3. The Schools of the Eleventh Century: From Bec to Reims	79
4. The Monks of the Twelfth Century	107
5. The School of St. Victor	137
6. The Schools of the Twelfth Century: From Laon to Paris	161
7. Exegesis in the Universities of the Later Middle Ages	195
8. Applied Exegesis: The New Testament and the Medieval Papacy	263
Conclusion: Can Medieval Exegesis Speak to Us Today?	281
Index of Scripture and Other Ancient and Medieval Sources	286
Index of Modern Authors	296
Index of Subjects	300

Preface

A great deal of work has been done in the field of medieval biblical hermeneutics over the past eighty years since Beryl Smalley first published her path-breaking *Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*. There is, of course, Henri de Lubac's multivolume *Exégèse médiévale* to consider, and more recently the prodigious scholarship of Gilbert Dahan, principally exemplified by his *L'exégèse chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiéval*. This is only the tip of the iceberg, though, as one could go on for pages recounting the work of many eminent scholars. Thus when I agreed to take on the task of writing this volume for Baker Academic Press, it all seemed a bit overwhelming. It was not clear to me at first how I could get a handle on the vast amounts of primary and secondary material so as to produce a coherent account. My fears were gradually allayed, however, as I found that the durable threads that run through the centuries would lead me along from one exegete to another and from one theme to the next. The continuity inherent in this sacred tradition proved to be an internal guide.

In many ways I have followed a conventional path in structuring the book, which moves in orderly fashion across the centuries, with some periods given more attention than others. For the most part, I devote sections within chapters to particular exegetes who best exemplify some period or genre of exegesis. An attempt, moreover, has been made to display the active work of the medieval exegetes, to let them speak for themselves with minimal interference. If I have succeeded, the diligent reader of this volume will have ingested a good deal of medieval biblical exegesis. This is a modest book, perhaps, but it is thick with primary material, the translations of which are my own unless otherwise indicated.

It would have been impossible to begin, let alone complete, the present volume if one did not also rely on the efforts of modern scholars whose facility

with the sources is both staggering and inspiring. Like Bernard of Chartres, I too was able to stand on the shoulders of giants even if I could not do full justice to all that I have learned from them. I remain grateful for the assistance of these scholars, some of whom I have been able to consult personally and to work with in other projects over the years. To name just a few: Marcia Colish, Boyd Coolman, Franklin Harkins, Philip Krey, Frans van Liere, Thomas Prügl, and Thomas Ryan. When this book had reached the stage of near-final draft, I sent it to David Nelson, the editor at Baker Academic who has been overseeing the project. He took the time to read it all very carefully and offer valuable comments. I am thankful to him for all of his encouragement, guidance, and dedication. Warm thanks are owed also to Wells Turner and the entire team at Baker for their excellent work in bringing this volume to press. Last, I want to express my gratitude to my wife, Michelle, for her consistent support throughout this and so many other endeavors.

Abbreviations

General and Bibliographic

CCCM	Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis. Turnhout: Brepols, 1966–.
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–.
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum. Vienna, 1866–.
DRA	Douay-Rheims, 1899 American edition
Eng.	English Bible versification
FC	Fathers of the Church. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947–.
fol(s).	folio(s)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912–.
MS	manuscript
MT	Masoretic Text
PL	Patrologia Latina [= <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus</i> . Series Latina]. Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844–55.
SC	Sources chrétiennes. Paris: Cerf, 1943–.
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa theologiae</i>
Vulg.	Vulgate versification

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	1 Sam.	1 Samuel
Exod.	Exodus	2 Sam.	2 Samuel
Lev.	Leviticus	1 Kings	1 Kings
Num.	Numbers	2 Kings	2 Kings
Deut.	Deuteronomy	1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
Josh.	Joshua	2 Chron.	2 Chronicles
Judg.	Judges	Ezra	Ezra
Ruth	Ruth	Neh.	Nehemiah

Esther	Esther	Joel	Joel
Job	Job	Amos	Amos
Ps(s).	Psalm(s)	Obad.	Obadiah
Prov.	Proverbs	Jon.	Jonah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mic.	Micah
Song	Song of Songs	Nah.	Nahum
Isa.	Isaiah	Hab.	Habakkuk
Jer.	Jeremiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Lam.	Lamentations	Hag.	Haggai
Ezek.	Ezekiel	Zech.	Zechariah
Dan.	Daniel	Mal.	Malachi
Hosea	Hosea		

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1 Tim.	1 Timothy
Mark	Mark	2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1 John	1 John
Eph.	Ephesians	2 John	2 John
Phil.	Philippians	3 John	3 John
Col.	Colossians	Jude	Jude
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	Rev.	Revelation
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians		

Old Testament Apocrypha / Deuterocanonical Books

Sir./Ecclus.	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon

Introduction

Saint Jerome provided the medieval exegetical tradition with an evocative image of peeling back the outer leaves of the letter to get at the rich marrow of meaning beneath the text's surface. Repeated in one form or another across the centuries, this organic depiction of Scripture with its rough husk and sweet fruit succinctly captures the spirit of medieval biblical hermeneutics. It is premised upon the conviction that Holy Scripture is a sacred text replete with mysteries to be quarried by faithful readers in their quest for an ever deeper understanding of the Triune God. The exegetes whom we will encounter in this volume were committed to the principle that Scripture was composed under the direction of a divine author in the person of the Holy Spirit, and they believed that any attempt to comprehend this sacred text was possible only under this same Spirit's guidance.

Yet we may still be left to ask whether medieval hermeneutics has any continuing relevance in an age dominated by the historical-critical method. Even were we to grant that the medieval quest for deeper spiritual senses beneath the text yielded beautiful and stirring theological insights, can we honestly endorse its presuppositions and methods? Has not more than a century of higher criticism put paid to all those allegorical readings of the biblical text, lovely as they might have been? By way of an answer, we ought first to offer some basic definition of the historical-critical method. As defined by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its comprehensive review of scriptural interpretation issued in 1993, it is "historical" insofar as "it seeks to shed light upon the historical processes which gave rise to biblical texts," and critical in that "it operates with the help of scientific criteria that seek to be as objective as possible."¹ Yet even as the commission affirmed the significant contributions that historical criticism has made to biblical studies, that method's limitations

1. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1993), 38.

were also acknowledged. For by restricting itself to the text's meaning within its own historical circumstances, historical criticism ignores other possible meanings that may have been revealed to later generations of faithful interpreters throughout the church's history.²

Clearly, then, a balance must be struck that at once acknowledges the irreversible advances made by the historical-critical method even as one affirms the church's lasting commitment to the deeper spiritual senses beyond the immediate historical circumstances of the text. In this vein, the Pontifical Biblical Commission asserted that "one must reject as unauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text. To admit the possibility of such alien meanings would be equivalent to cutting off the biblical message from its root, which is the Word of God in its historical communication." Nevertheless, the commission also cautioned that "there are reasons . . . for not taking 'alien' in so strict a sense as to exclude all possibility of higher fulfillment. The paschal event, the death and resurrection of Jesus, has established a radically new historical context, which sheds fresh light upon the ancient texts and causes them to undergo a change in meaning." For the faithful, a sense of continuity between the Old and the New Testaments emerges when one trusts that "the Holy Spirit, principal author of the Bible, can guide human authors in the choice of expressions in such a way that the latter will express a truth the fullest depths of which the authors themselves do not perceive." Here, then, we have what the commission calls the "fuller sense" (*sensus plenior*), "defined as a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author."³ We ought to point out here that such hermeneutical principles are not the sole province of Roman Catholicism. The renowned Protestant biblical scholar Brevard Childs has also argued that "allegory or typology, when properly understood and practiced, remains an essential part of Christian interpretation."⁴

At the conclusion of this volume, we will revisit questions of medieval and modern hermeneutical strategies to see if there may not be a good deal of common ground after all. In the remainder of the introduction, though, I will say a few words about what to expect in this volume. The material covered spans some one thousand years from late antiquity up until the eve of the Reformation. Perhaps the very first issue to be clarified is that, when discussing premodern exegesis, we are by no means reverting to a period lacking in scholarly sophistication. Origen of Alexandria and then Jerome, just to name

2. *Ibid.*, 41.

3. *Ibid.*, 84–87.

4. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2002), 71.

two especially astute commentators, were extremely adept at working through the many philological and lexical challenges that their texts presented. These men, along with Augustine of Hippo and the Venerable Bede, set the course for the centuries that followed. The establishment of a reliable Latin text, well grounded in the Hebrew and Greek originals, was considered essential from the Carolingian period straight through into the fifteenth century. This concern was itself grounded in the bedrock hermeneutical principle that the search for meaning begins with a solid grasp of the text's literal-historical sense. Perhaps no two medieval exegetes will better exemplify this commitment than the twelfth-century Augustinian canon Hugh of St. Victor and the fourteenth-century Franciscan friar Nicholas of Lyra.

So it was that the medieval exegetes, like modern practitioners of the historical-critical method, were attuned to the nuances of ancient languages, textual variations, and cultural contexts in which these books were produced. As we have seen, though, the medieval exegete then goes further, since his analysis does not end with the establishment of the literal-historical sense of the text. That sense is not an end but rather a foundation on which a greater edifice of meaning is constructed. Presupposing as they did the divine authorship of Holy Scripture (*sacra scriptura*), medieval exegetes maintained that the God of history had imbued events, places, and people with spiritual significance such that they could point beyond themselves to deeper salvific realities. In fact, the more one knew about everything from geography to botany, the better equipped one was to plumb the depths of the biblical text and unveil its mysteries. The sacred page (*sacra pagina*) and the created order depicted therein came to serve as a mirror (*speculum*) reflecting the saving work of the divine author across the plane of human history.

The points sketched above regarding the fecundity of meaning to be discovered through the techniques of medieval hermeneutics form the subject matter of our book. The opening chapter will be devoted to the patristic era, skimming the surface as we must, but still setting out the principles that guided the exegetes of later centuries. Here we will encounter not only Origen of Alexandria but also Diodore and Theodore of the Antiochene tradition. From there our attention turns to the West: Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, John Cassian (who had himself learned from the Eastern monks), and finally Jerome. So great was the influence of these writers, not only evinced in the consistent citation of their work across the ages but more fundamentally in the adoption of their greater hermeneutical vision, that one could scarcely make sense of medieval exegesis apart from them.

At this point we move into the earlier Middle Ages (chap. 2), beginning with the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon monk and scholar Bede, whom later generations

actually counted among the fathers. We will then cross the English Channel and look at the scholarship produced on the Continent during the Carolingian Renaissance, really an ambitious reform program that placed classical erudition at the service of biblical exegesis. These efforts cemented in the consciousness of northern European Christendom the need for rigorous training in the liberal arts as a prerequisite for the study of Scripture and theological analysis.

The seeds sown in the ninth century were steadily blooming in the cathedral schools of the eleventh century (chap. 3), notably evinced in the commentaries on the Psalms and Pauline epistles produced by Bruno of Cologne. The letters of the apostle Paul, which were already receiving sustained attention among Carolingians such as Haimo of Auxerre, increasingly assumed a position of importance in the French schools because of their rich theological content. Paul's works were carefully analyzed so as to uncover the inherent logical structure of their arguments, dealing with central questions of ecclesiology, sacraments, and soteriology.

Three chapters in this volume are devoted to exegesis in the twelfth century (chaps. 4–6). We will look first at the monastic tradition, beginning with the Benedictines and concluding with two giants of the Cistercian tradition. The monastics were men and women whose lives were formed by the rule they lived by in the monastery, this “school of Christ” (*schola Christi*) marked by prayerful reading (*lectio divina*), through which the exegete entered meditatively into the world of the biblical text. Along with the men we will be reading in this chapter—Rupert of Deutz, Bernard of Clairvaux, and William of Saint Thierry—we will also examine the works of the brilliant abbess Hildegard of Bingen. All of these monastic exegetes, although perhaps especially Bernard and William, exhibit an intimacy with the person of Christ that is both remarkable and encouraging.

