

Midwife of the Christian Bible

Irenaeus identified the books of the New Testament, then showed the church how they fit with the Old.

Fr. John Behr

Irenaeus was a living link to the apostles. Although he became bishop of Lyons, in France, he was originally from the East. He was probably born in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) around A.D. 130-140. As a youth he had seen and heard Polycarp of Smyrna, who, as Irenaeus put it, had received the things concerning the Lord from "the eyewitnesses of the Word of Life" (the name of John the disciple is often mentioned as one of these).

Irenaeus used these reports of Jesus, given "according to the Scriptures," delivered in the beginning by the apostles, to defend the truth of Christianity against a bewildering variety of early anti-Christian and heretical groups. As he did so, he gave the church a clear vision of the scriptural framework of its faith.

At the heart of this vision was Irenaeus's teaching of the right use of both the New Testament and the Old. Before Irenaeus, there was no New Testament. He is the first Christian writer to use, as Scripture, almost all the books that are in our New Testament today. And he insisted that these books could be properly used only by those people who accepted four authorities:

1. The "rule [*canon*] of truth"; that is, the belief in one God, one Son, and one Holy Spirit—the basis of the later creeds.
2. The whole canonical body of Scripture, Old and New.
3. The apostolic tradition; that is, the deposit handed down, once for all, by the apostles and preserved intact in the church to the present—referring to the contemplation of Christ according to the Scriptures.
4. The bishops whose very lives—as direct successors to the apostles—

provided the church with a visible witness that the true teaching about Christ was still being preserved and preached.

For all his decisive importance, we know very little about the life of Irenaeus. On his journey westward he probably visited Rome, where he would have encountered teachers such as the apologist Justin Martyr.

He also probably led the church in Vienne (near Lyons) during a violent persecution in 177, and then he assumed responsibility for the community in Lyons when its bishop, Pothinus, was imprisoned awaiting martyrdom.

Irenaeus is remembered as a martyr—though the claim dates from long after his death, which cannot be dated precisely. Only two of his written works have survived. The first is the collection of five books entitled *The Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So-called*, also known as *Against the Heresies*. The other, the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, was discovered only at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Rightly uniting the Word

The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching provides the best insight into Irenaeus' vision. Here he links the preaching of the apostles—the New Testament writers—to its source in the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets.

First he outlines the faith handed down by the elders, who had known the apostles, epitomized in the three articles of the "canon of faith"—the one God and Father; the one Lord, the crucified and risen Jesus Christ; and the one Holy Spirit.

Then he recounts, in the manner of the great apostolic speeches in Acts, the scriptural narrative of God's work of salvation culminating in Christ. Finally, he demonstrates that what the apostles proclaimed as fulfilled in Christ, shaped as it is by Scripture, was indeed foretold in Scripture.

Irenaeus stresses the way the apostles themselves used Scripture: following Paul's proclamation that Christ died and rose according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-5), the four canonical Gospels focus their accounts of Jesus on the Passion, and they always tell the story with references to Hebrew Scripture. Neither Marcion nor Gnostic writings like the *Gospel of Thomas* use Scripture like this in proclaiming Christ.

Irenaeus criticizes the heretics on the grounds that they have "disregarded the order and connection of the Scriptures." They have, he charges, rearranged the members of the body of truth, much as do those who take a mosaic of a king and rearrange the stones to form a picture of a dog or fox, claiming that this is the original picture. Those who know the "canon of truth," delivered in baptism, will be able to restore the passages to their proper order, so revealing the image of the King.

The "canon of truth" functions very much like the "pattern of sound words" to which Paul urged Timothy to hold firm (2 Tim. 1:13). By holding to this canon, Christians can proclaim in a continually changing context the same gospel—the "tradition" preserved in the Church.

In this way, Christ is, for Irenaeus, the subject of Scripture throughout. The apostles proclaimed him by reference to the Scriptures. The prophets saw "the Son of God as man conversing with men; they prophesied what was to happen ... declaring that the one in the heavens had descended into the 'dust of death'" (Ps. 21.16; Septuagint). Christ was not yet present, but his saving Passion was already the subject of the prophets' words and visions.

Jesus wrote it all

Not only is Jesus Christ the subject of Scripture, from beginning to end, but he is also its ultimate author: Irenaeus takes Jesus' statement that "Moses wrote of me" (John 5.46) to mean, "the writings of Moses are his words," and then extends this to include "the words of the other prophets." So, Irenaeus urges Marcion, "read with earnest care that Gospel which has been given to us by the apostles, and read with earnest care the prophets, and you will find that the whole conduct, and all the doctrine and all the sufferings of our Lord, were predicted through them."

"If anyone reads the Scriptures in this way," Irenaeus argues, "he will find in them the Word concerning Christ and a foreshadowing of the new calling." Using Christ's image of a treasure hidden in a field (Matt. 13:44), where the disciples are sent to reap what others have sown (John 4:35-8), Irenaeus suggests that Christ himself is the treasure, hidden in Scripture, in the types and parables, the words and actions of the patriarchs and prophets, which prefigure what was to happen in and through Christ in his human advent as contained in the Gospel. By their writings, the patriarchs and prophets have prepared the world for the advent of Christ, so that the field is ready for harvest.

Before their consummation in the Christ's advent, these types and prophecies could not be understood.

But the cross now sheds light on these writings, revealing what they in fact mean and how they are thus the Word of God. For those who read Scripture without knowing the "explanation" (literally "exegesis") of those things pertaining to Christ, the Scriptures remain only fables. However, those who read Scripture with understanding will be illumined and shine as the stars of heaven.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 80: The First Bible Teachers

The First Bible Teachers: Did You Know?

Interesting and unusual facts about the church's first Bible interpreters

Great grandfather of medieval culture?

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 160-215) began the monumental project that would culminate in the Middle Ages—to place all of Western culture on a biblical foundation. Robert Wilken calculates there are between seven and eight biblical citations on every page of Clement's writings, which contain, in all, some 1,500 references to the Old Testament and 3,000 to the New Testament. His writings are "suffused with [the Bible's] language, its forms of expressions, its images and metaphors, its stories. Its heroes become his heroes, and its history his history." This is all the more remarkable, adds Wilken, given that for Clement the Bible was "an alien book, written in a plain and unadorned style, a product of Jewish culture, quite unlike the artful and polished works of Greek literature."

Original sins

Though Origen is hands down the most influential figure in the early history of Biblical interpretation (p. 18), he was condemned at Constantinople in 553 by an ecumenical council and was regularly viewed as a heretic throughout much of Christian History. Among the teachings that contributed to this judgment were his Christological formulations that led Arius to deny the eternal existence of the Son, his belief in the preexistence of human souls, and his affirmation of the genuine possibility of a universal salvation of all creatures. In addition, he was viewed as the source of numerous heresies that, while not directly connected to his thought, were affirmed by those who claimed to be his followers.

How could 72 translators be wrong?

Until the writings of the apostles were gathered into a canonical collection in about the third century A. D., the only Bible the early church knew was the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made by Hellenistic Jews. Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-246 B.C.) is supposed to have commissioned the great undertaking to introduce a copy of Hebrew Law into his renowned library at Alexandria. According to Jewish tradition, 72 scholars gathered in 72 individual cells, each assigned to translate a full copy of the Bible. Emerging to compare their renderings, they discovered that each version was nearly identical. Until Jerome created his Vulgate translation between 383 and 405, the Septuagint continued as the church's authoritative Old Testament. The Vulgate united the entire Bible under a common linguistic banner for the first time. The Septuagint remains the canonical Hebrew Bible text for the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Not just role playing

We owe the word "Trinity" to the African theologian and apologist Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian (ca. 160 - ca. 225). Tertullian used the word for the concept that appears everywhere in the Bible but is never explicitly named. He coined it in an argument with a teacher who promoted modalism—the view that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct persons but mere appearances (modes) or roles played by a single God.

Classically trained

Early Christianity's intellectual leaders were all classical scholars. Their schooling was in Homer, Virgil, Isocrates, Cicero, Euripides, Herodotus, Plutarch, Thucydides, and other Greek and Latin masters of philosophy, rhetoric, drama, and history. They valued effective use of words, and when they interpreted the Bible, they did so using the tools of their classical education (p. 40).

No "dark ages" here

Early Christians took a very different attitude towards the body of the classical learning that preceded their rise to cultural dominance than did early Muslims, who spoke of the centuries leading up to Mohammed as *al-Jahiliyyaha*, "the time of ignorance."

Dreamy rebuke

Jerome (ca. 342 - 420) was a master of classical learning—his age's best Latin writer, some have said. His passion for scholarship took him to the empire's intellectual centers, where he devoured the works of the pagan thinkers. Though it troubled him, he preferred the cultured style of Cicero and other rhetoricians to the plain, sometimes clumsy style of the Bible. But in Antioch, he had a feverish dream in which Christ scourged him and accused him, "You are a Ciceronian, and not a Christian." Jerome vowed not to study pagan books again, though whether he kept the vow is unclear. He did spend the years 374-377 fasting and studying in the desert east of Antioch.

Eight for the ages

In 1295 Pope Boniface VIII named the first four Latin Doctors of the Church (that is, its formative thinkers): Ambrose (Pastoral Doctor), Jerome (Doctor of Biblical Science), Augustine (Doctor of Grace), and Gregory the Great (Doctor of Hymnology). In 1568 Pius V named four Doctors of the Church in the East, rounding out the Eight Ecumenical Doctors of the Roman Catholic Church: Basil the Great (Doctor of Monasticism), Gregory Nazianzen (Doctor of Theologies), John Chrysostom (Doctor of Preachers), and Athanasius (Doctor of Orthodoxy).

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Issue 80: The First Bible Teachers

The First Bible Teachers: From The Editor - The Founding Fathers We Never Knew

Chris Armstrong

Don't know much about history ... " So croons the popular song. And today, among the least-known figures of history are the early church fathers. But not only are such people as Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil the Great the originators of the church's founding doctrines (the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and many others), they have much to teach us on that favorite Protestant subject: Bible study.

For the fathers (and mothers!) of our faith, Scripture was the Fountain—the source of everything that mattered. They studied the Hebrew Bible (though usually in Greek translation), along with the apostles' documents that would become the New Testament, with an almost physical thirst for God and his truth. Their writings resound with the joy of those who have discovered the Well of Life and tasted its sweet waters.

These teachers developed the art and science of interpretation in different directions. What did their approaches—all reverent, but each distinctive—look like, and how do they continue to affect the church today?

In this issue we meet such larger-than-life Bible teachers as Irenaeus, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa. We peer over their shoulders as they work, to see the rich, quirky, inspiring ways they drew life from the Book that was the center of their lives. And we see how, as they read, they sought to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

As I read the stellar articles (sure, I'm not biased) our authors provide in this issue, I gained a new appreciation of how reverently the early generations studied Scripture—in settings marked by worship and the pursuit of holiness. The Holy Spirit clearly worked in the early Christians to open the eyes of their hearts—even though they used methods and came to conclusions that are strange to us.

My time with the first Bible teachers has also stirred again the passion for Bible study that I first experienced as a college-aged convert. In an age glutted with Bible "products," it has been refreshing to read Scripture anew through the eyes of brilliant readers sold out to its Author.

I hope this issue will encourage you to join this Bible study with some of the best teachers of all time. (Some of them are fascinating characters, too!) There's nothing like coming in contact with bright thinkers mere generations removed from the apostles, then following along with them as they plumb the deeper meanings of their faith's founding texts.

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The Habits of Highly Effective Bible Readers

What we can learn from the church fathers that will enrich our own Bible study.

A conversation with Christopher A. Hall

In recent years, more and more evangelical Protestants have been looking at the early church fathers—that group of Christian teachers stretching from just after the apostles through approximately the first five centuries of the church—to see how they read their Bibles and did their theology.

"Exhibit A" in this resurgence is the Ancient Christian Commentary series edited by Thomas C. Oden and published by InterVarsity Press—a 28-volume set that places side by side with the text of each Bible book the key exegetical writings of the early church.

In what might be seen as a book-length preface to that series, Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers, Christopher Hall of Eastern University guides readers into the "far country" of those early interpreters. Who better, we thought, to provide orientation for CH readers?

Why should Christians today care what the church fathers—Athanasius, Irenaeus, Augustine, and others—had to say about the Bible? Shouldn't we just interpret the Bible for our own times?