Of the chapters devoted to twelfth-century exegesis, chapter 5 focuses exclusively on the school of Augustinian canons working in the Abbey of St. Victor, on the outskirts of Paris. The leader of this school, Hugh of St. Victor, insisted on the careful analysis owed to the literal-historical sense of the text as the foundation laid for the spiritual senses. Contemplation of these spiritual senses would then facilitate the spiritual re-formation of the reader that was the goal of the canons' sacred studies. Even though most of our attention is given to Hugh in this chapter, we will also look at Richard and Andrew, who made major exegetical contributions in their own right, the latter exhibiting a keen interest in the work of the Jewish biblical scholars flourishing in France at this time.

The final chapter on the twelfth century (chap. 6) takes us back to the cathedral schools of northern France, first Laon and then Paris. It was the

Laon school that produced the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the standard commentary on Scripture that henceforth became a staple of the medieval classroom. Now the entire Bible could be read with the commentary tradition quite literally at one's fingertips, for in the margins and even between the lines were embedded snippets of patristic exegesis on a given passage, the raw material for which was often culled from earlier Carolingian collections. The schools were also the place of increasingly sophisticated and substantial theological analysis as difficult questions that arose from the morning's exegetical sessions were given sustained attention in the afternoon. It was here in the twelfth-century schools that theology began to come into its own as a science; now doctrinal questions could be treated separately from exegesis. Nevertheless, the scriptural basis for all church teaching was never lost sight of; the sacred page remained the font of divine revelation.

The longest single chapter in this volume (chap. 7) discusses the late medieval universities, running from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Here we enter the age of the licensed master of theology, whose very title testifies to his commitment to lecturing on Holy Scripture: "*magister sacrae paginae*." It is now the mendicant orders that take center stage, principally the Dominicans and Franciscans who began to arrive at the University of Paris in the first half of the thirteenth century. We will not only read the likes of Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Peter John Olivi, and Nicholas of Lyra; we will also turn to leading secular masters such as Henry of Ghent, John Wyclif, and Jean Gerson, in addition to Paul of Sainte-Marie, a convert from Judaism who responded to the work of Nicholas of Lyra. Of principal interest to us in this chapter will be the exegetical theories that these masters constructed, especially with regard to matters of authorship, authorial intention, and the multivalence of a text's literal sense.

That we may not be confined to theory and thus detached from the practical application of biblical hermeneutics to the life of the late medieval church, a brief chapter (chap. 8) traces the ways in which some of these same commentators analyzed biblical texts central to defining the role of the papacy. Most noteworthy in this section will be the ways in which exegetes offered nuanced positions that carefully balanced different New Testament texts, permitting one passage to aid in the interpretation of another, so as to render determinations on the controversial contemporary issue of the scope of papal authority.

The conclusion will bring us back to some of the questions addressed here in the introduction as we ask, "Can medieval biblical exegesis speak to us today?" This will allow us to delve ever so slightly into some principles of modern hermeneutical theory and maybe even to conclude that the medieval exegetes could actually be quite up to date!

1

The Age of the Fathers

“The Gospel is not located in the bare words [*verbis*] of the Scriptures but in their deeper meaning [*in sensu*], not in outward appearances but in the marrow, and not in the leaves of the sayings but in the root of their reason [*non in sermonum foliis, sed in radice rationis*].”¹ So said Jerome in his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians. Although there are many passages that one might draw from the fathers to this effect, none would convey any more concisely the patristic conception of Holy Scripture’s multifarious layers of meaning. If this saint wanted authorization for seeking mystical designations beneath the letter of the biblical text, he needed to look no further than the apostle Paul’s own momentous appeal to allegory when addressing the Galatians:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory [*allēgoroumena*]: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. (4:22–26)

So it was that when Jerome reviewed this passage in his commentary, he observed that allegory properly belongs to the art of grammar and differs from metaphors and other tropes. Noting that allegory is an instance of one

1. *Comm. in Epistolam ad Galatas* (PL 26:322c–d).

thing being signified in the words and another in the meaning, Jerome proceeded to point out that while allegories are to be found among the orators and poets, they are also employed in Holy Scripture.² Trained in classical grammar by the esteemed master Donatus, Jerome recognized, as did so many of his contemporaries, that Scripture could be mined for its grammatical, rhetorical, and dialectical riches. Yet Scripture possesses a quality that none of the great texts of antiquity could boast; it has a divine author whose limitless gift for subtle discourse renders it an inexhaustible trove of sacred mystery. It is in this vein that our opening chapter on the patristic period seeks, however modestly, to establish the exegetical *modus operandi* that formed the foundation for centuries of biblical interpretation across the Middle Ages. To be sure, medieval scholars made great and original advances in the study of Scripture; there were brilliant thinkers among their ranks. Nevertheless, the church fathers remained their authorities; they showed the way and provided the warrant for the progress made in the monasteries and the schools of medieval Europe.

Writing in the final decades of the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons established an abiding exegetical principle: Scripture in its totality will be rendered coherent only when Christ the Word is understood to stand at the center of salvation history as it has been recorded across the Old and New Testaments. Both Testaments, in seamless continuity, relate the action of the divine Word throughout sacred time, culminating in the Word's incarnation. Old Testament prophecies are to be adduced as proof of history's fulfillment in the incarnate Word, who thereby confirms the unified work of the Triune God, and the revelation of his will, across both Testaments.³ Thus, as Irenaeus combated both gnostics and Marcionites, he insisted that there is only one God, whom the prophets proclaimed and Christ himself confessed to be his Father. Rather than severing the relationship between the God of the Old Testament and the Christ of the New, therefore, we ought to recognize that the Father and Son bear testimony to each other.⁴ For Christ the Word was already active in the law and the prophets, proclaiming the Father, and through the incarnation, the Father was thereby manifested in the visible Son.⁵ The principle of unity

2. *Comm. in Epistolam ad Galatas* (PL 26:389c).

3. See Bernard Sesboüé, "La preuve par les Écritures chez saint Irénée," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 103 (1981): 872–87; D. Farkasfalvy, "Theology of Scripture in St. Irenaeus," *Revue Bénédictine* 78 (1968): 319–33; and Dennis Minns, "Truth and Tradition: Irenaeus," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, ed. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1:261–73.

4. *Adversus haereses* 4.2.1–5, ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau, 5 vols., SC 211 (Paris: Cerf, 1965–82), 4:397–406.

5. *Adversus haereses* 4.6.6 (SC 211, 4:448–50).

proves to be a divine person, the one author who is the eternal Word of God.⁶ As the final cause of the law (Rom. 10:4), Christ brought to culmination what he himself had brought into being in the first place.⁷

If a person stands at the center of salvation history and proves to be the axis on whom this history turns, then the authoritative interpretation of that history could be located in what Irenaeus designated the “rule of truth” (*regula veritatis*), that standard against which every reading of Scripture must be measured.⁸ It was in this same vein that Tertullian appealed to the “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*), which he ultimately traced back to Christ himself. This *regula fidei* was not a fixed formula, but rather a basic outline of orthodox doctrine.⁹ It came to serve as a hermeneutical key to Scripture that provided a coherent story line (*hypothesis*) reflecting the arrangement (*oikonomia*) of its divine author. So it was that Irenaeus could accuse the gnostics of substituting their own story for that of Scripture and thus distorting the meaning of the text in the process.¹⁰ Such appeals to a unifying theme were not unique to Irenaeus and Tertullian or even to Christian authors generally. The Neoplatonists also employed this hermeneutic when they determined that the dialogues of Plato must, like a living organism, have one purpose (*telos*), a single perspective (*skopos*).¹¹ In the fourth century, for example, Athanasius argued against the Arians that his reading of Scripture was correct with regard to the divine status of the Son because it accorded with the rule of faith, which provided access to the mind (*dianoia*) of Scripture. Recent interpretations might therefore take precedence over older readings if they are found to cohere with this overarching *dianoia*.¹²

The Literal and the Allegorical

As we touched on above, to allegorize means most basically “to speak so as to imply other than what is said.”¹³ The Stoics allegorized many myths about

6. *Adversus haereses* 4.9.1 (SC 211, 4:480).

7. *Adversus haereses* 4.12.4 (SC 211, 4:518).

8. *Adversus haereses* 1.9.4 (SC 211, 1/2:150).

9. *De praescriptione haereticorum* 13 (CCSL 1:197–98). See also L. W. Countryman, “Tertullian and the Regula Fidei,” *The Second Century* 2 (1982): 208–27.

10. Joseph Trigg, “The Apostolic Fathers and Apologists,” in *The History of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A. Hauser and D. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1:328–29.

11. Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 25.

12. *Ibid.*, 44–45.

13. H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 35.

the gods so as to make them suitable to their own sensibilities and philosophical system. Classical authors applied the method of *allēgorēsis* to their great ancient texts; the Neoplatonist Porphyry, for instance, provided an allegorical reading of Homer. Moreover, these Greek practitioners of *allēgorēsis* maintained that the deeper meaning was, in fact, the intended meaning of the myth and that mythical texts may indeed have more than one sense, such that there exists a hierarchy of meanings. Jewish exegetes also adopted this method as the philosopher Philo of Alexandria argued that the Torah was rich in philosophy beneath the surface of its various legal prescriptions. Philo did not discount the literal meaning of the Hebrew Bible, but it was for him of secondary importance. Elite readers searched out the hidden meanings, which revealed spiritual truths. The story of creation in Genesis, for instance, could be read as a meditation on the different aspects of human nature so that Adam represents the intelligence, Eve human sensitive faculties, and the beasts of the garden the passions.¹⁴ It was within this wider intellectual climate that Christians of the second and third centuries developed sophisticated allegorical approaches to their own sacred texts. Clement of Alexandria sought out what he called the “*epopteia*,” which is the hidden meaning of the biblical text there to be plumbed by the experienced exegete.¹⁵ Central to this entire enterprise, however, was a basic principle that the Christians of late antiquity had inherited from their pagan forebears: texts were to be studied for the sake of moral improvement, for advancing in virtue.¹⁶ Thus for the patristic commentators, as Frances Young writes, “the purpose of biblical exegesis, implicit and explicit, was to form the practice and belief of Christian people, individually and collectively.”¹⁷

Origen of Alexandria

Origen of Alexandria, who flourished in the middle of the third century, was a foundational figure in the history of Western exegesis. Although generally known for his sometimes elaborate allegorical readings of Scripture, Origen was nevertheless a very careful scholar fully attuned to the complexities of the biblical text and biblical history. He believed that text criticism must be

14. Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis*, trans. John Hughes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 5–7; and Mark Edwards, “Figurative Readings: Their Scope and Justification,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1:714–33, esp. 716–20.

15. Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 34–37.

16. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 248–63.

17. *Ibid.*, 299.

the first step of the exegetical process. One then launched into the explanation (*exēgētikon*), which entails determining the meaning of the usage of words (*glōssēmātikon*). From there one proceeded to historical analysis (*historikon*), followed by grammatical analysis (*technikon*), and then the work of discerning figures of speech. Having finally arrived at the foundation of the narrative, one then sought out the deeper meaning, or intention (*skopos*), of the text.¹⁸ That is why Origen insisted that to understand the biblical authors, one must read them possessed of the same Holy Spirit as indwelt the authors themselves as they wrote. To grasp the full import of the gospels, one should have the mind (*nous*) of Christ, which itself is a gift of the Spirit.¹⁹

Even as Origen sought the spiritual meaning of the text, that which would facilitate the soul's deeper union with God, the history recorded in Scripture always remained profoundly meaningful for him. As Henri de Lubac has shown, Origen grounded his exegesis in the incarnate Christ: word was united to flesh just as spirit to letter. In Origen's view, many events in the Old Testament are recounted in Scripture precisely for their greater christological meaning. More specifically, Origen looked to the centrality of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as being at the heart of the mystery of salvation.²⁰ As Scripture turns on the axis of the cross, the study of Scripture must be the highest expression of the Christian life. As Origen saw it, to immerse oneself in biblical exegesis was a lofty and demanding vocation that could be likened to the call of the Old Testament priests and Levites. Those engaged in scriptural studies have raised themselves above the world of flesh and blood to contemplate things of the spirit; they have set aside the pleasures of the flesh for contemplation.²¹ For all of the controversy that surrounded Origen in the centuries after his death, his exegetical works had a profound influence throughout the West. This was in no small part facilitated by the Latin translations of those works made by Rufinus and Jerome, thereby extending his readership. It seems safe to say that it was really Alexandrian exegesis, rather than Antiochene, that ultimately carried the day in the Western church deep into the Middle Ages.²²

In the fourth book of his massive *On First Principles*, Origen succinctly laid out his own exegetical method. First he affirmed that the Old Testament

18. Mark W. Elliot, "Exegetical Genres in the Patristic Era," in *New Cambridge History of the Bible*, 1:775–97.

19. Henri Crouzel, *Origen: The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian*, trans. A. S. Worrall (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 74–75.

20. Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen* (1950; San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), 103–204.

21. Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of an Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 89–106.

22. Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 88–90.

Scriptures, which prophesy about Christ and demonstrate his divinity, are each divinely inspired (*divinitus inspirata/theopneustos*). Hence those writings that announced Christ's coming and his teaching speak with full power and authority.²³ The advent of Jesus Christ has, in turn, opened the eyes of readers who might have otherwise been skeptical about the divinity of the law and the prophets, showing them that these writings were indeed composed with the help of divine grace. The light present in the law of Moses, but previously hidden under a veil, has begun to shine forth with Christ's advent. The veil had been finally removed, and the good things, whose shadow the letter (*literal/gramma*) displayed, gradually came to be fully known.²⁴ That people may miss the greater import of such things is certainly not the fault of Scripture itself. The divinity of Scripture, which pertains to all of its parts, is in no way undermined by human weakness. It is owing to our own frailty, Origen says, that we cannot discern the hidden splendor of its teaching concealed within what might otherwise be regarded as the lowly and contemptible literal sense.²⁵

It is for lack of a proper reading strategy that the salvific import of the Scriptures is so often missed. Countless errors arise, Origen says, because so many people have failed to find the path that governs the exploration of these holy books. First, there are Jews who were bound to the strict literal sense of the prophecies that foretold Christ's coming. When the promises of the prophets were not explicitly fulfilled according to the letter at Christ's advent, they refused to receive him.²⁶ Then there are the Marcionites, who also read Old Testament passages too literally and have thus developed the notion of an imperfect creator-god who is a source of malevolent action in the cosmos.²⁷ Finally, there are the simpler Christian people, who, in their naïveté, attribute to God all sorts of unfitting features.²⁸ As Origen sees it, all of these false opinions can be traced back to a failure to understand Scripture in the spiritual sense (*secundum spiritalem sensum / kata pneumatika*); it must always be remembered that we are dealing not with the writings of human authors but rather with works that have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, by the will of the Father through Jesus Christ.²⁹ Thus, as exegetes work through various

23. *De principiis* 4.1.6, in *Origenes Vier Bücher von den Prinzipien*, ed. Herwig Görgemanns and Heinrich Karpp (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), 686–88. See the English translation in *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, trans. and ed. Karlfried Froehlich (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 52.

24. *De principiis* 4.1.6 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 686–88; Froehlich, 53).

25. *De principiis* 4.1.7 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 690–92; Froehlich, 53).

26. *De principiis* 4.2.1 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 694–96; Froehlich, 54–55).

27. *De principiis* 4.2.1 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 698–700; Froehlich, 55).

28. *De principiis* 4.2.1 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 698–700; Froehlich, 55–56).

29. *De principiis* 4.2.2 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 700–702; Froehlich, 56).

passages in Scripture, many of which are rich in spiritual meanings, they must always keep in mind the greater purpose, or perspective (*skopos*), of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit, with the grand sweep of salvation history in his sights, who has enlightened the prophets and apostles regarding these great mysteries.³⁰

That one might not accuse him of generating his methods out of whole cloth, Origen was quick to see that Scripture itself provides warrant for the exegetical techniques that he proposes. The three levels of scriptural meaning that Origen located in Scripture had already been set forth by Solomon: “And you, write down those things threefold in your counsel and wisdom that you may reply with the words of truth to those who ask of you” (Prov. 22:20–21). The three levels of Scripture correspond to a basic anthropological model whereby each human being is composed of flesh, soul, and spirit in ascending order. It was along these lines that different readers, depending on their exegetical sophistication, could find something valuable in the text. The simple person may be edified by the flesh of Scripture, its obvious historical meaning; the somewhat more advanced by its soul, or moral sense; but the perfect by the spiritual sense of the contemplative.³¹ Thus, while not discounting the first two levels, Origen insisted that this last and highest level is reserved for those readers equipped to identify heavenly realities.³² Origen was not, however, attempting to classify, or rank, believers according to some inherent capacity to grasp the truth. Rather, as Young observes, Origen envisioned the work of the biblical exegete as assisting fellow Christians to make their way. Each level was suitable for people at different stages of their journey: purification, knowledge, and finally union with God. Holy Scripture’s three levels could thus provide each person, at whatever stage in life, with a meaning befitting their present state.³³

The actual practice of biblical interpretation that facilitated spiritual ascent could be arduous; in fact, it was not intended to be easy. Some of the dilemmas induced by the bare letter of Scripture, according to Origen, were placed in the text on purpose precisely to counteract our tendency to complacency. If the usefulness of legal prescriptions and the theological coherence of historical narratives were automatically evident in every instance, it would not occur to us that there might be some other meaning beside the obvious one. It is for this reason that the Word of God arranged for the insertion of certain offensive features, of stumbling blocks and impossibilities amid the law and historical narratives. He did not want us to be carried away by the unspoiled charm of the plain text such that we would refuse to move beyond the letter.

30. *De principiis* 4.2.7 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 720–22; Froehlich, 61).

31. *De principiis* 4.2.4 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 708–12; Froehlich, 57–58).

32. *De principiis* 4.2.6 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 714–16; Froehlich, 59).

33. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 241–42.

What is more, the Word used actual historical events wherever they could be accommodated to these mystical meanings, hiding the deeper sense from the multitude. Hence there can be woven into the historical narrative some feature that did not actually happen, perhaps because it was impossible or simply because it did not occur.³⁴ Nevertheless, we ought to remember that there are also some scriptural passages that have no bodily, or literal, sense at all. That is when we must search straightaway for the soul and spirit of the passage.³⁵

We need to be clear, however, about what Origen meant by the “literal sense.” It was, as Henri Crouzel notes, the “raw matter of what is said” apart from any consideration of the biblical author’s further intention. That is why Origen might dismiss the literal sense as impossible when found in a trope or parable. In that case he would reckon the spiritual sense to be the intended meaning of the parable.³⁶ No one, Origen said, could be expected to believe that God actually went about planting a garden to the east in Eden. Thus when the Lord is depicted as walking through the garden, and Adam hiding behind a tree, no one will doubt that these details point figuratively to greater mysteries. There are innumerable examples of things that are represented as having happened according to a literal reading of the text but did not actually happen on that level. Both the Old and New Testaments are full of such passages. Consider, for instance, the devil leading Jesus up on a high mountain to show him the kingdoms of the world (Matt. 4:8). Only a superficial reader, according to Origen, would think that one could see with the eyes of the flesh the kingdoms of the Persians and the Indians.³⁷

Having said all of this, Origen nevertheless insisted that he had no intention of discounting out of hand the literal sense itself or the historical value of Scripture. Just because one particular story did not happen does not mean that none of the narrated events actually occurred. Nor because a particular law is unreasonable or impossible in its plain reading ought we to conclude that no law should be observed literally. In fact, Origen says, the actual historical accounts recorded in Scripture far outnumber the purely spiritual texts that have been woven into them. After all, “Honor your father and mother that it may be well with you” (Exod. 20:12) is useful without any anagogy and ought to be kept; even the apostle Paul cites it verbatim (Eph. 6:2).³⁸

With these basic exegetical parameters in mind, we can look briefly at how Origen interpreted the Scriptures for his fellow Christians. In his homilies

34. *De principiis* 4.2.9 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 726–30; Froehlich, 62–63).

35. *De principiis* 4.2.5 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 712–14; Froehlich, 58).

36. Crouzel, *Origen*, 62.

37. *De principiis* 4.3.1 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 730–34; Froehlich, 63–64).

38. *De principiis* 4.3.4 (Görgemanns and Karpp, 740–44; Froehlich, 66).

on Exodus, Origen remarked on the wonderful fecundity of the sacred text; each word of divine Scripture is like a seed whose nature it is to multiply diffusely.³⁹ Indeed, there is nothing in the law and the prophets that is devoid of mysteries.⁴⁰ So many things in the divine law (*lex divina*) have been submerged in deep mysteries (*profundis demersa mysteriis*) before which we ought to pray, “From the depths I have cried to you, Lord” (Ps. 129:1 Vulg. [130:1 Eng.]).⁴¹ Origen’s immediate task in this work, so he tells us, is to see whether a spiritual reading of the text will unlock the mystery of the descent of the patriarchs into Egypt.⁴² Far from seeing himself as engaged in some novel enterprise, Origen wishes only to cultivate the seeds of the spiritual understanding (*semina spiritualis intelligentiae*) that the church has already received from the apostle Paul.⁴³ Origen observes that it was Paul who pressed beyond the literal meaning of Exodus when, in 1 Corinthians, he likened the crossing of the Red Sea to baptism and the cloud that followed the Israelites to the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 10:1–4).⁴⁴

It was preeminently the moral part (*locus moralis*) of the text that Origen wished to highlight so that he might edify the souls of the hearers.⁴⁵ Depicted in the Exodus account is a struggle for the moral life of believers, who must beware lest they find themselves enlisted as soldiers of Pharaoh led by the spirit of this world (*spiritus mundi*).⁴⁶ The faithful instead have been called by Christ to leave behind the works of Pharaoh, to depart from the land of Egypt, and to cast aside barbarian customs.⁴⁷ Origen was not calling into question the history of Israel’s liberation recounted in the book of Exodus, which formed the foundation of his allegorical readings. Yet beneath that history—recounted, he says, in such minute detail that would otherwise seem pointless—he found enduring spiritual lessons that could be applied by his fellow Christians to their own lives. Thus Origen called on his congregation to pray that by his mercy the Lord would snatch them up from the land of Egypt and thus from the power of darkness in their own lives.⁴⁸

39. *In Exodum* 1.1, in *Homilien zum Hexataeuch in Rufins Übersetzung*, ed. W. A. Baehrens, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1920), 1:145. See the English translation in *Origen on Exodus*, trans. Ronald Heine, FC (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 227.

40. *In Exodum* 1.4 (Baehrens, 149; Heine, 231).

41. *In Exodum* 4.2 (Baehrens, 173; Heine, 263).

42. *In Exodum* 1.2 (Baehrens, 147; Heine, 228).