The phrase Tom Oden taught me is "The Holy Spirit has a history." The church does not thrive in the first century, fail in the second, then revive in the sixteenth. The Spirit never deserts the church as it reads the Bible.

He is present in every century, guiding bishops and pastors of the church, particularly as they encountered readings of the Scripture that at first glance might have seemed plausible, but in light of the larger tradition—the Rule of Faith, the liturgical tradition, and so on—didn't make sense. It is the Fathers who provided the framework to protect that apostolic tradition down through the years.

So, since God has always been present with his church, our education as Christians will be stunted if we don't expose ourselves to how he guided the church in its foundational years.

Tom and I sometimes think of church history as a triangle sitting on an edge, where you have the apostolic period, then the time of the early fathers—then building on that, the medieval, Reformation, Enlightenment, and finally the modern. The weight we want to give to each period decreases as we move up the triangle.

Part of Tom Oden's project is to push people into the early patristic period; it's the most formative time for exegesis (biblical interpretation), theology, and many other facets of the church. Today it is as if the triangle has been inverted. The tendency has been to spend all one's time on modern sources and commentators.

What do we miss when we do that?

The Fathers worked only a few generations after the apostles. They read their Bibles in light of the Rule of Faith, an outline statement of Christian belief that circulated in the second century, stating the essential contents of the faith. This Rule, thought to have originated in the time of the apostles, was established to guide exegesis and ward off heretical readings.

They also knew how the Bible had been used in worship since the apostles, and they grew up reading, chanting, hearing these texts themselves.

Their minds were like Origen's: he had absorbed every word from Genesis through Revelation. The Scripture was like his own mental Rolodex, wrapped around certain key themes: especially Christ's incarnation. So when he read, for example, an obscure text

in Numbers, the Rolodex started spinning, because he was expecting to find Christ there.

The Fathers are important because they're much nearer than we are to the apostolic world, in which Scripture had shaped the church.

Modern scholars tend to analyze the text in detail, exhaustively studying its language and context.

But the Fathers were immersed in the ecclesial practice of the text—they insisted that you can't understand what the text is about if you are divorced from the life of the church.

What are the competing schools of Bible interpretation in the first centuries of the church? And are some of these more useful than others as models for us today?

The "schools"—Alexandrian, Antiochian, and so forth—are not so much wholly separate camps as interpretive communities that emphasize certain things more thoroughly than others.

The Alexandrian school emphasized the role of allegory. The Antiochians, though they did emphasize the historical referent of the literal reading and occasionally got angry with the Alexandrians, also shared the Alexandrians' assumption that biblical meanings are multi-layered.

The Antiochians certainly are helpful, reminding us to credit the literal sense. But even at Antioch they practiced both literal and contemplative ways of reading the text. They expected to find Christ there just as the Alexandrians did! They had their own understanding of *theoria*—a contemplative reading of the text grounded in its historia.

What is *theoria*?

It's a spiritual meaning, inherent in the literal framework of the text, which takes the reader to higher plane of contemplation. Eastern Orthodox folks are very familiar with this way of reading the Bible.

In Antioch, the higher *theoria* of the text remains subject to the text's history in a way that Alexandrians did not feel constrained by. For example, as an Alexandrian reads a text about the construction of the temple, he asks, ***What spiritual principle might this symbolize?*** and might not be deeply concerned about the history of the temple itself. The Antiochian takes seriously the history, language, and culture of the text—but then would expect that as he studies along these lines the Spirit of God would lead him to a higher contemplation of deeper spiritual realities.

I can't think of a single Father who would say the Bible is not a multi-leveled or -tiered text. Augustine and Origen and the others would all say that certain texts just don't make sense literally. There are some dangers in this assumption, of course, but also some rewards—and most evangelicals are not used to thinking this way.

Say you hear a sermon on something out of Judges—say Ehud kills a wicked king in Israel. An evangelical would study that text, getting all the historical background, what kings were like, what weapons were like, what the words meant—and the first 10-15 minutes of the sermon would deal with that context. But sooner or later even evangelicals need to ask: What does this text mean for me as a Christian?

That's what an Antiochian exegete would mean by the spiritual side of the text: putting our gospel glasses on—where is Jesus in this text? How does Christ speak to us here? What can we learn about Christ, the church, this present evil age from that historical narrative? This is what evangelicals do, too, in sermon application.

Summarize the qualities that marked the Bible study of these Fathers. How did they read Scripture?

- Through the tradition or the Rule of Faith.
- In response to different heretical positions that were threatening the church.
- Holistically—seeing the narrative of the Bible as one continuous story from Genesis to Revelation. So words like Jesus, Israel, and church are part of that larger story.
- Christologically. Irenaeus said: "If anyone reads the Scripture carefully, they will find some word, some hidden treasure in the field, which is Christ."

- Communally, within Christ's body, the church. So Irenaeus in response to Gnostics rejects their claim to knowledge revealed by secret interpretation—this is the church's book. The church knows the plot in a way the Gnostics don't.
- In the context of prayer, worship, and spiritual formation. Most interpreters were pastors and bishops—few were simply academics. The Fathers participated in an active, living rhythm between the life of the church and Scripture, each informing and cultivating the other.

Okay, what would this look like for us, if we wanted to apply this to our own study of Scripture?

Well, if we want to be effective Bible readers, we will immerse ourselves in the life of the church—we will be in church Sunday and in contact with our church community outside of Sundays as well.

We will immerse ourselves, too, in the history of the church, because the Holy Spirit has a history. We will be willing to develop listening skills—to push on through the dissonance that we all experience when we first step outside our linguistic, cultural, and historical boundaries.

The Fathers would also tell us that we must know the *whole* story from beginning to end. Maybe allowing the end of the story to penetrate earlier aspects of the story.

We will be developing specific virtues that will enable us to interpret Scripture well—not just a finely tuned mind but also a finely tuned heart. For example, the Fathers set great store in maintaining an attitude of humility as one read the text.

Finally, we will surround our reading with prayer. Prayer was the *sine qua non* of the Fathers in understanding Scripture.

You cannot know what the Bible is saying, they tell us, unless you are conversing with its Author.

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Why the Reformers Read the Fathers

The Reformers taught "Sola Scriptura," which meant every person became their own Bible interpreter, right?

Wrong. We asked noted Reformation scholar David Steinmetz of Duke Divinity School about this. In this excerpt from our interview, he reminds us that the Reformers strove to ensure their own interpretations of Scripture matched those of the Fathers.

"The Reformation is an argument not just about the Bible but about the early Christian fathers, whom the Protestants wanted to claim. This is one of those things that is so obvious nobody has paid much attention to it—then you look and you see it everywhere.

"The Reformers use the Fathers all over the place. We know Calvin read Augustine, and we discovered recently that Luther read Jerome—he had copies annotated in his own hand. The index of Calvin's *Institutes* is filled with an enormous number of quotations from the Fathers. And in the first preface to that work, addressed to Francis I, Calvin did his best to show his teachings were in complete harmony with the Fathers.

"The Protestants did this because they were keen to have ancestors. They knew that innovation was another word for heresy. 'Ours is the ancient tradition,' they said. 'The innovations were introduced in the Middle Ages!' They issued anthologies of the Fathers to show the Fathers had taught what the Reformers were teaching.

"But they also turned to the Fathers because they found them important sources of insight into the text of Scripture. Calvin and Melancthon both believed it was a very strong argument against a given theological position if you couldn't find authorization for it in the Fathers.

"All the Reformers loved Augustine (Luther, remember, was an Augustinian friar). Calvin, though he loved Augustine for doctrine, preferred Chrysostom's approach to biblical interpretation.

"Chrysostom is a verse-by-verse commentator in his sermons. Calvin doesn't mimic Chrysostom, but he appreciates his model.

Augustine flies a little too high above the text for Calvin—he is too quick to go to figures of speech, allegory, and so forth. Chrysostom flies at a lower level.

"Finally, the Reformation was not an argument about everything, but about just some things. It was not, for example, about the Trinity or the two natures of Christ. The Protestants had their own slant on these doctrines, but they agreed basically with Roman Catholics. Both confessed the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. And if we ask where these accepted doctrines came from—they came from the Fathers' reflections on the Bible!"

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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The First Battle For the Bible

A century after Christ's death, a literalist and a spiritualizer forced the church to choose how it would read the Scriptures it inherited from the Jews

Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J.

By the year 150, the Christian church exhibited many features that would mark it for centuries: Christians baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; they celebrated the Lord's Supper weekly; they were governed by a bishop, presbyters, and deacons. But they still lacked one thing that would become central to Christian identity: a New Testament. Their only Holy Scripture was that collection of sacred writings later called the Old Testament, which they generally read in the "Septuagint" version—a Greek translation pre-dating Jesus by over a century.

Of course, the documents now found in our New Testament had already been written: Paul's letters between 50 and 65, the four Gospels and Acts by 90 or 100, and the other books by that time or a little later. Paul's letters had gradually been collected and circulated; by 96, for example, the church at Rome had a copy of 1 Corinthians.

For the earliest Christians, who were Jews, the Sacred Scriptures were the fixed authority, and they were used to demonstrate that Jesus was Messiah and Lord. About a century later, the situation changed. Converts to Christianity, who now came from among the pagans, readily accepted Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, but they often found the Scriptures a stumbling block.

These strange writings portrayed God in highly anthropomorphic terms: with hands, feet, arms, and eyes—and passionate emotions. God could be talked out of a decision he had made by Abraham or Moses. The Hebrew preference for the concrete over the abstract led to unsettling expressions like "circumcise your hearts."

These fell with a clang on the ears and minds of educated Greeks who, following their philosophers, held a highly abstract idea of God. God was the supreme One, Being itself, far above the world of human beings and their troubles, "Thought Thinking Itself," as Aristotle wrote. In comparison, the God of the Jewish Scriptures was an embarrassment, even a scandal.

Unless, of course, one knew how to interpret those Scriptures correctly.

Around the year 140, two teachers put forth their own unique solutions to this problem of interpretation. Ultimately, the church rejected both—and in doing so, it clarified its own orthodox position.

Mr. Literal

The first of these teachers, Marcion of Sinope, came from a city on the Black Sea and made a fortune as a ship owner. Around 140 he went to Rome and joined the church there, to which he made a large donation. Four years later, he was excommunicated, and his money was returned to him. Thereupon he founded his own church.

Marcion read the Old Testament intently. He interpreted it literally, and only literally, and concluded that the god of the Old Testament was an inferior god, the creator and judge, distinct from the God of love

who was the Father of Jesus Christ. This creator god was ignorant (he had to ask Adam where he was); he contradicted himself (first forbidding Moses to make graven images, then ordering him to make the image of a serpent); and he commanded dreadful slaughters, even of women and children. This reading led Marcion to a radical decision: these Jewish Scriptures must be thrown out of the church.

But Marcion did not leave the church without a Bible; he created the first known New Testament "canon," or list of authoritative books. Marcion's hero was Paul, who had rejected the power of the Law to save. Paul had also written of "my gospel" (Rom. 2:16), which must be the Gospel according to Luke, since Luke was Paul's companion. But both Paul's letters and Luke's Gospel contained quotations from the Old Testament that, Marcion believed, had been inserted into the authentic documents by Judaizing Christians. So he purged these books of Jewish influence.

Mr. Spiritual

The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* was Marcion's diametric opposite. Probably written in Alexandria, Egypt, ca. 135, this pamphlet is also deeply concerned with the interpretation of the Old Testament in the church. But if Marcion took the Old Testament only literally and threw it out of the church, Barnabas took it exclusively as figurative.

In Marcion's mind, the Jews interpreted the Scriptures correctly and worshiped the inferior god of justice. In Barnabas's mind, the Jews failed to understand their own Scriptures, and they interpreted them incorrectly—that is, literally.

Barnabas worked out an extensive explanation. Moses, he wrote, received the covenant on Sinai. But, when the Jews worshiped the golden calf, the covenant was broken and never restored. The Jews then listened to a wicked angel, who told them to interpret their Scriptures literally. In fact, though, the whole Old Testament is an enormous Christian allegory.

Barnabas gives several examples. The prohibition against eating pork really means avoiding men who pray only when they are needy, for swine bellow only when they are hungry. The prohibition against eating rabbits, hyenas, and weasels really warns against deviant sexual sins (from the nature of these animals). The law of kosher, eating only animals with cloven hooves that chew the cud, means associating only with people who meditate on the Lord and have one foot on earth, one in heaven.