43. *In Exodum* 5.1 (Baehrens, 184–85; Heine, 277).

44. *In Exodum* 5.1 (Baehrens, 184; Heine, 276).

45. *In Exodum* 1.4 (Baehrens, 149; Heine, 232).

46. *In Exodum* 1.5 (Baehrens, 151; Heine, 234).

47. *In Exodum* 1.5 (Baehrens, 153–54; Heine, 237–38).

48. *In Exodum* 4.9 (Baehrens, 183; Heine, 274).

The inner moral struggle within each Christian played out here in Exodus has been placed within the greater drama of salvation history as it unfolds across the Old and New Testaments. Even as Pharaoh represents the devil and Egypt the sinful world, so the two midwives who nursed Moses are figures of the two Testaments. Souls born in the church are thus attended by these Testaments as if by midwives, Origen says, inasmuch as the antidote of instruction is conferred from the reading of the Scriptures. Pharaoh, however, attempts to kill the male children (who represent the human rational faculty) by means of these same Testaments when he suggests heretical readings of Scripture.⁴⁹ Then Pharaoh's daughter may be regarded as the church, which is gathered from the gentiles, finding Moses in the marsh, cast off by his own people. The law was lying helpless, enclosed in offensive interpretations, until the church of the gentiles would appropriate the law to itself within the courts of wisdom.⁵⁰

For Origen, it was precisely the full realization of the Old Testament in the New that made possible the moral perfection of believers, that is, their liberation from the darkness of Egyptian servitude. Thus as Moses ascended Mount Sinai, so the Christian must ascend to the lofty understanding of the law, to the peak of spiritual understanding (*spiritualis intelligentia*), rather than remaining in the lowly place of the letter (*in humili loco litterae*).⁵¹ Now we go forth from Egypt, leaving behind the world to serve the Lord in faith.⁵² We withdraw from the Egypt of vices and pass over the floods of the world as on a sure pathway through Jesus Christ.⁵³

Last, we will say a short word about Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs. Although incomplete, this work set the tone for a thousand years of Western commentary. Origen identified the book as a marriage song that Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure (*instar*) of a bride about to wed, who is burning with heavenly love for her bridegroom, who is the Word of God (*sermo Dei*). Reading the text allegorically, Origen opened up two complementary strands of interpretation. On one level the bride can be taken as the individual human soul made in Christ's image; she also represents the whole church, which is yearning for Christ, the spouse to whom she has been joined.⁵⁴ This love song is therefore both personal and

49. *In Exodum* 2.2 (Baehrens, 157; Heine, 242).

50. *In Exodum* 2.4 (Baehrens, 160; Heine, 246).

51. *In Exodum* 3.2 (Baehrens, 165; Heine, 252).

52. *In Exodum* 3.3 (Baehrens, 165; Heine, 253).

53. *In Exodum* 3.3 (Baehrens, 171; Heine, 259).

54. *Comm. in Cant. Canticorum*, prologue 1.1, in *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, ed. Luc Brésard and Henri Crouzel, SC 375 (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 1:80–81. See the translation in *Commentary on Song of Songs*, trans. R. P. Lawson, Ancient Christian Writers 26 (New York: Newman, 1956), 21.

corporate, denoting either the church (*ecclesia*) in relation to Christ or the soul (*anima*) in her union with the Word of God (*Verbum Dei*).⁵⁵ Aflame with longing for her spouse and vexed by the inward wound of love, the bride pours out her prayer to God. Here, then, is the church, which longs for union with Christ.⁵⁶ Yet this is also the individual soul whose only desire is to be united to the Word and to enter into the mysteries of his wisdom as into the chambers of her heavenly bridegroom. Finally, when her mind is filled with divine perception and understanding, she will come to believe that she has received the kisses of the Word of God himself.⁵⁷

Either way one reads it—and the two are certainly not mutually exclusive—this is a love song. Origen was aware that the Greeks had also composed such works in dialogue form to reveal the power of love that leads the soul from earth to the lofty heights of heaven. They knew that the highest beatitude can be attained only under the stimulus of love’s desire.⁵⁸ And now, by God’s power, Origen hopes that he too can address the nature of love, a wholesome love that will thereby build up chastity.⁵⁹ It makes no difference whether Scripture speaks of love (*amor*) or of charity (*caritas*) or of affection (*dilectio*), except that the word “charity” is so highly exalted that even God himself is called charity (1 John 4:7–8). Because God the Father is charity, and the Son likewise, he requires in us something akin to himself.⁶⁰ Called to participate in the divine nature of love by way of God the Son, we are to be conformed to God through charity itself. So it is then that, in the Song of Songs, the figures of the bride and bridegroom are employed by Solomon to teach us that communion with God is to be attained through the paths of charity and love.⁶¹

The Antiochene Exegetes

While not constituting a school of exegesis as such, a collection of like-minded exegetes linked to Antioch were concerned that excessive allegorization of the Scriptures might undermine the very foundations of biblical history. This is not to say that the Antiochene exegetes were wedded to the literal meaning of the text to the exclusion of all mystical interpretations, but they did proceed more cautiously than their Alexandrian counterparts. Thus in his commentary

55. *Comm. in Cant. Canticorum* 1.2 (SC 375:176–77; Lawson, 58).

56. *Comm. in Cant. Canticorum* 1.3–5 (SC 375:178–79; Lawson, 59).

57. *Comm. in Cant. Canticorum* 1.8–12 (SC 375:182–85; Lawson, 60–61).

58. *Comm. in Cant. Canticorum*, prologue 2.1 (SC 375:90–91; Lawson, 23–24).

59. *Comm. in Cant. Canticorum*, prologue 2.3 (SC 375:90–91; Lawson, 24).

60. *Comm. in Cant. Canticorum*, prologue 2.25–27 (SC 375:108–12; Lawson, 32–33).

61. *Comm. in Cant. Canticorum*, prologue 3.47 (SC 375:130–32; Lawson, 40–41).

on the Psalter, Diodore of Tarsus assigned a christological reading only to Psalms 2, 8, and 44, which the Jews themselves also regarded as messianic. Theodore of Mopsuestia, for his part, was willing to allow for a typological reading of Old Testament texts provided that they bear some similarity to their New Testament counterparts, such that Jonah could serve as a proleptic symbol, or foreshadowing (*typos*), of Christ. Like Diodore, Theodore was very cautious in dealing with the Psalms; hence he looked for explicit New Testament applications of the messianic psalms. Theodore was also attuned to the subtleties of metaphorical speech, and so where Alexandrians may spin these figurative expressions into allegories, Theodore determined that metaphorical language belongs to the literal sense.⁶²

Diodore, for his part, had actually developed multiple categories of discourse that went beyond the plain literal sense. In addition to the deeper spiritual meaning that he called *theōria*, Diodore listed figuration (*tropologia*), parable (*parabolē*), and enigma (*ainigmata*), all of which are acceptable as allegory precisely because they all—in one form or another—remain true to their historical context.⁶³ In the prologue to his Psalms commentary, he divided the Psalter broadly into ethical and doctrinal categories, and from there he went on to make further subdivisions. Diodore certainly regarded the book of Psalms as a spiritual guide to which the faithful could turn in times of trial, noting that the Holy Spirit has foreseen all manner of situations in which believers may find themselves. Diodore thus held that, although the Psalms address David's own life, they also speak to the whole of Israel and then, even beyond, to Christians today. In that vein he tells his readers that “we will not shrink from the truth but will expound it according to the historical substance [*historia*] and the plain literal sense [*lexis*]; . . . we will not disparage anagogy and the higher *theōria*. For history is not opposed to *theōria*. On the contrary, it proves to be the foundation of the higher senses.” What Diodore warned against, however, was the lapse into allegory, which (according to him) does away with the historical foundation, thereby opening the door to flights of fancy on the part of reckless readers. Yet having indicated his aversion to allegory, Diodore had to meet the potent challenge of Paul's own words in Galatians 4:24, where he explicitly invoked the term “allegory” (*allēgoroumena*). To this Diodore answers that the apostle had

62. Frances Young, “Traditions of Exegesis,” in *New Cambridge History of the Bible*, 1:734–51; Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 67–74.

63. *Preface to the Commentary on Psalm 118*, in Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 87–94. See also John Behr, “Diodore of Tarsus and His Exegesis,” in *Handbuch der Bibel-Hermeneutiken: Von Origenes bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Oda Wischmeyer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 35–46.

actually adopted the way of *theōria* even though he did so under the name of allegory, for he never sacrificed the historical content of the Genesis narrative even as he expanded its application.⁶⁴

Theodore of Mopsuestia also grappled with Paul's allegorization of the Genesis account, taking to task irresponsible exegetes who cannot grasp the subtleties of the apostle's method. "There are people who take great pains to twist the senses of the divine Scriptures and make everything written therein serve their own ends. They dream up silly fables in their own heads and give their folly the name of allegory. They (mis)use the Apostle's term as a blank authorization to abolish all meanings of divine Scripture." What these allegorists miss, according to Theodore, is that Paul was not discarding the history in this case, but instead established similarities between those ancient events and the contemporary situation; allegory for Paul is thus a comparison or juxtaposition of past and present. Yet if the allegorists had their way, Theodore cautions, "Adam is not Adam, paradise is not paradise, the serpent not the serpent," with the result that there will be no historical foundation remaining, thereby compromising the integrity of salvation history itself.⁶⁵ This attempt to achieve a reasonable balance of the historical and the spiritual senses remained integral to biblical exegesis throughout the patristic and medieval periods.

Augustine of Hippo

Among the church fathers, Augustine of Hippo had perhaps the deepest and most enduring effect on the Western theological tradition as a whole, from soteriology to ecclesiology and certainly biblical exegesis. Although Augustine produced a staggering array of works that, in some form, addressed scriptural interpretation, it was his *De doctrina christiana* that stood as the principal interpretative paradigm throughout the Middle Ages. This was no mere handbook of exegesis; it belonged to a great and ambitious project of reformation. As Peter Brown has observed, in an age when great texts were the basis of culture, Augustine was determined that the Bible would form the foundation of a new "Christian culture." This would not, however, entail the wholesale rejection of pagan learning (as we shall see) but rather its incorporation into the grand endeavor.⁶⁶

64. *Prologue to the Psalms*, in Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 82–86.

65. *Commentary on Galatians*, in Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 95–103.

66. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 256–66.

For Augustine, the fundamental integrity of Holy Scripture, its coherence and comprehensiveness, had to be grounded in a hermeneutical system capable of dealing with the myriad exigencies of the text. It was not only a matter of meeting the challenges of pagans or heretics but, more important, sustaining believers along their own journeys. The reliability, the trustworthiness, of Scripture as a guide for Christian life must not only be asserted but also supported if the pilgrims are to make their way to their homeland. Augustine made this point succinctly: “Faith will stagger if the authority of the Divine Scriptures wavers. Indeed, if faith staggers, charity itself languishes.”⁶⁷

At the outset of *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine explains to his readers that he wants to lay out for them certain precepts necessary for meaningful discussion, or investigation, of the Scriptures (*tractandarum scripturarum*).⁶⁸ This education in divine things is not intended to stifle the inspired creativity of the reader or to exalt the magisterial status of the teacher. Rather, Augustine says, that human beings should offer one another such instruction belongs to the realm of charity; it is the “knot” that holds people together.⁶⁹ Precisely because love rests at the center of Scripture, for Augustine, all genuine interpretation and instruction will by definition proceed on that basis. Looking to the First Epistle to Timothy, “But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5), Augustine insists that faith, hope, and charity will be the foremost prerequisites for any investigation (*ad tractionem*) of the Scriptures.⁷⁰ Faithful exegetes, therefore, never exult in their own skills as though sheer erudition will unveil the mystery of the text; rather, they submit themselves to the Scriptures in a state of humble receptivity: “We must become meek through piety so that we do not contradict Divine Scripture.”⁷¹ For Augustine, therefore, biblical exegesis is an existential enterprise that takes hold of the whole person. Scripture claims the utmost reverence on the part of the believer. Affective devotion (*pietas*) will believe in, and accede to, the authority of the sacred books.⁷² This is a theme that runs throughout the entire work and, it may be safely said, throughout all of Augustine’s writings.