In his *pièce de résistance*, Barnabas writes that when Scripture attests that Abraham circumcised 318 men, it really teaches the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, for the number 318 in Greek (which used letters for numbers) is the first two letters of Jesus' name (*iota* and *eta*, IH = 18) and tau (T = 300), which represents the cross.

The church's verdict

In rejecting Marcion and not following Barnabas, the church began to define its own position. Against Marcion, the church asserted that the God of the Old Testament and the Father of Jesus Christ are one God. The Old Testament was and remains the Word of God, to be interpreted in light of Christ. Against Barnabas, the Old Testament had a true literal sense. God did make a covenant with Abraham and gave the Law to Moses.

A few decades after Marcion, a Gnostic teacher named Ptolemy wrote a letter to a woman, Flora, who had asked him how to understand the Law of Moses. Ptolemy undertook what modern scholars call a "source-critical" approach—using the supposed literary sources of Bible books to throw light on their meaning. The Old Testament represents not one lawgiver, but three: God himself, Moses, and the Elders. Ptolemy could quote the Gospel according to Matthew to prove his point: God made marriage indissoluble (Matt. 19:6), Moses granted divorce as an exception (Matt. 19:8), and the Elders invented *corban* (Matt.

15:2).

Thus there are three levels in the Old Testament: God's law, which Christ fulfills (such as the Ten Commandments); the law of Moses, which Christ abolished (such as "an eye for an eye"); and symbolic legislation (like unleavened bread, circumcision, and animal sacrifice), which provided images of higher realities; with Christ, the practices were abolished but the higher truth remained.

Thus Ptolemy accepted some Old Testament texts literally, understood others figuratively, and rejected still others as invalid. Modern Christians should not rush to reject Ptolemy, for he saw a real problem. One might consider two verses from the King James Bible: Exodus 20:14, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," and Exodus 22:18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Both are Holy Scripture, God's Word. Must both be interpreted today in the same way?

What did the Christian church do about the right interpretation of the Old Testament? That question could not be answered definitively until there was a New Testament, for the authoritative message of Christ and about Christ would also provide the key to interpreting the Old Testament.

The New Testament canon took shape gradually. By 150 or so, the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) were accepted and circulated together. There was more resistance, in some quarters, to the Gospel according to John, because the Gnostics made use of it (the oldest commentary on that Gospel is by a Gnostic). By the end of the second century, however, it was generally accepted. Sixteen other books were also accepted: thirteen Pauline letters, but not Hebrews; Acts, as the continuation of Luke; and the first epistles of Peter and John. Thus, by the year 200, a canon of twenty books was almost universally acknowledged. This New Testament made a Christian interpretation of the Old Testament possible, but it did not of itself provide one.

Solving the Two-Testament Puzzle

In essence, there are two ways to relate the Old Testament to the New. One is history, envisioning a process of divinely guided progress and progressive revelation that comes to its fulfillment in Christ. Irenaeus of Lyons (died ca. 200) and later, in their own way, the Antiochene exegetes followed this path. The other way is that of promise and fulfillment, shadow and reality, type and antitype. This was the way followed by Origen (died 254) and by the Alexandrian school of interpretation.

Irenaeus, a Greek by birth, was the bishop of Lyons in Gaul (now France) at the end of the second century. His great work was ***Against the Heresies***, by which he meant various forms of Gnosticism. The Gnostics denied the historicity of the gospel: neither the historical Jesus (whose flesh, they said, was not real anyway) nor the events of his life meant anything for salvation; they were all signs of an eternal, invisible reality. Matter and the world were the product of an inferior god, and the human call was to escape from the body, matter, and time and to return to the higher world from which we fell.

In response, Irenaeus proposed a sweeping historical vision, a great ellipse with Adam and Christ as its two foci. Matter was created by the one God who is also the Father of Jesus Christ; salvation took place in time and history; and Old and New Testaments form a single vision within this historical sweep.

Moreover, the interpretation of all of Scripture had to be guided by the Rule of Faith, a loosely formulated confession of faith in the one God whose name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; in the saving cross of Jesus Christ; and in the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. Irenaeus thereby established the principles for the "right interpretation" of the Scriptures, guided by the Rule of Faith, and insisting the whole Bible portrays one continuous history, from creation to redemption and consummation.

Origen's pastoral approach

Origen did something wholly new and ultimately necessary: he worked his way through almost the whole of the Old Testament (and the New, too), verse by verse. The second-century crisis of interpretation was resolved in the third century by actually interpreting the Scriptures. To dismiss Origen's interpretation as "allegory" is to do him injustice. Real allegories are relatively rare in Origen.

It is better to say that he did almost anything to find something in a word or a phrase in the Old Testament that would speak to Christians of his day. Sometimes he was reminded: water reminded him of baptism, wood of the cross, bread of the Eucharist. Sometimes he saw types: Joseph a type of Christ, the bride of the Song a type of the church. Sometimes he saw moral lessons: the Christians of the New Covenant must go beyond observing the Law to selfless charity.

The way that Origen trod was unexplored before him, and his influence on the tradition of exegesis has yet to be fully grasped. As one admirer wrote, Origen was a vessel of precious nard; the vessel was shattered, and the perfume has filled the whole world.

Thus the crisis of interpretation was resolved by seeing Christ as the key to understanding the Scriptures. The door has been unlocked, but in a modern interpretive environment shaped by critical methods that owe little to faith, we still have not fully entered into the world it leads to.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 80: The First Bible Teachers

Origen: Friend or Foe?

By turns bizarre and insightful, Origen's allegorical forays remain fascinating reading today.

John R. Franke

Few figures in church history have stimulated the level of debate and controversy that surrounds Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185 - ca. 254). To some, he was a brilliant intellectual as well as a passionately committed disciple of Christ, the most influential and seminal thinker in the early church. Others regard him as a dangerous heretic whose interest in philosophical speculation unleashed a string of teachings that stand in stark opposition to orthodox Christian faith (p. 2). Still others affirm the truth of both positions.

As a Christian, Origen believed that the Bible was the Word of God, and as such it occupied a central place in his life and thought, the touchstone for all his beliefs. Indeed, one of the major concerns of Origen's work was to assist Christians facing the intellectual challenges of the third century by providing scriptural answers to the questions posed by Hellenistic philosophy and culture.

In spite of Origen's intentions and clear commitment to biblical authority, however, many believe that his **use** of Scripture compromised that authority, providing fertile conditions for the germination and growth of heresy.

Cultured scholar, would-be martyr

Young Origen grew up as both a learned Greek and a devoted Christian. Born in either 185 or 186 in Alexandria, Origen was raised in a Christian home. His father was most likely a prosperous and influential man, who provided his son with an education that was both Hellenistic and Christian. This dual education undoubtedly caused some internal tension in Origen as he sought to reconcile his commitment to Christian faith and the Bible with the classic teachings of ancient Greece.

From the perspective of Hellenism, Christianity was little more than another barbarous superstition, and the Bible simply an inferior collection of texts unworthy (by Greek aesthetic standards) of serious consideration.

Origen was not the first to grapple with this tension, and he was able to learn from previous Jewish and Christian engagements with Hellenism. Indeed, as a student at the catechetical school in Alexandria, Origen likely studied under Clement of Alexandria, who was well known for his attempts to relate Christian teaching to Greek philosophical thought.

When Origen was about seventeen, his father was arrested during an outbreak of persecution and executed for his profession of Christian faith. According to tradition, Origen intended to turn himself in to the authorities and join his father in martyrdom but was prevented from doing so by his mother, who hid his clothes and thus prevented him from leaving the house.

Later, he is said to have written to his father in prison exhorting him not to turn from the martyr's calling for the sake of his family. Many Christians fled Alexandria to escape the fate of Origen's father, including Clement, who had been the head of the catechetical school.

The combination of Origen's clear Christian commitment in the face of persecution and his growing reputation as an outstanding thinker led Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, to entrust him with the leadership of the school at the age of eighteen.

Teen dean

During his tenure, the pursuit and execution of Christians in Alexandria continued, and Origen was under threat on numerous occasions, living the life of a wanted man and enduring the martyrdom of several of his students. In addition to these pressures, Origen lived an austere life characterized by extreme self-discipline and ascetic practices, including his own self-castration in accordance with a literal reading of Matthew 19:12.

In the midst of all this, Origen was immensely productive, teaching, preaching, traveling, and writing scholarly works concerning theology, philosophy, apologetics, and the Bible.

He was significantly aided in his literary output by Ambrose, a wealthy convert impressed by Origen's intellectual abilities. Ambrose provided Origen with a trained staff of stenographers, copyists, and calligraphers, as well as funds for the publication of his works. The stenographers wrote down Origen's words in shorthand as he lectured and turned their notes over to the copyists, who produced a manuscript for him to revise. The calligraphers then reproduced as many copies as were needed in a clear and elegant hand.

Ambrose constantly exerted pressure on Origen to make full use of the resources he had provided, leading Origen to refer to his patron as "God's taskmaster" in his life. This patronage and "encouragement" enabled Origen to compose rapidly, and he authored hundreds of manuscripts, becoming one of the most prolific writers of the ancient world. Unfortunately, the majority of these works have not survived.

Among his many extant works, two are of particular importance. ***On First Principles*** is a systematic account of Origen's theological and philosophical positions concerning God, creation, Jesus Christ, the Logos of God, and salvation. One of the great classics of Christian thought, it constitutes both a philosophical discussion on the relation of God to the world and an attempt to develop a coherent set of theological teachings. It may be the first formal attempt at systematic theology in the history of the church.

The second work, ***Against Celsus***, is a detailed defense of Christian faith against the critique of the Roman philosopher Celsus, in which Origen attempts to demonstrate the superiority of the teachings of the Bible versus Greek philosophy. This thorough point-by-point response to Celsus made an important contribution to the growing cogency and respectability of Christian faith in the ancient world. These works effectively refuted the contention that Christianity was simply another superstitious folk religion and helped to establish the intellectual credentials of the faith.

Spoiling the Egyptians

While Origen appreciated a great deal of Plato and the Greek philosophical tradition, he argued that at its best it merely anticipated the fullness of truth that was to be found in divine revelation.

Further, he maintained that for all the benefits of philosophy, it could not finally lead to a true and proper knowledge of God, since it was contaminated with too much false and erroneous teaching. In spite of his reservations concerning philosophy, Origen believed that Christian faith itself was a kind of divine philosophy that, while surpassing and superceding all other philosophies, could make use of them by leading persons to a true knowledge of God and to salvation.

Thus, Christians may profitably study Greek philosophy or other pagan learning, "borrowing" truth from these sources in order to explain the Christian faith. In the same way that the Israelites took the property of the Egyptians with them in the exodus, said Origen, so the people of God are permitted to make use of the truths of pagan culture and philosophy, the "spoils of the Egyptians," in the work of theology and biblical interpretation.

Getting to the next level

This willingness to make use of Greek thought is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Origen's spiritual or allegorical approach to interpreting Scripture. He maintained that the Bible contained three levels of meaning, corresponding to the three aspects of a human being—body, soul, and spirit—derived from Platonic philosophy and the writings of Paul.

The bodily level of Scripture is the bare letter of the text, or its literal meaning, which is particularly useful in meeting the needs of the more simple minded.

The psychic level can be understood as the moral meaning of the text, providing guidance concerning right and proper conduct, although some ambiguity exists as to the exact ways in which Origen made use of this sense. In many cases he simply maintains that biblical narratives contain ethical and moral principles that may be found within or beneath the surface of the text's literal meaning.

The third and most important level of meaning is the spiritual or allegorical, which points to Christ and the relationship of the Christian with God. Origen believed that this spiritual/mystical meaning, while often hidden, is always present in the text. The task of the Christian interpreter is to uncover it. The allegorical method of interpretation sought to yield this hidden, symbolic meaning, and Origen became the leading figure in its establishment as the dominant method of biblical interpretation until the sixteenth century.

To allegorize or not?

This approach to interpretation often strikes contemporary readers as strange, unwarranted, and potentially dangerous. Why did Origen adopt it?

First, allegory is a legacy of Greek thought and would have been a one of the staples of Origen's Hellenistic education. It was initially used to defend belief in the inspired character of Homer's writings, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in the face of the charge that they portrayed morally suspect behavior. Homer's supporters maintained that the poems were symbolic and when read in their true, allegorical sense contained no moral or religious difficulties.