As Augustine begins to construct his hermeneutical system from the ground up, he establishes a fundamental distinction between signs (*signa*) and things

67. *De doctrina christiana* 1.37.41, ed. Joseph Martin, CCSL 32 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1962), 30; English translation by D. W. Robertson (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 31.

68. *De doctrina christiana*, prooemium 1 (CCSL 32:1; Robertson, 3).

69. *De doctrina christiana*, prooemium 6 (CCSL 32:4; Robertson, 6).

70. *De doctrina christiana* 1.40.44 (CCSL 32:32; Robertson, 33).

71. *De doctrina christiana* 2.7.9 (CCSL 32:36–37; Robertson, 38).

72. *De doctrina christiana* 2.7.10 (CCSL 32:37; Robertson, 39).

(*res*) that proves absolutely vital to the entire process. Here he explains that while every sign is a thing (or it would be nothing at all), not all things are signs. Human authors use signs in the form of words (*verba*) to signify some actual thing in the world. Yet God, the divine author of Scripture, not only can signify things with words, but can also employ things themselves as signs of still greater things.⁷³ It is precisely because God can employ physical things as signs of greater spiritual realities that exegetes must learn all they can about the natural sciences, so as to pick up on the divine cues. The more one knows about the properties of some plant or animal, the better prepared one is to grasp its deeper spiritual significance.⁷⁴ Augustine therefore encourages Christians to draw on the best of pagan learning and place it in the service of the gospel, as he himself had learned from the Platonists. Such forays into the classical tradition were famously likened by Augustine to the Israelite despoiling of the Egyptians upon the flight from Egypt, thereby reclaiming the treasures of God. Indeed, Augustine says, the exodus account was surely intended as a figure (*figuratum est*) meant to foreshadow (*praesignaret*) such a reclamation of knowledge. As all truth is from God, so whatever the great pagan scholars had learned they received from God; now this knowledge will serve the highest good.⁷⁵

In keeping with the wider patristic tradition, Augustine maintained that the biblical text was finally unlocked only with the advent of Christ, whose passion and resurrection shed light on the whole of salvation history. Consequently, failure to recognize Jesus as the Christ leaves the reader at a grave disadvantage, consigned to the mundane and unable to ascend to the spiritual heights. So it was, according to Augustine, that Jews had mistaken signs for things. They were lost in the letter (*littera*) and therefore missed the spiritual import of the things that were functioning as signs. Hence they remained on the level of merely carnal sacrifice when they should have seen such rites as pointing to the greater reality of Christ's perfect sacrifice on the cross.⁷⁶ That the biblical text may be misunderstood is largely due to the fact that meanings are hidden under unknown or ambiguous signs. Linguistic signs, in turn, vary between the proper and the metaphorical, the latter of which expands the range of a word's signification in a given context.⁷⁷

If ignorance of metaphorical signs leaves readers perplexed, this is a cue that they must devote themselves to studying not only words but also the

73. *De doctrina christiana* 1.2.2 (CCSL 32:7; Robertson, 8–9).

74. *De doctrina christiana* 2.16.23–24 (CCSL 32:48–50; Robertson, 50–51).

75. *De doctrina christiana* 2.40.60–61 (CCSL 32:73–75; Robertson, 75–76).

76. *De doctrina christiana* 3.5.9–6.10 (CCSL 32:82–83; Robertson, 83–85).

77. *De doctrina christiana* 2.10.15 (CCSL 32:41; Robertson, 43).

very things that are signified. Therefore it is crucial that biblical exegetes possess more than grammatical aptitude; they must be well acquainted with the natural sciences too if they hope to understand what is meant by Scripture's use of figurative sayings (*figuratae locutiones*).⁷⁸ As mentioned above, all the liberal arts will be pressed into service. For beyond the trivium, there remains the study of the quadrivium, learning the ways of the natural world, those phenomena represented by linguistic terms. Of course, the question will arise as to precisely how the reader can discern whether something should be taken properly or metaphorically, whether its meaning had been transferred or not. There must be some means of investigation (*modus inveniendae*), some method to determine whether to take an expression literally or figuratively. It can be summed up this way, Augustine says: whatever in Scripture does not pertain to virtuous behavior or the truth of the faith should be taken figuratively. For all scriptural instruction must ultimately promote the love of God and neighbor.⁷⁹

We noted earlier that the affective piety of the reader was an essential component of the hermeneutical process. To this observation should be added the specifically christological dimension that orients the exegete. Genuine comprehension of the sacred text comes only to the reader who is humble of heart, rooted in charity, and easily subjected to Christ.⁸⁰ Christ is the true teacher who must illuminate our minds if we are to grasp the truth.⁸¹ The Christ of the gospels is not only the exemplar of charity and humility, but he is also the eternal Word of God through whom the cosmos was brought into being and can be comprehended. As Mark Jordan has shown, Augustine recognized it was the divine Word who ultimately and decisively explicated the words of Scripture.⁸² Brenda Schildgen has likewise noted that Augustine, while fully aware of language's limitations and provisional quality, could nevertheless find meaning anchored in the one source of all meaning, the divine Word.⁸³ Holy Scripture, grounded as it is in the Word of God, serves as our guide: the *verba* all lead us to our final goal of resting within the *Verbum*. We must beware lest we become entangled in the material things of this world and with a clouded mind begin to enjoy some inferior thing in place of God. All the things of this world are to be used for assistance during our sojourn here on earth as we make our way to the homeland, where we will at last enjoy the

78. *De doctrina christiana* 2.16.23 (CCSL 32:48–49; Robertson, 50).

79. *De doctrina christiana* 3.10.14 (CCSL 32:86; Robertson, 87–88).

80. *De doctrina christiana* 2.42.63 (CCSL 32:76–77; Robertson, 78).

81. *De magistro* 11.38, ed. K.-D. Daur, CCSL 29 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1970), 196.

82. Mark Jordan, "Words and Word: Incarnation and Signification in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 177–96.

83. Brenda Deen Schildgen, "Augustine's Answer to Jacques Derrida in the *De Doctrina Christiana*," *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 383–97.

Trinity. To that end the wayfarers must purge their minds of inferior loves, ordering their affections, so that with clear minds, illuminated by grace, they will successfully navigate their voyage home.⁸⁴

Wending our way back to the Trinity, we will place our trust in the divine author of Scripture, who discloses a seemingly endless series of mysteries that draw us closer to our ultimate goal. We are constantly reading signs that point us farther down the road to ever greater realities, which means that we must ask what these signs are intended to mean. This, in turn, raises the question of authorial intention—both human and divine. How many meanings might there be in a given text? How would we know which are legitimate (intended by the author) and which are only the product of our own imagination? Augustine was confident that the Spirit of God, who is at work through the human authors, has foreseen the various meanings that we may find in a single passage, all of which may be accepted provided that they agree with the truth conveyed in other passages of Scripture.⁸⁵ It was along these lines that, in his *Confessions*, Augustine addresses the possibility of multiple true meanings within a single passage. Two people may disagree about what Moses had meant by some statement recorded in Scripture, each claiming to know the mind of Moses. And yet, according to Augustine, Moses may well have intended many meanings, all of which are true and thus discerned by different people. Ultimately, Moses is speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the font and guarantor of all truth. There within the words of the inspired human author rest all the true meanings that have been found and many more besides that we have yet to find.⁸⁶ Carol Harrison puts it well: “The meanings and truths which the text of Scripture contain remain eschatologically open, provisional and inconclusive; always capable of further, future, different interpretations so long as they too resonate with the single unifying rule of the double commandment.”⁸⁷ That being said, the interpretation of Scripture is never a purely individualistic exercise in which the pious believer sets out alone in search of the divine meaning. Augustine counsels that when the literal reading generates ambiguous meanings, one should have recourse to the rule of faith (*regula fidei*) as it is found not only in the clearer passages (*plenioribus locis*) of Scripture but also as established by the authority of the church.⁸⁸

84. *De doctrina christiana* 1.3.3–10 (CCSL 32:8–12; Robertson, 9–13).

85. *De doctrina christiana* 3.27.38 (CCSL 32:100; Robertson, 101–2).

86. *Confessiones* 12.42, ed. Martin Skutella and Luc Verheijen, CCSL 27 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1990), 240–41.

87. Carol Harrison, “Augustine,” in *New Cambridge History of the Bible*, 1:676–96.

88. *De doctrina christiana* 3.2.2 (CCSL 32:77–78; Robertson, 79).

Toward the end of *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine commends to his readers some exegetical advice from an unlikely, or at least unexpected, source: the late fourth-century Donatist theologian Tyconius. In his *Book of Rules* Tyconius locates “certain mystical rules [*regulae mysticae*] which reveal what is hidden in the whole Law and make visible the treasures of truth which are invisible to some.”⁸⁹ Endorsed as they were by Augustine, these guidelines subsequently passed into the Western medieval exegetical tradition. The first two rules were perhaps the most impactful, bearing as they do a direct connection to larger (and potentially controversial) questions of ecclesiology. The first concerns the Lord and his body, which is to say, Christ and the church. Discussions in Scripture, it is noted, can move from head to body, or body to head, while still on the subject of one and the same person (*una eademque persona*). So it is, for example, that we find one person speaking in the Song of Songs: “As a bridegroom [Christ] decked out with a crown and as a bride [church] adorned with her jewels” (Isa. 61:10).⁹⁰ The second rule extends this to the bipartite body of the Lord, or better still, the true and mixed body (*verum atque permixtum*) of the Lord, or even the true and simulated (*verum atque simulatum*). As we are told, hypocrites are not really part of the Lord’s body in eternity, or even now, despite the fact that they seem to be members of his church. Here then is the “mixed church” (*ecclesia permixta*) in which good and bad fish are presently caught up within a single net. Both parts may be addressed in a single passage, although they nevertheless remain distinct. For instance, we read in Isaiah 42:16–17, “I will lead the blind,” while he speaks to the other part, “They are turned back.”⁹¹ The third rule addresses promises and the law, or the spirit and the letter, or yet still grace and commandment. To miss these crucial distinctions, Augustine says, is to open the door to the Pelagian heresy.⁹² The fourth rule covers species and genus, or part and whole. Thus something might be spoken in Scripture to the city of Jerusalem, for example, which actually has a much wider application intended for all people.⁹³ The fifth rule addresses times, in which intervals of time hidden in the Scriptures can be discovered either by synecdoche (a part for the whole or the whole for a part) or numbers such as seven, ten, or twelve, which convey completeness. Thus “Seven times a day I will praise you” (Ps. 118:164 Vulg. [119:164 Eng.]) means all the time.⁹⁴ The sixth rule is that of recapitulation

89. *De doctrina christiana* 3.30.43 (CCSL 32:103; Robertson, 102–3).

90. *De doctrina christiana* 3.31.44 (CCSL 32:104; Robertson, 106).

91. *De doctrina christiana* 3.32.45 (CCSL 32:104–5; Robertson, 106).

92. *De doctrina christiana* 3.33.46 (CCSL 32:105–6; Robertson, 107–8).

93. *De doctrina christiana* 3.34.47 (CCSL 32:106–7; Robertson, 108–9).

94. *De doctrina christiana* 3.35.50 (CCSL 32:110–11; Robertson, 112).

whereby some things in Scripture are described as though they follow each other in the order of time, or narrate a continuous sequence of events, when the narrative covertly refers to previous events that have been omitted.⁹⁵ Finally, the seventh rule speaks to the devil and his body. It is basically the converse of the first rule. The devil is the head of the wicked, who are in some sense his body, just as the faithful are members of Christ's body. Sometimes Scripture says things of the devil that actually refer to his body, which comprises not only those people manifestly outside the church but also some of those presently mingled within it.⁹⁶

We have seen, therefore, that Tyconius's rules facilitated christological readings of the Old Testament that could, in turn, also be ecclesiological. Augustine interpreted Psalms in a christological vein that might not have pleased the likes of Theodore of Mopsuestia but certainly won the day in the medieval West. Commenting on Psalm 1, "Blessed is the person who does not follow the advice of the wicked," Augustine immediately asserts that these words apply to Jesus Christ, the God-man.⁹⁷ That "He will be a tree planted by streams of water" (Ps. 1:3) may in turn refer to Wisdom itself, who deigned to assume humanity for our salvation such that it is the human Christ who is planted like this tree. Appealing to other psalms that invoke similar images can then serve to bolster this christological reading: "The river of God is brimming with water" (Ps. 64:9).⁹⁸ The words of the second psalm, "Yet I have been established by him a king over Zion" (Ps. 2:6), clearly proceed from the mouth (*ex persona*) of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.⁹⁹ And because such words can be spoken of or by Christ, they may refer to Christ's humanity, or his divinity, or both. Augustine was always alert to multiple possible meanings. Thus "the Lord said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you'" (Ps. 2:7) could be a prophetic statement regarding Christ's human birth, Augustine says, although it more likely refers to the eternal birth of the Word. In this case "today" may indeed signify the present, since in eternity there is neither past nor future, only the eternal now. Hence this psalm proclaims, according to Augustine, the true and catholic faith of the eternal generation of the power and wisdom of God.¹⁰⁰

If both the divine and human natures of Christ may be the subject of any given psalm, so the psalms may be speaking of Christ in his singular or

95. *De doctrina christiana* 3.36.52 (CCSL 32:111–12; Robertson, 113).

96. *De doctrina christiana* 3.37.55 (CCSL 32:114–15; Robertson, 115–16).

97. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 1.1, ed. J. Fraipont and Eligius Dekkers, CCSL 38 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), 1. See the English translation in *Augustine on the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2000), 67.

98. *In Psalmos* 1.2 (CCSL 38:2; Boulding, 68).

99. *In Psalmos* 2.5 (CCSL 38:4–5; Boulding, 72).

100. *In Psalmos* 2.6 (CCSL 38:5; Boulding, 72–73).

corporate person, thus with respect to head or members. “I rested and fell asleep and I arose” (Ps. 3:5) is spoken in the person of Jesus Christ (*ex persona Christi*) with regard to his passion and resurrection.¹⁰¹ Likewise, “You Lord are my support” (Ps. 3:3) is spoken by Christ to God in keeping with his humanity (*secundum hominem*), as the Word assumed human nature.¹⁰² Yet this same psalm, according to Augustine, can also be understood of the whole Christ (*totus Christus*), that is to say, Christ as both head and body; Christ’s body the church is beset by persecutions throughout the whole earth and therefore can say, “You are my support, my glory.” The church, after all, does not attribute preeminence to herself since she understands by whose grace and mercy she exists.¹⁰³ In this vein, “she who receives the inheritance” refers to the church, who receives eternal life as her inheritance through Christ and thereby possesses God himself.¹⁰⁴ And when she calls out to God, “Hear my words,” she seeks the Lord’s assistance so that she may pass through the vileness of this world and finally reach him.¹⁰⁵ The church’s prayers to God are often voiced in the Psalter, which makes them no less christological, since she is the very body of Christ. Thus she prays that God might “make my steps perfect in your pathways” so that her love may grow to perfection through those narrow paths by which she attains God’s rest. “And that my footprints may not be obliterated” is her request that the signs of her journey would not be removed. These are the signs, Augustine says, that have been impressed like footprints (*vestigia*) on the sacraments and apostolic writings.¹⁰⁶ Augustine’s christological reading of the Psalter is indicative of the way in which patristic exegetes, and their medieval successors, found Christ throughout the Old and New Testaments and in this way unified the Scriptures around not merely a theological theme but an eternal person.

Gregory the Great

Gregory the Great, one of the four great Latin fathers of the church (along with Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome), was a Benedictine monk elevated to the papacy. He had received a solid classical education, wrote good Latin, and was well acquainted with the works of the other fathers. As an exegete,

101. *In Psalmos* 3.1 (CCSL 38:7; Boulding, 76).

102. *In Psalmos* 3.3 (CCSL 38:8; Boulding, 77).

103. *In Psalmos* 3.9 (CCSL 38:11–2; Boulding, 81–82).

104. *In Psalmos* 5.1 (CCSL 38:19; Boulding, 93).

105. *In Psalmos* 5.2 (CCSL 38:19; Boulding, 93).

106. *In Psalmos* 16.5 (CCSL 38:92; Boulding, 185).

Gregory was above all else interested, as R. A. Markus observes, in moral questions. The old divide between the Christian and the pagan world that marked the times of Augustine had, by the late sixth century, given way to a divide within the church itself: those who lived a good Christian life and those who did not.¹⁰⁷ Although a pope and statesman, Gregory remained at his core a Benedictine monk seeking union with God in prayer. As Jean Leclercq remarked, for Gregory, “The Christian life is conceived of as, above all, a life of detachment and desire: detachment from the world and from sin, and intense desire for God. This attitude is already a prayer in itself, a life of prayer.”¹⁰⁸ Holy Scripture would then be at the center of such contemplation, a sustained process of deep meditation wherein the readers immersed themselves in, and thereby absorbed, the wisdom of the Scriptures. Gregory thus presented the evocative image of ruminating (*ruminamus*) on the green leaves of Scripture, chewing them over again as a cow with its cud.¹⁰⁹ In this vein he could say that, when reading Scripture, “We are being fed with the fodder of truth” (*veritatis pabulo pascimur*).¹¹⁰

Gregory’s exegetical masterpiece was his commentary on the book of Job, appended to which was a letter to the Christian scholar Leander, wherein Gregory offered a concise overview of his approach to the entire enterprise of biblical exegesis. Here he tells Leander that, at the request of fellow monks who had asked for this work, he would search out not only the literal-historical sense of words (*verba historiae*) for the allegorical sense (*per allegoriarum sensus*) but then also press beyond to the exercise of moral action (*exercitium moralitatis*), which presents an even more serious obligation. He would accompany what he found with other texts of Scripture and finally tie together all of these expositions for the clarification of difficult sections.¹¹¹ The exegetical process could not proceed in the case of Scripture, however, as it might when reading the classical authors. Hence in words that echoed down through the Middle Ages, Gregory declared that he would not make himself a slave to

107. R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 34–50.

108. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. C. Misrahi (New York: Fordham, 1988), 29.

109. *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam Prophetam* 1.5.1, ed. Marcus Adriaen, CCSL 142 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1971), 57. See also G. R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 87–95; and John Moorhead, *Gregory the Great* (London: Routledge, 2005), 49–67.

110. *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam Prophetam* 1.9.30 (CCSL 142:139–40).

111. *Ad Leandrum* 1, in *Moralia in Iob*, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 143 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), 2; English translation in *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job*, vol. 1, *Preface and Books 1–5*, trans. Brian Kerns (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2014), 49.

the art of rhetoric; by no means was he going to subject the words of divine revelation to the rules of Donatus (*ut verba caelestis oraculi restringam sub regulis Donati*).¹¹² Precisely because Holy Scripture has its own eloquence, Gregory need make no apologies on its behalf.

As the volumes grew larger, Gregory admitted that he sometimes had to set aside the literal sense so that he could pursue the senses that lead to contemplation and moral action.¹¹³ Admittedly, there are times when a literal reading of the text (*iuxta litteram*) leads to error; indeed, sometimes the words themselves militate against their own literal exposition. Thus when the words on the page appear to be inconsistent, that is the cue that there is a deeper meaning to be sought.¹¹⁴ Along these lines, within his homilies on the prophet Ezekiel, Gregory stated that the book of sacred eloquence (cf. Ezek. 2:9) is written inwardly (*intus*) through allegory and outwardly (*foris*) through history. The inward amounts to the spiritual understanding, while the outward is the simple sense of the letter. The first promises invisible things, whereas the second functions on a moral level as it disposes visible things through the rectitude of its precepts. And yet even as the inward sense does speak of “heavenly secrets” revealed to us by the Spirit, there are still some things that remain hidden to us now, known only by the angels.¹¹⁵

Gregory’s search for the spiritual, or inner, meaning ought not to be taken as a repudiation of the literal, or outward, sense of the text. He insisted that exegetes must first find their bearings on the foundations of history (*fundamenta historiae*). Only when this groundwork has been laid does one elevate the mind’s construction into an edifice of faith through the symbolized spiritual meaning, and finally adorn the building with exterior color through the charm of moral action.¹¹⁶ Gregory even warned of those who fail to take the words of sacred history literally (*verba historiae iuxta litteram*). They may actually be covering up the light of the truth that is offered as they force an allegorical reading on the text and thereby lose its edifying meaning.¹¹⁷ At one point Gregory beseeches the monks that, while raising their minds to a spiritual understanding (*spiritalem intelligentiam*), they not abandon their respect for history (*a veneratione historiae non recedat*).¹¹⁸ Thus as he led his fellow monks through the book of Job, Gregory insisted that they first plant

112. *Ad Leandrum* 5 (CCSL 143:7; Kerns, 1:55).

113. *Ad Leandrum* 2 (CCSL 143:3; Kerns, 1:50).

114. *Ad Leandrum* 3 (CCSL 143:5; Kerns, 1:52).

115. *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam Prophetam* 1.9.30 (CCSL 142:139–40).

116. *Ad Leandrum* 3 (CCSL 143:4–5; Kerns, 1:51).

117. *Ad Leandrum* 3–4 (CCSL 143:5; Kerns, 1:53).

118. *Moralia in Iob* 1.37.57 (CCSL 143:58; Kerns, 116).

the roots of the story so that they might then be able to satisfy their minds with the fruits of allegory (*de allegoriarum fructu satiare*).¹¹⁹

Finally, and most poignantly, Gregory spoke to Leander of his own suffering, the constant stomach pains that left him exhausted for lack of appetite. Here the fully human dimensions of this contemplative exegete emerge; here we see the man existentially engaged with the living text. Gregory told his friend that the more depressed he found himself by present suffering, the more consoled he was by the certain promises of eternal life. Perhaps it is divine providence, he opined, that he would comment on stricken Job after having been so stricken himself and thus better understand the soul of the one scourged through the lashes that he himself has received.¹²⁰ Addressing Gregory's confession, Jean Leclercq commented with typical insight that "Gregory's poor health is one of the great events in the history of spirituality, since to some degree it determines his doctrine. . . . For him, man's suffering is by no means a theoretical notion; he knew it from the inside at the cost of sensitivity that was sharpened and increased by the difficulties of each day."¹²¹

It was in the preface to his Job commentary that Gregory reflected on the question of biblical authorship. He confidently assured the monks that the true author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit (*auctor libri Spiritus sanctus*). It is the Spirit who dictated what was to be written and inspired it. Consider, Gregory says, if we received a letter from some great person, how absurd it would be to wonder by whose pen it was written. The scribe is of no importance when we know who sent the letter and what it is about.¹²² None of this is to discount the role of human authors, but only to highlight their unique role as inspired agents of the divine author. Thus, when the human authors give information about themselves as though speaking of others, this is because they are writing under the inspiration of the Spirit. These human writers were placed above themselves, having been inspired by the Holy Spirit. Blessed Job, filled with the Spirit, could therefore write of his own deeds as though they were not his, just as Moses had also done.¹²³

What, then, is the book of Job all about? According to Gregory, the man Job embodies great mysteries regarding the incarnation. In fact, Job's own suffering was itself a form of prophecy pointing to the mystery of Christ's passion. Because Christ is the head of the body, which is the church, Job may

119. *Praefatio* 10.21 (CCSL 143:24; Kerns, 1:75).