Over time, allegorical interpretive methods became increasingly sophisticated. Platonists contended that myths and symbols were necessary components in the communication of truths that were otherwise inaccessible. This appreciation for the value of myths and symbols became an essential part of Origen's outlook.

Second, Origen was exposed to a tradition of spiritual exegesis that began with the Jewish community in Alexandria, who used the method to demonstrate that their Scriptures were compatible with Greek philosophy. The leading Jewish proponent of this movement was Philo, and although his work eventually fell out of favor with the Jews, it was accepted enthusiastically by Christians and was probably communicated to Origen through Clement.

Hence, Origen inherited a strong belief in allegory as a tool to communicate the deepest and most profound philosophical and theological truths as well as the assumption that the Bible, the inspired Word

of God, must be subject to such allegorical interpretation in order to grasp its spiritual significance.

Third, Origen found ample evidence in Scripture itself for the practice of spiritual exegesis, beginning with the Christian conviction that the entire Old Testament is a prophecy concerning Christ, who is the interpretive key to understanding the Hebrew Bible. In 2 Corinthians 3 he read that the Jewish people who reject Christ have a veil before their faces and over their hearts. This hides the true meaning of Scripture from their perception and limits them to the letter of the text, which kills. Only through Christ can the veil be removed and the spiritual meaning of the text, which gives life, be revealed. Only when Jesus explains the Scriptures to his disciples on the road to Emmaus and shows that they speak of him can their true meaning be revealed. For Origen, allegorical exegesis clearly provided the true meaning of the Old Testament.

The apostles did it too

Among the most significant New Testament passages that Origen cited as justifying spiritual exegesis is 1 Corinthians 10. Here, the pillar of cloud, the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna, the water from the rock, and death in the wilderness represent baptism, the eucharist, and punishment for sin. Verse 11 sums up these events, explaining that each of these things happened to the Hebrews as a *typikos*, a figure or example, written down for those who live at the end of the age. For Origen, this implied that the Old Testament was written for Christians, who needed to seek the spiritual interpretation since many of the ceremonies and legal precepts (the literal teachings of many passages) are no longer binding.

In Galatians 4, another important passage, Sarah and Hagar symbolize the two covenants. The Christians are prefigured by Isaac, the son of Sarah the free wife, and the Jews by Ishmael, the son of Hagar the slave. This passage is explicit in its use of allegory.

Other examples mentioned by Origen include Matthew 12:39-40, in which the three days Jonah spent in the great fish symbolize the three days Jesus will pass in the heart of the earth; Matthew 26:61 and John 2:19-21, in which the Temple symbolizes the body of Christ; Galatians 3, in which the posterity of Abraham is portrayed in Christ, who will fulfill the promises made to the patriarchs; and Hebrews 8, in which the ceremonies of the old covenant are but shadows of heavenly realities.

For Origen it was clear that the New Testament authorized and validated the spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament and, by extension, all of Scripture.

He could do no other

To Origen, the cultural assumptions of the Hellenistic world, the Christian belief in the inspired nature of the Bible, the centrality of Christ, and the teaching of the New Testament itself combined to demand the practice of spiritual interpretation. Three other apologetic or pragmatic impulses sealed his commitment to allegory.

1. In Hellenistic Alexandria, the assertion that the Bible was divinely inspired would have required its allegorical interpretation. To assert that it could not or should not be interpreted in such a fashion would be tantamount to denying its inspired character. Affirming the Bible as the Word of God entailed the assumption that its form and teaching was consistent with the highest cultural standards.

2. The Jewish critics of Christianity stressed Christ's failure to fulfill many of the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Origen believed that only a spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies, able to perceive their deeper sense and meaning, would overcome these objections.

3. The Gnostic sects rejected the Old Testament on the grounds that it taught a different God than the one revealed in Christ. They believed that in contrast to the New Testament God of love, the deity of the

Old Testament was vengeful, jealous, capricious, and often directly responsible for sin and evil. Origen considered this conclusion unavoidable if the biblical texts were accepted as literal; hence, he asserted that they must be understood allegorically. In fact, he argued that they are in many cases intentionally obscure and incoherent in order to coax and compel the reader to seek their true, spiritual meaning.

Finally, in response to those who might argue that the multiplicity of meanings generated by this approach would result in interpretive chaos, Origen insisted that the practice of Christian spiritual exegesis must always be conducted within the framework of the rule of faith established by the consensus of the church.

Loyal son or heretic?

Origen's significance as a biblical commentator, coupled with his intellect and skill as a teacher, should have ensured him an esteemed and permanent place in the Alexandrian church. In spite of his accomplishment and popularity, however, he fell into conflict with Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria, over the issue of Origen's desire to be ordained to the priesthood.

Demetrius refused to allow this, saying that Origen was disqualified by his self-castration, although some have speculated that the denial had more to do with jealousy and concern over the power that Origen might wield in the church if he were to be ordained. Origen asked the bishop of Caesarea if he would be willing to grant ordination, and the affirmative answer prompted him to move to Caesarea sometime between 231 and 233. Here he spent the remaining years of his life teaching and writing, never returning to Alexandria.

Origen was arrested during the Decian persecution and subsequently imprisoned, tortured, and threatened with execution in an attempt to force him to recant. In spite of his suffering, he stood fast and was eventually released from prison, denied the martyr's crown he had sought to share with his father so many years earlier. He was a broken man, however, and lived out his last few years in relative obscurity, probably dying sometime around 254.

Had Origen been executed or had he died in prison, subsequent generations would have been slower to condemn him. Martyrdom covered a multitude of sins, theological and otherwise. His steadfastness in the face of torture and his death as a confessor of the faith were not enough to spare him the scorn of the church in its collective memory. Eventually, Origen was formally condemned as a heretic, and he has been regarded as heretical throughout much of the history of the church, particularly in the West.

Recently, this negative assessment has been reconsidered and altered considerably in some quarters. The question remains, however: How should those who are committed to the authority of Scripture and orthodox expressions of Christian faith assess Origen?

He set the pace

In Origen's context, Christian theological beliefs were not well developed or respected. Origen's work was a decisive factor in changing this state of affairs, both by establishing the intellectual credibility of the faith in the Hellenistic setting and by exploring the internal coherence of Christian faith. That he must sometimes be judged as mistaken in these explorations should hardly be surprising or cause for great concern.

Origen was one of the first Christian thinkers to give sustained attention to many of the issues he addresses. He did teach some unorthodox positions by later standards. But he was a seminal thinker in a process of trial, error, revision, and refinement from which an orthodox consensus emerged. Origen was always faithful to his own time's standards of orthodoxy. Certainly, he failed to see the implications of his views for future generations. But it is uncharitable to charge him with guilt for that failure.

Origen does provide us with an object lesson in the pitfalls of accommodation—the practice of too closely associating the Bible and Christian faith with the values and presuppositions of a particular social, cultural, or philosophical outlook. Having said that, it is important to remember that all human forms of thought are situated and embedded in social contexts. Origen is perhaps most guilty of the assumption that the Bible, as the Word of God, must be interpreted in conformity with the highest standards and aspirations of his Hellenistic setting.

Before we judge too quickly, however, we might want to ask a similar question of ourselves. Have we too readily conformed our own conceptions of the Bible and its interpretation to the assumptions and aspirations of our culture? And further, given our participation in it, on what basis are we able to make such an assessment? Perhaps in grappling with this perennial question, the life and work of Origen becomes most meaningful to us today.

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Allegory at Work

By turns bizarre and insightful, Origen's allegorical forays remain fascinating reading today.

Examples of Origen's allegorical Scripture interpretation abound in his writings, particularly in his commentaries and homilies. For instance, in his 27th homily on the book of Numbers, he describes growth in the spiritual life based on the 42 stopping places of Israel in the wilderness mentioned in Numbers 33.

Origen begins by asking why the Lord wanted Moses to write this passage down: "Was it so that this passage in Scripture about the stages the children of Israel made might benefit us in some way or that it should bring no benefit? Who would dare to say that what is written 'by the Word of God' is of no use and makes no contribution to salvation but is merely a narrative of what happened and was over and done a long time ago, but pertains in no way to us when it is told?"

Exodus redux

For Origen, because the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it is never merely concerned with mundane matters of history and factual occurrences. Rather, it expounds the mysteries of God in Christ and gives direction to the spiritual life.

Hence, the Christian interpreter must probe the text in various ways in order to uncover its true and deepest significance. According to Origen the stopping places of the wandering Israelites are recorded in Numbers so that we come to understand the long spiritual journey that we face as Christians. And thus we must not "allow the time of our life to be ruined by sloth and neglect."

Further, each stopping place has some particular spiritual significance until the sojourn ends on the banks of the Jordan, making us aware that the whole journey takes place and "the whole course is run for the purpose of arriving at the river of God, so that we may make neighbors of the flowing Wisdom and may be watered by the waves of divine knowledge, and so that purified by them all we may be made worthy to enter the promised land."

Self-serving senses

Another example is found in Origen's eleventh homily on Joshua, which deals with the five kings who attack Gibeon in chapter ten and end up hiding in the cave at Makkedah after the Lord's lengthening of the day and the destruction of their armies by Israel.

"Now these five kings indicate the five corporeal senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell; for it must be through one of these that each person falls away into sin. These five senses are compared to those five kings who fight the Gibeonites, that is, carnal persons."

As to their choice of refuge: "That they are said to have fled into caves can be indicated, perhaps, because a cave is a place buried in the depths of the earth. Therefore, those senses that we mentioned above are said to have fled into caves when, after being placed in the body, they immerse themselves in earthly impulses and do nothing for the work of God but all for the service of the body."

—*John R. Franke*

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Too Racy for Bible Study

Origen could not believe the Song of Songs was a hymn to erotic love. So what did it mean?

Warren Smith

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out. ... How beautiful are you, my love, how very beautiful. ... Your hair is like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of Gilead ... your lips are like a crimson thread and your mouth is lovely. ... Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle."

The words are not from a cheesy romance novel but from the Old Testament, specifically Song of Songs (1:1-2; 4:1, 3, 5). If these words are not familiar, it is because Song of Songs is one of the books contemporary Christians rarely read or study. Few pastors preach from the Song. The erotic language is off-putting and the metaphors ("Your hair is like a flock of goats") strange. What moral insight can lie within a text that is so explicitly sexual? How can a book that celebrates sex but never explicitly mentions God edify the Christian?

Christ's love song

The early Christians found the Song just as odd and its sexual language just as problematic as we do. But they took its very strangeness as an invitation to seek out a deep and hidden spiritual message. They could find meaning within its shocking imagery because they made use of allegory.

Not surprisingly, the man with whom the allegorical method is most famously associated, Origen of Alexandria, led the search for the Song's hidden meaning. Since every part of Scripture is inspired, reasoned Origen, every detail must have meaning. Where details, passages, or even (as in this case) entire books seem obscure or disturbing, one must read allegorically.

In Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs, he begins by explaining the literal sense of the Song. It is a "marriage-song" that Solomon composed as a drama. The bride and bridegroom sing to each other words of love, and at times they sing to their friends who accompany them to the wedding.

But Solomon uses the erotic language of romantic love between man and woman to describe something deeper. The book is really expressing what it means for the Christian to love God with her whole heart and soul and mind and strength. The bride is the church or the soul of an individual "burning with heavenly love" for the Word of God, symbolized by the bridegroom.

A more mature understanding

The problem of the Song's sensual language, Origen says, lies not with the Song, but with the reader. He believed that only those Christians who have purified themselves by turning from the pleasures of the flesh and the world can recognize the spiritual sense of Scripture. Solomon's Song, with its carnal but symbolic language, is not milk providing nourishment for children in the faith, rather it is "strong meat for the perfect."

The immature cannot understand the Song because they are still too fleshly, "not knowing how to hear love's language in purity and with chaste ears." They are concerned with the things of the material world,

which they know through their senses, rather than the invisible realm of ideas, which only the intellect trained in philosophy can apprehend. Therefore, they are never able to get beyond the sensual language in its literal meaning to behold the hidden spiritual sense.

Origen therefore counsels that the childlike Christian "who is not yet rid of the vexation of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature" should refrain from reading the Song, lest he think that Scripture is "urging him on to fleshly lust." Since, as the Greek maxim says, "like is known by like," Origen concludes that only those whose minds have become spiritual can know the God who is "spirit and truth."

Origen's treatment of the opening lines of the Song shows how he saw the spiritual sense symbolically represented in the literal sense of the drama.

Solomon's Song begins with the bride who, tired of waiting so long for her beloved to come, asks the bridegroom's father, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." The bride's cry is the voice of Israel's faithful, who are not satisfied with intermediaries such as Moses and the other prophets, but desire the Divine Word himself. Moses and the prophets have prepared her. They have trained her to love the Word. But she wants more; she wants to see the Word face to face.

The Father, hearing the prayer and knowing that the bride desires the Word with a suitable passion, sends the Son. The bride is now ready to be united with her beloved because she has attained a perfect love for the Word.

The fragrance of salvation

When the bridegroom comes, the bride says to him, "Your love is better than wine; and the odor of your perfumes better than all spices." In this verse, Origen explains, the bridegroom is a symbol for Christ. The Greek word Christ means "the anointed one"—the one anointed with oil. The bride's description of "the odor of [his] perfumes," Origen claims, alludes to the oil mentioned in Psalm 44:8, "Thou has loved Justice and hated iniquity: therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows."

Origen sees perfume as a symbol of the Word's power to sanctify those who love him. For 2 Corinthians 2:14 says that the Church is "the good odor of Christ in every place." When the bride is united to her beloved, the perfume that covers the bridegroom's body rubs off on the bride. Even as the bride takes on the fragrance of her new husband's perfumes, so too the soul united with Christ is made holy by their intimate communion. The stench of sin is replaced by the sweet smell of virtue and righteousness. The Church that is spotless takes on the aroma of Christ's holiness by being taken to Christ's bosom. When the Church is united with Christ it becomes like him, restored to the image of God.

Solomon's language of desire is shocking, Origen admits, but only if we fail to appreciate its symbolic meaning. Personal virtue and correct interpretation are integrally linked for Origen. The interpreter must possess virtue in order to see beyond the carnal sense of Scripture. But if the Christian has made God, rather than the world, the object of her deepest desire, then she will be able to recognize the truth hidden in the Song's erotic language: only such language can adequately describe the intensity of perfect love for God—and the ecstatic joy the soul finds in loving and being loved by God.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 80: The First Bible Teachers

The First Bible Teachers: Christian History Timeline

Traditions in Bible Reading

The Apologists

100- 165 Justin Martyr, born a pagan at Naples, is the first to use Scripture methodically in his writings.

Late 2nd century Theophilus of Antioch is the first to quote primarily from the New Testament as "divine Word."

The Gnostic Crisis

Ca. 135 The Gnostic *Epistle of Barnabas* offers a completely spiritualized, figurative interpretation of Old Testament passages. Such Gnostic writings—some of which were discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945—pushed the church to refine its own understanding of the Old Testament.

144 Marcion of Sinope is excommunicated from his church and founds his own. He rejected the Old Testament, creating his own collection of New Testament books with Old Testament references cut out. This pushed the church to re-emphasize the Old Testament and to establish its own canon of New Testament writings.

185 In his detailed attack on the Gnostics, *Against Heresies*, **Irenaeus of Lyons** appeals to the apostolic writings to show that the God of Moses is the same as the God and Father of Jesus Christ—thus the Old Testament must be taken as sacred Scripture.

The Alexandrian Tradition

Seeking the *deep meanings*

Ca. 20 B.C. - A.D. 50 Lifetime of **Philo of Alexandria**, the Jewish thinker and exegete who pioneered the allegorical method of interpretation to link the Hebrew Scriptures to Greek philosophy. His goal: an effective apologetic for Judaism in the Hellenistic world, with a success not lost on **Clement** and **Origen of Alexandria**. Those two Christian teachers picked up the method for the church and passed it on to Ambrose and others.

Late 2nd century Clement of Alexandria (ca. 60-215) responds to Gnostic teachings with a thorough, detailed exegesis of all of Scripture, combining allegorical methods and acute theological insights.

225 Origen publishes *On First Principles*, the first systematic treatise that provides a theoretical framework for biblical interpretation. This book promotes the allegorical method exemplified by Philo of Alexandria and Origen's own teacher **Clement**.

Early 3rd century Origen identifies three levels of spiritual meaning in Scripture: moral, mystical (dealing with the mystery of Christ and the church), and anagogical (leading to heavenly, transcendent reality).

245 After 15 years of work, **Origen** completes his *Hexapla*, a six-column parallel edition of the Old Testament. It compares several Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible with the Hebrew original and its Greek

transcription.

4 12-444 While bishop of Alexandria during these years, **Cyril of Alexandria** fills thousands of pages with verse-by-verse exegesis of Isaiah, the Psalms, the Gospels of John and Matthew, and other books. His eloquent, erudite interpretations of the Scriptures' spiritual sense enriched both the Western and the Eastern church for many centuries after his death.

The Latin Tradition

Adopting classical learning

Ca. 193 The lawyer **Tertullian**, raised as a pagan in Carthage, converts and begins to write passionate anti-pagan literature. He expressed his high view of the Bible as divinely inspired in a realistic rather than allegorical interpretive style. His principle was to let Scripture explain itself, by proceeding from clearer to more obscure passages.

Ca. 252 Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200-258) writes *On the Lord's Prayer*, the West's first exegetical essay. It applies each verse of the Gospels to some aspect of the Christian's experience.

Early 360s Hilary of Poitiers, bishop from 350 to 367, writes the vast *Commentary on the Psalms*, written in classical style and applying to the biblical text the thought and style of Latin classical works.

End of 4th century Nesteros, an Egyptian monk, elaborates Origen's three senses of Scripture into four: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical (heavenly). These became foundational categories for Western monastic interpretation.

375-397 In the midst of a very busy life as bishop of Milan, **Ambrose** (ca. 339-397) writes commentaries on parts of Genesis that joins moral instruction from the allegorical method of Philo and Origen with classical ethical sources.

380s Having discovered the only copy of Origen's Hexapla at Caesarea of Palestine, **Jerome** begins work on a Latin text of the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew. The resulting "Vulgate" became the Bible most widely used in the West. It introduced a principle still in use today—to understand the original setting and Semitic thinking behind the Scriptures. From 386 onward, Jerome worked from his monastery in Bethlehem.

ca. 430 By this date, **Augustine of Hippo** (b. 354) completed *On Christian Doctrine*. It explains how to distinguish passages that should be interpreted literally from those demanding an allegorical reading.

Antiochian and Syrian traditions

Interpretation rooted in history

312 Lucian, martyred in this year, founded the exegetical tradition of Antioch. Favoring literal interpretation and fidelity to Hebrew sources, Lucian made a revision of the Septuagint text more in line with the original Hebrew that was widely adopted by Eastern churches.

324 to 327 During these years **Eustathius** was bishop of Antioch. He wrote *On the Witch of Endor* Against Origen (on I Kings 28), criticizing the great Alexandrian exegete for undervaluing the historical nature of Scripture.

390 Diodore of Tarsus dies. The teacher of both **John Chrysostom** and **Theodore of Mopsuestia**, Diodore wrote commentaries on almost all the books of the Bible. He strongly opposed Origen's allegorical method, instead dedicating himself to close analysis of Scripture's words and grammatical structures.

392 Diodore's student **Theodore** (c. 350-428) becomes bishop of Mopsuestia in Asia Minor. In his lifetime, he championed literal exegesis over against Origen's allegorical method. The Councils of Ephesus (431) and Constantinople (553), however, condemned Theodore's writings as heretical, and only recently have they enjoyed something of a renaissance.

397 John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) becomes patriarch of Constantinople. His many sermons (the most from any early father that survive to the modern day) are closely and carefully exegetical, and marked by twin concerns for literal meaning and practical application. His series of sermons from AD. 400 on the book of Acts is the only complete commentary on that book surviving from the patristic era.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 80: The First Bible Teachers

Opponents of Allegory

The scholars at Antioch rejected allegory in favor of history. But their interpretive method led some into heresy.

Steven Gertz

There are people who take great pains to twist the sense of the divine scriptures," wrote the fourth-century biblical scholar, Theodore of Mopsuestia, a prominent voice of the exegetical school centered at Antioch, "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 misuse the apostle's term as a blank authorization to abolish all meanings of divine scripture."

At the beginning of the third century, Origen of Alexandria introduced to the church an exegetical method that searched for the hidden, spiritual meanings of Old Testament passages, treating the Old Testament as a great allegory of Christ. Most biblical interpreters who followed him worked in this tradition.

But not all. A few Christians recognized the danger posed by the allegorical method. Someone must hold the "spiritualizing" interpreter accountable, or Scripture meanings might be warped into forms the biblical authors never intended.

Home of hermeneutics

As Paul once said of Tarsus, Antioch was "no mean city." We know it as the place where Jesus' followers were first called "Christians," but its secular fame was also well-established. Founded three hundred years before Christ, this city on the Orontes River in modern-day Turkey became the Roman empire's third largest city.

Antioch stood at an east-west crossroads and exerted enormous cultural and political influence throughout the empire. "In what land or sea had the fame of this city not entered?" asked Libanius, chief rhetorician of the Hellenistic school in Antioch. "Attractions of all kinds bring people from all sides [of the empire], from Africa, Europe, Asia, from the islands, from the mainland."

Libanius's school of rhetoric dominated the intellectual environment of Antioch. In Greco-Roman culture, young men wanting higher education trained in schools of rhetoric and philosophy. When rhetoricians read classical literature, they looked for moral principles and ethical models civic authorities could follow, while philosophers, particularly the Stoics, searched for symbolic meanings. Libanius swayed Antiochians (Christians included) toward the rhetorical perspective and away from the metaphysical, even mystical bent of men like Origen.

Lucian of Antioch (d. 312) was the first to offer an alternative to Origen's approach. Emphasizing the need for textual accuracy, he set about revising the Septuagint. Jerome, translating the Hebrew Bible into Latin years later, praised Lucian's work.

Eustathius (c. 270-360), bishop of Antioch, directly criticized Origen in his treatise *On the Witch of Endor*. For example, Origen had apparently claimed that in 1 Samuel 28, the witch's calling up of Samuel from Hades foreshadowed Christ's resurrection. Eustathius countered that only God can raise people

from the dead, and that the devil used the witch to deceive Saul into thinking Samuel spoke to him.

Whether Eustathius was correct is not the point; his concern for the integrity of the text led him to directly confront Origen's premise for finding Christ there.

It was Diodore of Tarsus (d. 390), though, who founded the "school" of Antioch that fully challenged Origen's method. "We demand them [the Alexandrian exegetes] to know that we prefer much more the historical comprehension of the text than the allegorical," he wrote.

Diodore believed Origen's method disparaged Scripture, and he encouraged Christians to retain its literal meaning. Doing so did not rule out *theoria*, or higher "contemplation" of the biblical passage. But it must be consistent with the author's intentions and the text that surrounded it.

While Origen felt spiritual truth lay beyond the words, like a code to be cracked, Diodore felt meaning lay within the words, pregnant with spiritual significance but still rooted in history.

The "less inspired" Scripture

Diodore's most famous student, Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428) carried Diodore's ideas even further. He questioned the canonicity of some of the books in the Bible—especially the apocryphal books in the Septuagint—and preferred the more limited "Jewish" canon. He refused to place the "wisdom" literature on the same level of inspiration as the rest of Scripture. The Song of Songs, he said, was simply a conversation between lovers and nothing more. And he aggressively criticized Paul's epistolary writing style, thereby departing from the traditional understanding of biblical inspiration.

Like Diodore, Theodore was determined to set the biblical text in its historical context. In his commentaries on the psalms and minor prophets—the only works still extant—Theodore wrote an introduction in which he discussed the date, authorship, historical occasion, the purpose of the writer, and a summary of the plan and perspective of the book. In this, his work resembles modern scholarship to a remarkable degree.

The literalists' risky divisions

But Theodore had some radical ideas. Fidelity to the text, he argued, demanded that scholars drastically reduce the number of Old Testament passages that Christians had traditionally held to be messianic prophecies of Christ. In virtually every case, the prophecies of the minor prophets and psalmists referred not to Christ, but to the events of the post-exilic period.

In fact, he limited messianic psalms to just four—Psalms 2, 8, 45, and 110. Even Psalm 22, the psalm Jesus quoted on the cross, was not prophetic of Christ. "Those commentators who claim that this psalm is related to the person of Christ ought to know that they can be accused of recklessness because the second half of the opening saying of the psalm does not allow such an interpretation. How could Christ ever speak of his sins?" By so limiting Christ's presence in the Old Testament, Theodore ran the risk of divorcing it entirely from the New—in a sense creating two Bibles.