120. *Ad Leandrum* 5 (CCSL 143:6; Kerns, 1:54).

121. Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 28.

122. *Praefatio* 1.2 (CCSL 143:8–9; Kerns, 1:57–58).

123. *Praefatio* 1.3 (CCSL 143:9–10; Kerns, 1:58–59).

at times symbolize either the head or the body.¹²⁴ Drawing on Jerome's *Book of Hebrew Names*, Gregory explained that Job means "one who suffers," thereby symbolizing Christ by his very name. Thus we read of both the passion of the mediator himself and the trials of the church, which is crucified by the many troubles she bears in this present life.¹²⁵ It is fitting, moreover, that we are not told how long Job's trials lasted, for the church will likewise face trials in this world, the duration of which we cannot determine.¹²⁶ Other actors in this narrative also bear symbolic value. Job's wife, who tempted him to curse God, typifies those who live according to the flesh, behave wickedly in the church, and oppress the faithful, while Job's friends prefigure the heretics, who pretend to offer sound advice but in reality lead believers astray through their false teachings.¹²⁷ Such correlations belong to the very construction of Holy Scripture, as Gregory declared when commenting on the wheels of Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 1:16). He found that the wheel within the wheel is the New Testament: what the Old Testament pointed to (*designavit*), the New Testament showed forth (*exhibuit*). For example, Eve having been produced from the side of sleeping Adam foreshadows the church formed from Christ as he was dying. Isaac carrying the wood to the altar of his own sacrifice looks forward to Christ carrying the wood of his own cross to his passion.¹²⁸

Gregory begins his exposition of the book of Job by reflecting on the holiness of Job the man, who, despite his many concerns, offered himself up in constant attentiveness to God. Even though the evangelical counsel to leave all things behind had not yet been revealed, Job already abided by it in his heart.¹²⁹ Having brought the monks through an overview of Job's story, Gregory then returns to the beginning to point out the secret of the allegories (*allego-riarum secreta*).¹³⁰ We believe what happened in this story, Gregory says, but now it is time to see its fulfillment through the allegorical sense. In the case of Job the man, an allegorical reading is ultimately christological. Gregory observes that, just as Job means "one who suffers," so Uz means "counselor." Surely this must be Jesus Christ, of whom Isaiah says, "He took on himself our sufferings" (Isa. 53:4), and Wisdom herself speaking though Solomon says: "I,

124. *Praefatio* 6.14 (CCSL 143:19–20; Kerns, 1:70).

125. *Praefatio* 7.16 (CCSL 143:20–21; Kerns, 1:71–72). See Jerome, *Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum*, in *Opera exegetica* 1, ed. Marcus Adriaen et al., CCSL 72 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959), 133.

126. *Praefatio* 8.17 (CCSL 143:21–22; Kerns, 1:73).

127. *Praefatio* 6.15 (CCSL 143:20; Kerns, 1:71).

128. *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam Prophetam* 1.6.15 (CCSL 142:75).

129. *Moralia in Iob* 1.5.7 (CCSL 143:28; Kerns, 1:81–82).

130. *Moralia in Iob* 1.10.14 (CCSL 143:31; Kerns, 1:85).

Wisdom, dwell in counsel, and I am to be found among learned thoughts” (Prov. 8:12). That Job dwells in the land of Uz points therefore to Wisdom, who bore the sufferings of the passion for our sake and made the hearts of those dedicated to his counsels his own habitation.¹³¹

From the symbolic value of names to numbers, Gregory hits upon the seven sons and three daughters of Job. Noting that Scripture employs the number seven to symbolize perfection, the seven sons can be reckoned the apostles, who put the counsels of perfection into practice. That there were twelve apostles symbolizes the perfection implied in the seven gifts of grace. And the number seven itself grows into twelve when we multiply its parts: three times four. So it was that the apostles went to the four regions of the earth to preach the Trinity.¹³² The moral aspect is revealed as the birth of the seven sons symbolizes the seven virtues of the Holy Spirit born within us. These seven sons of ours need the three sisters of faith, hope, and charity that they may be perfected and reach the number ten.¹³³ Job’s early rising to offer a holocaust for each son can then be manifested in our own lives when we are radiant with the light of compunction and leave behind the night of our humanity by opening our minds to the rays of the true light. As a holocaust is a sacrifice totally consumed, so the offering of a holocaust is to burn the mind completely with the fire of compunction, while its heat burns on the altar of love and consumes our impure thoughts.¹³⁴

Such forays into etymology and numerology might leave the modern reader a bit exasperated. But Gregory never lost sight of the narrative sweep of Scripture, its characters and their lives, the totality of which was designed to bring us to a greater knowledge of ourselves and lead us in our journey. Sacred Scripture, Gregory says, is presented like a kind of mirror (*quasi quoddam speculum*) to the eyes of our mind so that we might see our interior face within it. There we recognize both our ugliness and our beauty; there we measure our progress and see how far we are from our goal. In Scripture we can see how Job is described as strengthened by temptation while David is beaten down by it, so that the virtues of our great leaders may at once encourage our hope, and their failures counsel caution and humility. Even as we must bear the weight of fear sometimes, we will not despair, strengthened as we are by the example of virtuous living, which promotes confidence and hope.¹³⁵

131. *Moralia in Iob* 1.11.15 (CCSL 143:31–32; Kerns, 1:85).

132. *Moralia in Iob* 1.14.19 (CCSL 143:33–34; Kerns, 1:87).

133. *Moralia in Iob* 1.27.38 (CCSL 143:45–46; Kerns, 1:100–101).

134. *Moralia in Iob* 1.35.49 (CCSL 143:50–51; Kerns, 1:107).

135. *Moralia in Iob* 2.1.1 (CCSL 143:59; Kerns, 1:117).

John Cassian

The monk and spiritual writer John Cassian spent much of his career in fifth-century Gaul following a sojourn in Egypt. His classic work *The Conferences* recounts his conversations with various holy men of the Eastern desert. Cassian no doubt rearranged these sources to suit his own purposes and likely added a fair amount of his own material. Still, the final text is what concerns us, and it is a wonderful guide not only to the spiritual life but also to the place of Scripture within that life.

In the eleventh conference, Cassian recounts how he and his companions left Syria for Egypt in their quest for a “greater grace of perfection,” seeking the counsel of holy men “whose reputation for sanctity had made them glorious everywhere.”¹³⁶ There he met monks “whose old age and holiness, in bodies now bent over, shines so brightly in their faces that the mere sight of them is able to teach a great deal to those who gaze upon them.” In fact, one would learn from them not so much through words (*verbis*) but rather by the example of their holy life (*sanctae vitae exemplo*).¹³⁷ The lives of these men had been formed by immersion in the Scriptures; they were actualizing all that they had meditated on for decades. Thus, as the father Chaemeron explained to Cassian and his companions, divine Scripture (*scriptura divina*) arouses the will to ascend the ladder of perfection, as “the divine word [*sermo divinus*] has in some way established different ranks and different measures of perfection itself.”¹³⁸ Chaemeron concluded with a word from the psalmist on the way to blessedness: “Continually to learn and to teach the disposition by which we may cling to the Lord” (Ps. 1:2). So it is, the father says, that we ought to meditate on this disposition (*affectus*) day and night, “always chewing on this heavenly food.” Such constant rumination (*perpetua ruminatio*) is the life of the monk who seeks the grace of perfection.¹³⁹ As Douglas Burton-Christie observes, for the desert fathers “to ruminate on Scripture was to embark upon a deeply personal drama that the monks referred to as the quest for purity of heart.”¹⁴⁰

In the fourteenth conference, Cassian sought the instruction of Abba Nesteros, who, upon learning that these monks had committed parts of Scripture to memory, proceeded to offer them a lesson in hermeneutics. Nesteros noted

136. *Collationes* 11.1, CSEL 13:314; *The Conferences*, trans. and annotated by Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers 57 (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 409.

137. *Collationes* 11.2 (CSEL 13:315; Ramsey, 409–10).

138. *Collationes* 11.12 (CSEL 13:326; Ramsey, 417–18).

139. *Collationes* 11.15 (CSEL 13:332; Ramsey, 422).

140. Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 299.

first that knowledge (*scientia*) can be divided between the practical (*practike*) and the theoretical (*theoretike*). The first “reaches its fulfillment in correction of behavior and in cleansing of vice.” The second “consists in the contemplation of divine things and in the understanding of most sacred meanings.”¹⁴¹ Nesteros observes that, while the practical can be pursued apart from the theoretical, it is not so the other way around, precisely because a pure moral disposition is essential for embarking on the path to contemplation: “In vain, therefore, does someone who does not reject the contagion of vice strive for the vision of God.”¹⁴²

It was the theoretical sort of knowledge that could then be subsequently divided into historical interpretation and spiritual understanding, and it is here that Cassian hands down what became the classic medieval paradigm of the four scriptural senses. Galatians 4:22–31 was employed as a starting point to explain the process. According to Nesteros, as recounted by Cassian, history embraces knowledge of past and visible things and thus corresponds to Paul’s recounting of the fact that Abraham had two sons born of the free and slave women. What follows, however, belongs to allegory. For the events that took place (*in veritate gesta sunt*) prefigured the form of another mystery (*sacramentum*), namely, the two covenants. Anagogy proceeds from here, mounting from spiritual mysteries (*mysteria*) to even more sublime and sacred secrets, as Paul goes on to speak of the heavenly Jerusalem. And finally there is tropology, the moral explanation, which pertains to correction of life and practical instruction as though these two covenants referred to practical and theoretical discipline. At this point Nesteros explains that the aforementioned four levels may apply to one biblical event or place, in this case Jerusalem, which can be read in a fourfold manner. Historically it is the city of the Jews; allegorically it is the church; anagogically the heavenly city of God; and tropologically the human soul that is either commended or castigated by God. Thus allegory is a sort of revelation, a spiritual understanding that lays bare what had been concealed by the historical narrative. Tropology allows for the prudent examination of whatever pertains to practical direction, to order the useful and the good. Anagogy directs us to what lies in the future, exhorting us to our final end.¹⁴³

By the late Middle Ages a mnemonic refrain had emerged that was frequently rehearsed by exegetes as they tipped their hats to the four senses before presenting more complex variations on this basic theme: *Littera gesta docet*,

141. *Collationes* 14.1 (CSEL 13:398–99; Ramsey, 505).

142. *Collationes* 14.2 (CSEL 13:399; Ramsey, 505).

143. *Collationes* 14.8 (CSEL 13:404–7; Ramsey, 509–11).

quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia. That is, the letter teaches you about the historical events, the allegorical sense what you ought to believe, the moral sense how you ought to behave, and the anagogical sense what you should strive to attain.