Theodore also emphasized to perhaps an unfortunate degree the humanity of Christ in his writings. One of his students, Nestorius, held that Christ had "two natures which are adored in the one person of the only-begotten by a perfect and unconfused conjunction." But Nestorius was later condemned by the Council of Ephesus (431) for dividing Christ's person into two, and Emperor Theodosius II branded him as a heretic.

In 553, more than 100 years after Theodore's death, the Council of Constantinople condemned

Theodore's views as heretical and ordered that his commentaries be burned. Only the Nestorian church remembered and preserved his writings. Ironically, orthodox Christians are once again rediscovering the scholar who most effectively challenged the school of Alexandria—and provided another way of understanding the Bible.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 80: 80. The First Bible Teachers

Scripture Saturation

To achieve holiness, believed the early monks, you must soak in the moral sense of the Word.

Patrick Henry Reardon

A little-known monk living in the Egyptian desert at the end of the fourth century provided one of the most durable interpretive keys in the history of Bible study. The monk, named Nesteros, proposed that all of Holy Scripture is to be understood in four ways or "senses."

He explained this paradigm by examining the various meanings of "Jerusalem" in the Bible.

Jerusalem in its literal and historical sense, said Nesteros, is simply a city in the Holy Land. That is the Bible's first sense, its literal and historical meaning.

Besides this, however, Jerusalem is also a symbol (*typos*) of the Church, God's redeemed and sanctified people. That is its second or allegorical sense (Gal. 4:24—*allegoroumena*).

Next, Jerusalem is an image of the redeemed but struggling Christian soul; this is its third or moral sense.

Finally, Jerusalem is that heavenly city on high (Gal. 4:26; Rev. 21:2), the final expectation of our hopes, and this is its fourth or anagogical sense.

Nesteros's "four senses" became the foundation of all monastic reading of the Bible. It shows up absolutely everywhere in medieval theology. In Dante's fourteenth-century masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, we find the same scheme in use.

The Book that reads us

The history of monasticism owes most to one of these four senses: the moral. When church fathers and medieval interpreters spoke of the Bible's "moral sense," they expressed a conviction that God's unchanging word, precisely because it is fulfilled in Christ the Lord, is intended by the Holy Spirit to address the practical moral lives of those who are "in Christ." It is especially the Christian believer, they argued, who can most truly tell his heavenly Father, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105), because the Christian has been given, in the person and work of Christ, the Bible's true interpretive key.

Thus, whether in the pulpit or in other forms of pastoral teaching, teachers of the Bible continued for over a millennium to present the Bible, correctly understood in the light of Christ, as the ready and reliable source of moral guidance for those striving to live godly lives. Indeed, they discovered this interpretive principle explicit in the Bible itself, as when the apostle Paul taught that "*whatever* things were written before were written for *our* learning" (Rom. 15:4).

Certainly, this approach to Scripture was always understood to be valid for all Christians. But not surprisingly, we find a greater concentration of interest on this subject in the writings of monks, nuns, and other ascetics. These were Christians who felt called to a more intense life of prayer and virtuous striving, and their ancient monastic rules show how thoroughly biblical that quest was for them.

The preeminent example is the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia (d. 547), which became the dominant monastic code of the entire western half of Christendom. In Benedict's rule the monk's entire waking day, roughly seventeen hours, was divided among three activities: manual labor, the prayerful reading of Holy Scripture (*lectio divina*), and choral prayer, especially the praying of the Psalms. Even while the monk ate his sparse meals each day, he listened to one of his brothers reading Holy Scripture.

The monks and nuns pursued their goals—purity of heart and the gift of constant prayer—by ingesting massive daily dosages of Scripture. They gave themselves totally to God not only by denying themselves and serving others, but by allowing themselves to become saturated in and absorbed by the power of God's Word. Monks took seriously that principle of Jerome of Bethlehem (347-419), who said, "To be ignorant of the Scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ."

Consequently, those men and women who centered their entire existence on the study of Holy Scripture, prayer, and ascetic effort, were bound to reflect more closely, and in greater detail, on the internal theological relationship between the understanding of Holy Scripture and ascetical striving for purity of heart. From both East and West, the treatment of this theme in monastic literature, though daunting in its sheer mass, remains instructive for Christians today.

The soul's mirror

The Bible itself provided the framework of the discussion. For example, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who lived as a monk after his conversion and prior to his becoming a bishop, was fond of the metaphor in the Epistle of James: "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was" (1:23). On many occasions throughout his voluminous writings, Augustine appealed to this verse in order to explain how the Bible functions as a spiritual mirror to reveal believers' true selves. His interpretation of this verse was taken up hundreds of times in medieval monastic and ascetic literature.

Studied as a "mirror of the soul," the Scriptures became immediately and directly applicable. To look into the Bible was to look at one's own inner biography, as it were. Indeed, the ascetics of old, when they read the Bible, perceived it to be a divine word directed to them in the concrete circumstances of their relationship to the Lord. They would have been shocked to hear Scripture described in modern terms as a "record of God's word." The monks believed its divine inspiration caused the Bible to be, rather, a living reality in the here and now. Biblical inspiration was not a one-time, over-and-done-with sort of thing; it adhered to the Bible as a permanent, living quality.

The written book was not active by itself, of course—no more than a sheet of printed music. In order to become alive, God's word had to take the living form of sound. In the patristic and middle ages, therefore, it was common and normal to read the Scriptures out loud, at least loud enough to be heard by the reader, even in private reading. "Faith," after all, "comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

All Bible reading was perceived to be, of its very nature, a true *proclamation* of God's word. The revered twelfth-century monk and teacher Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) reflected this ancient view when he said, "God spoke once, but His speech is continual and perpetual."

Bernard described the Bible as the liber *experientiae*, "the book of experience," because the Christian discerned in its pages the history of his own personal relationship to God. Adam's fall was the believer's own, but so too was David's repentance. God's choice of Isaac was the narrative of the Christian's own election. The Exodus was the account of his personal deliverance. The very sins of the Israelites in the desert were described in detail, so that Christ's striving servant would better avoid them. Indeed, "all of these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition" (1 Cor. 10:11).

Both Augustine and Bernard agreed with Jerome that "whatever was promised in a carnal manner to the people of Israel, we show that it is fulfilled in us in a spiritual manner and is fulfilled today." Did the Bible speak of a law, a manna, a holy city, a clean oblation, and a land flowing with milk and honey? These were but elements of the believer's daily life in Christ. Did it warn against the assault of Philistines, the invasion of Ammonites, and the siege of the Assyrians? These were the enemies Christ's struggling servant encountered each day, prowling through the recesses of his own heart. Did the Bible present a covenant to be ratified by the personal consent rendered in faith? That consent was required every time the believer opened its pages.

Origins in Origen

Although it was the monks and other ascetics who left us the greatest body of literature on this subject, there is nothing intrinsically "monastic" about this approach to Scripture. In fact, the monks themselves were aware of their debt, in this respect, to the non-monk Origen (185-254), teacher at the famed catechetical school at Alexandria.

The early monks, though they knew their debt to Origen, were often reluctant to admit it. Origen also dabbled excessively in certain philosophical questions and thereby got himself in trouble with the Church. For all that, however, he was recognized as an outstanding interpreter of the Scriptures, and even those monks who were careful never to mention his name were among his most ardent readers (Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance). For a long time, in fact, some of Origen's best works circulated from monastery to monastery under pseudonyms.

Origen never thought of himself as writing for monks, since monastic life in the third century was only beginning to take shape. He wrote, rather, for all Christians with a keen sense of their baptismal commitment to "put to death" those passions in their souls and bodies that would impede the new life of Christ within them. Such believers were determined to "seek those things which are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God." Having died and hidden their lives with Christ in God, they set their "mind on things above, not on things on the earth." They were resolved to "put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him" (Col. 3:1-10). Where better to go for guidance, therefore, than to the Scriptures?

Over and over in his catechetical instructions, which were simply lessons based on biblical texts, Origen exhorted such Christians to go to the well of the Scriptures every day in order to draw the living water. His favorite metaphor for this daily discipline was found in those biblical stories where various women (Zipporah, for instance) met their bridegrooms at the well. If we go to draw from the biblical waters every day, said Origen, we will meet him. He will keep his appointment there with us.

Not an "easy read"

And how do we keep open and accessible the well of Holy Scripture, asked Origen, which is continually being stopped up and obstructed by the Philistines? We do it, he answered, by removing the vicious and selfish obstacles in our own souls. To dig into the Scriptures, he insisted, it is necessary to dig into our hearts, ridding them of darkness, purging them of vices, maintaining our minds in purity. Reading the Bible, therefore, involved a strenuous asceticism, because the understanding of God's word would certainly be distorted in a dark heart.

Without great ascetic effort, the Bible reader's understanding would remain at the level of the "letter," and we have it on good authority that "the letter kills" (Rom. 3:6). What was needed, then, was an ever deeper conversion of heart, a removal of the soul's veil, in order to disclose the inner Spirit of the Holy Scriptures (2 Cor. 3:12-4:6). Only the pure of heart could penetrate to this more profound level of biblical understanding, for only they can see God (Matt. 5:8).

Recovering unity

The greatest advantage of that spiritual approach to Scripture was that it recognized no real distinction between praying and Bible reading. "When you pray," Jerome had written, "you talk to God. When you read the Bible, God talks to you." Prayer and Bible reading were to be done simultaneously, like a conversation between friends. For several hours each day, the monk was to read Scripture in a meditative way called *lectio divina*, literally "divine reading." Slowly, with loving repetition, he pondered the power of God's word, tasting it in the palate of the heart.

Some monks literally learned the entire Bible "by heart," not only in the simple sense of memorizing it, but also in the richer sense of putting the whole content of the Scriptures into the treasury of his heart.

Day by day, as he chanted the Psalms with his brothers in church, the monk's conversation with the Lord continued, employing God's own inspired expressions in order to speak to Him. Praying through the entire Book of Psalms in this way each week, as the Rule of St. Benedict required, the monk kneaded the leaven of the Psalter into his mind.

As he walked from place to place, he brought up from his heart a favorite psalm and recited it once again. The monks compared this exercise to the cow's serene chewing of the cud. There was simply no such thing as too much Bible.

In this way, concentrating all of the spiritual life on the Holy Scriptures, the monk of old avoided those dichotomies that have become such distractions in modern life, like the separation of worship from study (especially theological study!) and the alienation of prayer from moral striving. Such dichotomies are clearly neither necessary nor especially healthy. Perhaps the example of the ancient monk provides us a fine model of how to correct these more recent problems.

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Related article: [Origen's Monastic Legacy](#)

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 80: The First Bible Teachers

Origen's Monastic Legacy

Origen did not invent the idea that one must pursue purity of heart in order to understand the deeper spiritual meanings of Scripture. But his teaching ministry at Alexandria in the early third century gave this idea a deep and longstanding influence in the church.

In spite of the vying claims of Athens and Antioch, Alexandria served as the intellectual center of the Roman Empire at that time, and it was the Alexandrian synagogue that had first translated the Old Testament into Greek. The church at Alexandria was the heir to both of those traditions. Consequently, the other churches recognized the Alexandrian church as, in many ways, their teacher.

Following his predecessor, Clement, who died in 215, Origen established the exegetical standards of the church in Alexandria.

From its catechetical school would come forth some of the most famous names of Christian doctrinal history, such as Athanasius, whose teaching guided the Council of Nicaea in 325, and Cyril, who dominated the Council of Ephesus in 431.

It was from the church at Alexandria that Christianity's first monks went out to the Egyptian desert, taking with them the great teacher's deep insights into the reading of the Bible and the quest for holiness. The lives and writings of those Egyptian monks—including Nestoros—became authoritative for all of Christian monasticism.

Nestoros's exegetical approach might never have left the sands of Egypt, except for a Romanian monk who happened to be visiting the place sometime just before 400. His name was John Cassian.

After he left Egypt, Cassian went up to Constantinople, where he became the deacon for that city's new bishop, John of Antioch, better known to history as John Chrysostom (437-407). (Cassian thus became a living link between the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools of biblical interpretation.) Later he went west to Rome and finally to Marseilles, in the south of Gaul, where he served as the abbot of a large monastic community.