For Nesteros, however, all biblical interpretation is ultimately a matter of spiritual growth. And we may surely assume that Cassian approved of this father's words, which he recounted: "If you wish to attain to a true knowledge of Scripture, then, you must first hasten to acquire a steadfast humility of heart which will, by the perfection of love, bring you not to the knowledge that puffs up (1 Cor. 8:1) but to that which enlightens. For it is impossible for the impure mind to receive the gift of spiritual knowledge [*scientia spiritualis*]." The proper spiritual discipline is thus the sine qua non of all biblical study. And the study of Scripture, for Nesteros, means nothing less than immersion in the texts. He insists that "the successive books of Holy Scripture must be diligently committed to memory and ceaselessly reviewed." The result is a "double fruit" that at once preserves the mind from harmful thoughts and prepares it through meditation for clearer understanding of its mysteries.¹⁴⁴ "As our mind is increasingly renewed by this study, the face of Scripture will also begin to be renewed [*innovari*], and the beauty of a more sacred understanding will somehow grow with the person who is making progress."¹⁴⁵

Entering deeply into the sacred text clearly transcends a merely intellectual endeavor. Purity of heart will be required for anyone attempting to comprehend the Scriptures. Memorization of texts and clever interpretations devised by even the most erudite do not count as genuine understanding. For the arrogant and the vain cannot possibly attain a genuine spiritual knowledge of the text.¹⁴⁶ Such people are simply incapable of plumbing the spiritual depths of Scripture. "True knowledge [*vera scientia*] is possessed only by true worshippers of God." One can hardly expect someone who has "stained the Catholic faith with unclean works" to have acquired it. The way to genuine comprehension, therefore, is by increasing our practical perfection through righteous works. "No one can properly arrive at searching into the testimonies of God unless he first enters undefiled upon the way of Christ by his practical way of life." So it is that one will often find genuine spiritual knowledge (*vera et spiritualis scientia*) flourishing among the otherwise uncultured and barely literate.¹⁴⁷ Only by living out the text, and not merely "filling the air

144. *Collationes* 14.10 (CSEL 13:410–11; Ramsey, 513–15).

145. *Collationes* 14.11 (CSEL 13:411–13; Ramsey, 515).

146. *Collationes* 14.14 (CSEL 13:416–17; Ramsey, 519).

147. *Collationes* 14.16 (CSEL 13:418–21; Ramsey, 520–21).

with words,” as one father chastised his disciple, did the monk come to greater understanding of the divine Scriptures.¹⁴⁸

Jerome

The last of the fathers that we will look at in this chapter, Jerome, hailed from Stridon in present-day Croatia. We noted that as a young man Jerome had studied with the renowned grammarian Donatus before going on to study Greek in Antioch and later learning Hebrew with the help of a Jewish convert. Jerome continued his Hebrew studies in Rome, where he consulted with Jews in their synagogues. All of this language work would eventually be brought to bear when, at the request of Pope Damasus, Jerome undertook a revision of the Latin Bible, which came to be known as the Vulgate and was read throughout the Middle Ages. Jerome’s work on the New Testament consisted mainly of revising the Old Latin (*Vetus Latina*). In fact, much of the New Testament Vulgate edition was not even his own work but rather that of Rufinus the Syrian. The work that Jerome did on the Old Testament, however, was quite substantial. He produced the so-called Gallican Psalter by correcting the Latin with the aid of Origen’s *Hexapla* edition, which lined up the Hebrew text and various Greek translations side by side. Jerome later undertook a revised translation of the Psalms based on the Hebrew, hence the *Hebraica Veritas*. He believed this to be imperative, having seen how the Greek translations provided in the *Hexapla*—those of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion—exposed how the classic Septuagint (LXX) version differed from the Hebrew text. For Jerome to depart from the Septuagint and thus begin a new translation from the Hebrew was a bold move. Hilary of Poitiers, for instance, had claimed that the seventy translators who produced the Septuagint had access to a secret oral tradition that later translators did not possess. Augustine believed that the Septuagint was a divinely inspired translation designed to lead the gentiles to the Messiah.¹⁴⁹

Jerome’s allegiance to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament was not born simply of a desire for scholarly precision. Like his contemporaries, Jerome believed that Hebrew was the original human language; the multiplicity of languages was therefore God’s punishment for the presumptuous tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). Jerome had long been motivated to incorporate into his studies the wisdom inherent in Hebrew. In his *Hebrew Questions*, he appealed

148. Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 160–66.

149. Adam Kamesar, “Jerome,” in *New Cambridge History of the Bible*, 1:653–75.

to rabbinic sources and gathered material from Josephus's *Antiquities*. In fact, it was during his work on the *Questions* that he came to recognize the urgent need to recover the *Hebraica Veritas*. What he could not have known, however, was that the Septuagint actually preserved some more ancient readings than the Hebrew texts on which he was basing his new translation. Jerome was also moved by apologetic reasons to jettison the Septuagint. Jews of his own day, now relying on the Hebrew canon, did not accept the Septuagint as an authentic Old Testament text, which meant, in turn, that any Christian arguments made from the Septuagint regarding Christ's divinity and his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies would be dismissed out of hand. Among the problems with Jerome's Latin translation of the Hebrew, however, is that he edited the text in the process. He therefore introduced explanations into the text, condensed prolix passages, and even reconfigured some to smooth out inconsistencies. This is because Jerome was after readability: he wanted to present the Christian public with a comprehensible and edifying text. In the process, as Kelly observes, Jerome set aside the strict dictates of his classical Latin education so as to create a new "Christian Latin," the impact of which was felt for centuries to come in the Western church.¹⁵⁰

Jerome was a prolific author, with numerous commentaries and letters to his name in addition to his work on the Bible. His many prologues to various biblical books open a window into his thinking about the canon, the process of translation, and the nature of Scripture as a sacred text. In his prologue to the Pentateuch, for instance, Jerome points out that the gospel writers and Paul offer many quotations of the Old Testament that are not found as such in the Septuagint. Which version of the text should one adopt? For Jerome, the best course of action is to stick with the apostles, since they were filled with the Holy Spirit. We follow the apostles, he says, for it is through their mouth that Christ himself speaks. This great translation project is obviously a daunting task, and so Jerome prays that he will be guided by the same Spirit through which the books themselves were written.¹⁵¹ In his prologue to the gospels, addressed to Pope Damasus, Jerome also laments the precarious and awesome assignment he has undertaken. Who would dare add to, change, or correct these ancient books?¹⁵² And when he set out to translate the Psalms anew from the Hebrew text, rather than the Greek, Jerome was clearly on the defensive. We see this in his prologue to the Hebrew Psalter, where he

150. J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 153–67.

151. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatum Versionem*, ed. Robert Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1969), 3–4.

152. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatum Versionem*, 1515–16.

complains of those who prize novelty in all things except when it comes to the study of the Scriptures; then they are content with the old flavor.¹⁵³

Translation is, of course, a subtle operation that demands flexibility on the part of the translator. In his prologue to the book of Job, Jerome stated that he sometimes offers a very literal translation, at other times tries to capture the larger sense of the passage, and then sometimes employs a mix of both approaches (*nunc verba, nunc sensus, nunc simul utrumque resonabit*). Here Jerome also makes clear that he has no wish to condemn the old translation, even as he recognizes that some parts of it are obscure, omitted, or have suffered scribal corruption. He hopes only to make such passages clearer in his own translation.¹⁵⁴

The Vulgate Bible does not reflect Jerome's ideal canon, since it includes books belonging to the Septuagint that were too popular to be omitted. Jerome made his own views on the canon known in his prologue to the books of Kings, also known as the *Prologus Galeatus*. Here he divided the Old Testament into three sections, comprising twenty-two books in all: the five books of Moses; eight books of the prophets; and nine books of the sacred writings. It was in this prologue that Jerome specifically denied full canonical status to the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, and Tobit. These he deemed the apocryphal books (*inter apocrypha seponendum . . . non sunt in canone*), which is not to say that he found no value in them. They could be read for edification but were not so authoritative that they could form the basis of Christian doctrine. However, Jerome later spoke of Judith along with Ruth and Esther as "sacred volumes" and referred to Sirach as "Holy Scripture" in his Isaiah commentary, while Wisdom is cited as Scripture (*dicente Scriptura*) in his Jeremiah commentary.¹⁵⁵

The *Prologus Galeatus* was widely known in the Middle Ages and accepted by some, but it did not command universal adherence. Despite Jerome's authoritative status in the area of biblical studies, there was another ancient source to which medieval exegetes also looked. This was the *Decretum Damasi*, or *De explanatione fidei catholicae*, which was established at a Roman council in 382. Proclaiming the divine Scriptures to be "the foundation upon which the catholic church throughout the world has been founded," this decree provided a list of the Scriptures that have been accepted by the universal catholic church. The list included the very books that Jerome had

153. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatum Versionem*, 768–69.

154. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatum Versionem*, 731–32.

155. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatum Versionem*, 364–66. See also E. F. Sutcliffe, "Jerome," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 2:83–93.

left out of his canon: Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, and Tobit.¹⁵⁶ This document was later incorporated into the *Decretum Gelasianum*, compiled in about 495, perhaps in southern Gaul. It seems that the first three parts of the *Decretum Gelasianum* constitute the earlier *Decretum Damasi*, to which two parts were later added during the pontificate of Gelasius I (492–96).¹⁵⁷ The document as a whole later circulated under the name of Gelasius and eventually entered into the canon law collections attributed to him.¹⁵⁸

By the seventh century, Isidore of Seville points out that the Jewish canon of the Old Testament accepts twenty-two books, which are then divided into the three categories of law, prophets, and sacred writings. Yet, Isidore says, Christians accept a fourth category not found in the Hebrew canon, which includes the books of Sirach, Judith, Tobit, and others: “For although the Jews put them separately into the apocrypha, the Church of Christ nevertheless honors and proclaims them among the divine books.”¹⁵⁹ As for the New Testament, Isidore contends that there are two orders: the evangelical and the apostolic, that is, the four gospels and all the rest of the books from the epistles to the Apocalypse.¹⁶⁰ The writers of these sacred books speak to us through the Holy Spirit for our instruction, since they wrote down precepts for living and the rule of belief (*praecepta vivendi et credendi regulam conscripserunt*).¹⁶¹

Isidore also addressed the very concept of an apocryphal book. Books, he says, are considered apocryphal because they have come into doubt. Their origin is unknown even to the fathers, from whom authority and certainty regarding the veracity of the Scriptures come down to the church in later generations. Although there may be some truth within these books, the falsity that they also possess excludes them from holding canonical authority.¹⁶² Isidore was furthermore concerned to defend the textual integrity of the Old Testament books that the church does accept. Thus he contended that Ezra, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (*divino afflatus Spiritu*), had corrected the volumes that were corrupted during the Babylonian captivity.¹⁶³

156. *De explanatione fidei catholicae* (PL 19:787–93).

157. *Decretum Gelasianum* (PL 59:157–64). See D. J. Chapman, “On the Decretum Gelasianum: De Libris Recipiendis et non Recipiendis,” *Revue Bénédictine* 30 (1913): 187–207, 315–33.

158. Gilbert Dahan, *L'exégèse chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiéval* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 57–61.

159. *Etymologiarum* 6.1 (PL 82:229d–30a).

160. *Etymologiarum* 6.1 (PL 82:230a).

161. *Etymologiarum* 6.2 (PL 82:235b).

162. *Etymologiarum* 6.2 (PL 82:235b).

163. *Etymologiarum* 6.3 (PL 82:235c).

As we shall see in later chapters, the state of the biblical canon and the relative authority of various authors were still open questions. Beyond those issues, the status of the biblical text itself, after centuries of recopying and attempts at emendation, could be quite a contentious issue. One thing that was not in doubt throughout the Middle Ages, however, was the status of the church fathers; their exegetical authority exceeded that of even the most ingenious medieval master.