Living at Marseilles until his death in 435, Cassian also found time to write books, and one of those books, called the **Conferences**, contained the teaching of Nestoros on the four senses of Scripture. A century later Benedict of Nursia, in the final chapter of his monastic rule, recommended the writings of Cassian to his monks, and for the next thousand years those monks zealously followed his recommendation.

—Patrick Henry Reardon

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 80: The First Bible Teachers

Three Wise Men from the East

The Cappadocian Fathers brought the best gift of all: a powerful scriptural defense of the Trinity and Christ's divinity against the Arian heretics.

Edwin Woodruff Tait and Chris Armstrong

Basil of Caesarea ("the Great")

Pugnacious saint and theologian of the Spirit>

Mention the "church fathers" to a Western Christian, and Basil the Great is not usually the first name to come to mind. Yet even for the Roman Catholic Church, Basil ranks with his friend Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom as one of the great propounders and defenders of the faith.

Born around 330, Basil grew up in a world where Christianity was recognized by the Roman government but divided between those who believed in the full divinity of Christ and the Arians who did not. For much of the fourth century, the Arians would enjoy the support of the emperors. The struggle between Christianity and the empire had not ended with Constantine.

After his studies in Athens ended in 356, the young Basil returned to his native city of Caesarea in Cappadocia (southeastern Asia Minor). Though he appeared to have a brilliant secular career before him, instead Basil chose to follow the path of his sister Macrina, renouncing his share in the family property and living an ascetic life with a few companions.

Thus, Basil was one of the first to establish a monastic community in Asia Minor, and the rules he drew up are still normative for Orthodox monks today.

In 370 he became the archbishop of Caesarea, which brought him into conflict with the Arian emperor Valens. In an attempt to intimidate the stubborn bishop, Valens sent the prefect of the imperial guard, Modestus, to threaten him with punishment. Basil answered that he was ready and eager to die for Christ, and that he had so few possessions that banishment, confiscation, or imprisonment would mean nothing to him.

When Modestus complained that no one had ever talked to him like that, Basil answered that perhaps he had never met a bishop before: "When the interests of God are at stake, we care for nothing else."

The emperor eventually backed down after his young son took sick and died, but the controversy with the Arians continued for the rest of Basil's life.

In 374 Basil wrote a treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, which fleshed out the orthodox doctrine of the divinity of the Spirit.

It was while Basil was at Caesarea that the doxology "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit" was first used, placing all three Persons of the Trinity on an equal footing. Basil also authored a liturgy still used by the Orthodox Church.

Basil's major work of biblical interpretation was the *Hexameron*, his homilies on the six days of creation. He refused to allegorize away the literal meaning of the text, and is often classed with the "Antiochene" school of exegesis. Along with scientific speculation and theological argument, however, the *Hexameron* also interprets animal behavior as symbolic of various human characteristics, in order to offer moral instruction. Comparing an unhappy couple to a viper mating with a lamprey surely does not count as "literal exegesis."

Basil was a difficult man to deal with, even for his friends. He made his friend Gregory of Nazianzus and his own brother Gregory of Nyssa miserable by forcing them to accept positions as bishops of small rural towns, positions for which they were not suited. He was accused of harshness or pride in his defense of the truth. Yet as bishop he devoted immense energy to feeding the hungry and caring for the poor, and his courage and devotion are beyond doubt. Basil's life showed that the heroic, counter-cultural power of the gospel had not been stifled by government recognition of Christianity, and that even in a state-sponsored church there would always be found those willing to die for Christ.

—Edwin Woodruff Tait

Gregory of Nazianzus

Divided soul who united Christ's two natures

Posterity would know him simply as "the Theologian." He was, says Robert Payne, a "small, shrunken man, bald-headed, with a long red beard and red eyebrows like Athanasius, wrinkled, nearly always in pain, haggard with vigils and fastings." And he would likely not have become known to the wider world except for a year-long, un-looked-for stint as bishop of Constantinople.

Gregory was a "BK"—a bishop's kid, who spent his life torn between the desire for solitary study and the pressing demands of a church that needed him to take a more active role. He loved God, and then wordcraft, and then people—and sometimes he could do without the people. He was in Payne's words "quick-tempered, sullen, unhappy in the company of most people, strangely remote from the world."

Gregory spent his youth in study. His well-off parents bankrolled his travels from Caesarea in Cappadocia to Caesarea in Palestine to Alexandria to Athens—at each place, he learned under the masters of classical philosophy and rhetoric.

In Athens, Gregory met the man who was to become his closest friend, Basil of Caesarea. The two were a good match—according to Payne, the assertive Gregory was "the only man who is known to have dared to laugh at Basil."

More important, Basil inflamed Gregory with a yearning for the monastic life. Soon after the two met, the young rhetorician left his secular studies to join Basil's monastery on the Iris River in Pontus. The blessed peace of the monastery was like heaven to the thoughtful young man, but it was not to last. In 362, his father, ailing, called for Gregory to join him in Nazianzus and receive ordination. This he did, assisting his father in the duties of his bishopric for the next ten years.

From this time on, Gregory repeatedly sought escape from the entanglements of church administration. But always, until a final few years of retirement on the family estate in Nazianzus, he became involved again by a sense of God's call on his life.

In 378 or 379, that call took Gregory to the see of Constantinople, long bishop-less. His year in that city's episcopal chair was the most difficult of Gregory's life. He suffered in swift succession the deaths of a sister, a brother, his mother, and his spiritual brother, Basil. All the while, ministering in the midst of a small remnant of orthodox believers, Gregory faced what amounted to the theological siege of

Constantinople, with the church seeming to be succumbing to the advances of Arianism. In this period he wrote to a friend:

"You ask me how my affairs are. Miserable. ... My body is in a sorry state; old age is over my head. Cares and business worry me, as do false friends and the shepherdless state of the Church. Good is destroyed, evil is naked; we are at sea by night without any light, Christ is asleep. What further must I endure?"

Out of this forge came a series of brilliant speeches against Arianism—Gregory's "Theological Orations." In the first of these, Gregory attacked the Arians' misuse of Scripture. Rather than focus on particular errors, he charged his opponents with nursing an ungodly "tone of mind" that delighted in "strifes about words, which tend to no profit."

They interpreted Scripture, charged Gregory, in an irreverent, jocular mode, making them "a matter of pleasant gossip, like any other thing, after the races, or the theater, or a concert, or a dinner, or still lower employments."

These were not just words spoken in the heat of polemic battle. In the early post-Constantinian era, when Christianity had become fashionable rather than persecuted, the Arians (among others) did indeed amuse themselves, almost as theological dilettantes.

But the Arians had a deeper intellectual problem, said Gregory. Their rationalism left no room for the paradoxical mysteries at the heart of the orthodox faith. Forgetting the limits of their own human reason and the wonder and majesty of God's person, they reduced God to a pale image and Christ to a mere man.

At the heart of this rational failure to understand Scripture was the mismatch between the Arians' professions of faith and the quality of their lives. They had "tied their hands and armed their tongues," by undervaluing and failing to practice "either hospitality, or brotherly love, or conjugal affection, or virginity; ... liberality to the poor, or the chanting of psalms, or nightlong vigils, or tears." They had failed to tame their anger and pride, discipline their eyes, and set limits on their "insatiable ears" and "excessive talk," which in the end, unchecked by a holy life, expressed only "absurd thoughts."

In his later orations and epistles, Gregory turned to the substance of Arian theology. The Arians took Bible passages that indicated Jesus' human frailties and sufferings as evidence that he was less than divine. Gregory turned to those same passages, but he juxtaposed them, in unashamed paradox, with the many scriptural evidences of the Lord's divinity. When read as an authoritative whole, he said, the apostles' writings in the New Testament portray a Jesus who is at one and the same time fully human and fully divine:

"He was baptized as man—but he remitted sins as God. ... He was tempted as man, but he conquered as God. ... He hungered—but he fed thousands. ... He was wearied, but he is the rest of them that are weary and heavy-laden. ... He asks where Lazarus was laid, for he was man; but he raises Lazarus, for he was God. ... He is bruised and wounded, but he heals every disease and every infirmity. He is lifted up and nailed to the tree, but by the tree of life he restores us" (***Third Theological Oration: On the Son***).

Though his cause was not fully vindicated until the Council of Constantinople in 381, Gregory's preaching and teaching in that city propelled Nicene orthodoxy, with its affirmation of Christ's divinity, from the preserve of a few brave Constantinopolitan holdouts in a sea of heretical Arians to the accepted (though still contested) creed of the empire.

—Chris Armstrong

Gregory of Nyssa

Allegorical reader in pursuit of holiness

Gregory of Nyssa is the only one of the three "Cappadocian" theologians who is not also one of the "three hierarchs," the central theologians of Orthodox tradition. Yet among modern students of the Fathers, his reputation stands far higher than that of his elder brother Basil or Basil's friend Gregory of Nazianzus. Gregory was unquestionably the most original of the three, but this very originality has often counted against him.

Born around 330, Gregory lived for years in the shadow of his older brother and teacher Basil. Like Basil, he practiced rhetoric and law for several years, before the influence of his sister Macrina led him to abandon a secular career and join his brother's monastery. He did not take a leading role in the affairs of the church until Basil was made archbishop of Caesarea in 370 and made his brother bishop of Nyssa, a small town in western Cappadocia.

Gregory was not a successful bishop. He lacked administrative skills, and his interventions in ecclesiastical politics were counterproductive. His tenure as bishop of Nyssa was interrupted by trumped-up charges of financial misdeeds. Gregory was deposed from his position and not restored until the death of the emperor Valens in battle in 378 ended the Arians' hold on political power.

This marked a shift in Gregory's career and the beginning of his influence in church politics. After the death of Basil in 379, Gregory took on his mantle as the champion of orthodoxy. He participated in the Council of Constantinople in 381, which defined the doctrine of the Trinity and adopted the Nicene Creed as it is used today. Traditionally, Gregory is credited with the authorship of the section of the Nicene Creed added at Constantinople. Gregory lived for more than a decade after the Council, dying probably in 394.

Gregory's theology was heavily influenced by Origen, who was often regarded as dubiously orthodox. Gregory's theology was not a mere copy of Origen, however, especially in his doctrine of infinity.

For Origen, as for pagan Greek philosophers, infinity was a defect—perfection involved having exactly the right dimensions, neither too much nor too little. Some scholars credit Gregory with introducing into Christian thought the idea that infinity is perfect rather than a sign of imperfection. For Gregory, the infinity of God was essential to human happiness. Human beings, created in God's image, were not infinite but were capable of endlessly striving after perfection. Because God's perfection is infinite, this quest never ends.

This means that, again contrary to Greek philosophy, change is actually a good thing. Human beings cannot help but change, and since evil (unlike good) is static and limited, it is impossible to go on becoming evil forever. God's infinite holiness, on the other hand, allowed for continual change without any reverse in direction. In the end, only goodness will satisfy any of us.

Gregory's biblical interpretation was based on this theological understanding. For Gregory, all Scripture concerns the growth of human beings toward divine perfection, and his major works of exegesis focus on texts that can easily be interpreted in this way. The ***Song of Songs*** tells the story of God's love, guiding us toward the heavenly goal. The ***Life of Moses*** dramatizes the Christian journey in the form of the Exodus, the vision of God in Mount Sinai, and the pilgrimage through the wilderness. ***The Beatitudes*** are levels of holiness through which we progress as we climb the mountain of divine perfection.

This constant concern with growth in holiness is expressed in a radical use of allegory. Unlike Basil, Gregory is quite willing to say that many of the biblical narratives are not historical (such as the slaughter of the Egyptian firstborn, which means that we should destroy evil at its very beginning). Even the most apparently trivial details (such as the structure of the doorposts anointed with the blood of the Passover Lamb) can be mined for their relevance to the Christian life.

Gregory is one of the major conduits through which Origen's allegorical method of interpretation was transmitted to the church. As a champion of Trinitarian orthodoxy, Gregory gave credence to ideas that might be dismissed if they came from Origen.

Through the seventh-century theologian Maximus the Confessor, Gregory's ideas remained part of the mainstream of Orthodoxy. Through anonymous homilies by "pseudo-Macarius," permeated with Gregory's theology, his understanding of holiness would exercise influence over John Wesley and an important stream of Western Protestantism. While the Augustinian West would always look askance at Gregory's more optimistic view of free will and human potential, his ideas remain important for all Christians who believe holiness to be the overriding goal of the Christian life.

—Edwin Woodruff Tait

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 80: The First Bible Teachers

Early Voices on Bible Study

The Church Fathers faced two big questions: "What is Scripture?" and "How should we read it?"

Why Two Books? "All the apostles taught that there were indeed two testaments among the two peoples: but that it was one and the same God who appointed both for the advantage of those people. ... who were to believe in God.... [T]he first testament was not given without reason, or to no purpose, or in an accidental sort of manner; but... exhibited a type of heavenly things... and foreshadowed the images of those things which now actually exist in the Church, in order that our faith might be firmly established." Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.32

Garden of Delights. "All who ask receive, those who seek find, and to those who knock it shall be opened. Therefore, let us knock at the beautiful garden of Scripture. It is fragrant, sweet, and blooming with various sounds of spiritual and divinely inspired birds. They sing all around our ears, capture our hearts, comfort the mourners, pacify the angry, and fill us with everlasting joy." John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 4.17

Plain Words for the Simple; Depths for the Wise. "The Divine nature intended to teach not only those who were learned in the literature of Greece, but also the rest of mankind. Jesus adapted Himself in order to be understood by the simple multitudes whom He addressed. He sought to win their attention by using language familiar to them. This is so that after their first introduction, they might be easily persuaded to strive after an understanding of the deeper truths hidden in Scripture." Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.60

Awesome Teachings. "The things [Jesus] explained [to his disciples] require even more consideration than the things which seem to have been simply stated. Those who heard such explanations didn't ask questions, because the Lord's words pertaining to the entire design of salvation were meant to be contemplated with awe and a deep spiritual mind." Clement of Alexandria, *Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?*

Buried Treasure. "Then [we believe] that the Scriptures were composed by the Spirit of God and that they have not only a meaning that is manifest but also another that is hidden as far as most people are concerned. ... About this the universal Church is in accord, that the whole law is spiritual. What the law is full of, however, is not known to all but only to those to whom it is given by the grace of the Holy Spirit in a word of wisdom and knowledge." Origen, *Dc principiis* 1, praef. 8

Locked Away from the Learned. "There are many today who consider themselves learned, yet the Scriptures are a sealed book to them. They can't open it without the help of Him who has the key of David. 'He that openeth and no man shutteth; and shutteth and no man openeth.'" Jerome, *Letter* 53

Wash Before Reading. "In order to search Scripture and truly understand it, we must have an honorable life, a pure soul, and Christ's righteousness. Then our minds can understand the Word of God as much as human nature allows.... People who want to see a city or country go to the place to see it. In the same way, if we want to understand those who wrote about God, we must begin by washing and cleansing our souls. We must live like the saints themselves and imitate their works. When we become like them and live the common life, we can understand what God has revealed to them." Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 57

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Issue 80: The First Bible Teachers

Classical Ear-Training

What the church fathers heard in Homer and Virgil tuned them to the harmonies of Scripture

Christopher A. Hall

Blessed are the meek," Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "for they shall inherit the earth." When Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Eusebius heard Jesus speaking of meekness, they immediately thought of Moses.

Theodoret cites Numbers 12:3, a text referring to Moses "as very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth." Eusebius comments that "whereas Jesus promised the meek inheritance of the earth, Moses promised Israel inheritance of the land."

But no modern commentator on Matthew's Gospel links Moses with Jesus' teaching on the meek and the kingdom. Why?

The church fathers' tendency to find allusions and allegories within the broader biblical narrative can seem to many modern readers forced and fanciful. Why did they so often take a text that at first glance appears to refer to one thing—meekness, for instance—and find in it things that surprise modern interpreters?

Homer as Scripture

Think of an educational system in which the study of Homer's great works, the Iliad and the Odyssey, played a central role in forming young, impressionable Greek minds. Homer was the backbone—even the Bible—of the Greek-speaking world. Greek culture turned to Homer for guidance and insight much as Jews turned to Moses.

The church fathers were educated, for the most part, in this Greek culture. They were raised on these stories, and the way they learned to read Homer and Virgil deeply influenced the way they read Scripture.

For example, unlike modern texts, ancient texts did not have spaces between words. The result was that the text was more easily read by sounding the words than by only seeing them. So students of Homer repeatedly read him aloud, pronouncing the words carefully, thus committing the stories to memory—in every detail.

Students not only read Homer aloud, they "heard" the inner music of his accounts. As they listened, the harmonies and melodies of Homer's text, its narrative connections and allusions, were unveiled.

This immersion in the text, using three faculties (hearing, speaking, seeing) rather than one, enabled students of Homer to see and hear things in the text that modern readers often overlook. For example, the Fathers were quite adept in picking up very subtle allusions in Scripture. Think of our earlier reference to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. New Testament scholar Dale Allison has observed that Matthew expects his readers to recognize, almost automatically, the allusions he has planted in his text to the larger biblical narrative. Rather than being a self-enclosed text, Matthew is more like "a chapter in a book." If we are to be sensitive to Matthew's particular contributions to the

gospel story, our minds must be soaked in the entire biblical narrative.

Gospel harmonics

A central difficulty for modern readers, though, is what Allison calls their "historically conditioned deafness to oblique allusions in the Bible." Because of modern Christians' reliance upon their eyes in reading, they often demonstrate an inability to hear the echoes and harmonies of Scripture and frequently doubt whether genuine allusions are present at all.

Before we conclude that the Fathers are conjuring false melodies, we might consider a modern analogy. Allison reminds us how well we remember songs we have heard on the radio.

"Those who habitually listen to music over the radio can often identify a popular song after hearing just the smallest portion of it. There are in fact contests ... which require people to name a musical piece after hearing only a slight excerpt from it, one lasting no more than a second or two, and consisting of no more than two or three notes or chords. The uninitiated will discern only noise. But to those with the requisite musical knowledge (gained, be it noted, not through arduous study but through effortless listening), the briefest extract can conjure up a world: a song, an album, a musical group. Was it maybe not similar with those Jews who first heard the Gospel of Matthew?"

Or, I would add, might it not have been the same with the Greek fathers who had learned to read and memorize texts by reciting Homer out loud? Might not they hear things in the Bible to which we remain strikingly deaf?

The Fathers, our music teachers?

So, the significance of the Fathers' insights into the biblical text grows when we remember how Greek fathers learned to read Homer, or Latin fathers Virgil. Unlike modern students of the Bible, they had learned to read slowly, scrutinizing each syllable and word with their tongues and ears as well as their eyes, and they could easily transfer this way of reading to their study of the biblical text.

As Allison notes, the Fathers "still read aloud. ... They still had, because of their educational methods, magnificent memorization skills. And they still heard Scripture chanted. They were accordingly attuned to hear things we no longer hear, things which we can only see after picking up concordances or doing word searches on our computers. I have come to believe that if we find in Matthew or another New Testament book an allusion to the Old Testament that the Fathers did not find, the burden of proof is on us; and if they detected an allusion which we—here I am thinking of modern commentaries—have not detected, investigation is in order."

Through their grounding in Homer and Virgil, the church fathers were attuned to tonal qualities in the biblical text that modern readers who rely solely on their eyes will rarely perceive. The Fathers see and hear where we often tend to "walk by sight" alone.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Augustine's Key

The West's foremost theologian offered a single principle by which even the unlearned could unlock Scripture's meaning.

Gerald Bray

Few people today would doubt that Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was the greatest writer of the early Christian church. Certainly, he has left us more books than anyone else. For centuries, most of the Western Church took its understanding of Christian doctrine from him, and his influence lingers even today.

From the moment he heeded the voice in the garden to "Take and read," Augustine had a close relationship with the Bible. But he was never a biblical scholar as such. Even in his own time, he was outclassed by his great contemporary Jerome, who made the classic Latin translation of Scripture that we call the Vulgate.

Augustine knew that Jerome was doing this, but he did not altogether approve of his methods. Jerome took the trouble to learn Hebrew, which Augustine thought was unnecessary, since he believed that God had inspired the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. That made the Hebrew original obsolete, in Augustine's eyes, and most of the church at that time agreed with him.

A critical error

Unfortunately, Augustine's Greek was not very good either, and he struggled with the biblical text. Sometimes he even got it wrong, as in Romans 5:12, which he translated to say that the human race sinned *in* Adam, and not merely *because* of Adam. Augustine took the verse to mean that every human being was spiritually present in Adam himself, and therefore directly responsible for Adam's sin, whereas the apostle Paul was merely saying that, as a result of Adam's sin, death came into the world and we have all suffered as a result.

The mistranslation had an unfortunate effect on Augustine's doctrine of original sin, making it harsher than it should have been and leading some modern critics to reject it altogether. It just goes to show how important a correct understanding of the text can be!

Perhaps because of his linguistic shortcomings, Augustine was not a great commentary writer, though he did leave a penetrating discussion of the first chapters of his favorite book—Genesis. His main interest was not in the fall of Adam, but in the nature of the creation itself. His treatment of this theme in his magnum opus, *The City of God*, shows Augustine's real genius: his ability to systematize and explain the principles underlying biblical interpretation.

The Bible as history book

In Augustine's day, most people who had tried to forge rules for biblical interpretation ended up promoting some form of allegory—a literary technique that treats a text as a riddle concealing a mystery that the average reader cannot understand without guidance.

Augustine inherited this allegorizing tradition, and he often went along with it. But the remarkable thing

about his writings is that he offered a vision of the Bible that treated the text not as allegory but as history. Thus in *The City of God*, he rewrote the whole history of the human race, basing it on biblical evidence.

He rejected the common pagan belief that matter was both eternal and evil, because it was not spiritual. On the contrary, declared Augustine, the Bible tells us that matter was created by God, which means it must be naturally good, because God would not create anything that was evil in itself.

This explains why he was so preoccupied with Genesis: it was there that God revealed these important truths. In exploring the mechanics of creation, Augustine discovered that there were other parts of Scripture that explained how God had acted. He had created the world by his Word, and the Word was the Son of God, Jesus Christ himself.

Augustine therefore saw the creation as the first of Christ's works, which enabled him to understand it as part of a divine plan embracing redemption and the final salvation of God's people.

The Bible was the history of that salvation, the record of how God had acted in and through real people in particular situations in order to reveal his great purpose to them.

The creation story in Genesis also teaches us that evil is not something inherent in the divine order, but a corruption or deformation of it. We cannot blame our sins on our heredity or environment, since there is nothing intrinsically wrong with either of these. If we are sinners, it is because we have done something wrong and are responsible to God for our disobedience. Even a newborn baby is a sinner in need of God's saving grace, and the Bible has been given to us so that we can find out how to get hold of it and put right what has gone wrong in our lives.

The master key

Augustine often used the techniques of the allegorizing tradition in ways that seem foreign to us today. His real contribution is that he offered a key to interpreting Scripture that unlocked the Bible's riches for even the unlearned reader. That key is love.

Augustine believed that it was because God loves us as a Father that he has spoken to us, his children, in a way we can understand, explaining what we have to do in order to be saved. This, Augustine said, was why Scripture often seems to be too simple for intellectual minds.

There are hidden depths in the Bible, of course, but in order to understand them, we have to start with the simple things. Once we have grasped the basics, we can move on to the more complicated details. If there is something that seems difficult, then we must ask ourselves what the principle of love teaches us to think.

Thus, it is clear that when the Bible says we should be kind to our enemies, we ought to take it literally and give them the food and drink that they need to survive. But when it goes on to say that in doing this, we shall "heap coals of fire on their head" (Rom. 12:20), we have to understand that figuratively, since it would hardly be an act of love to pour burning coals over someone.

Augustine believed that this principle of love could be applied to every part of Scripture, and that it would invariably give the reader the right answer. It had the added advantage that the reader did not have to be a learned person in order to figure out what the text actually meant.

Love is a gift of God that does not depend on great learning. By making it the key, Augustine was opening up the Bible to ordinary church members, many of whom could not read or write. With love in

our hearts, we shall not go wrong in applying the commands of Scripture—and far from being confused by the Bible, we shall be led into an understanding of its deepest mysteries.

The Book of fellowship

Christian love is the fruit of a living relationship with God, and the main purpose of the Bible is to enable that relationship to develop. For Augustine, the Bible is never an end in itself. It is a means to the end, which is fellowship with God.

This does not mean, however, that we can do without the Bible, because in this life it is the only sure guide to the nature of that fellowship. Without the Bible we would be groping in the dark, and although we might occasionally stumble on God's truth, we would not be in a position to appreciate it or make the most of it.

That is the fate of the heathen, whose knowledge of divine things is so partial and confused that it is practically useless. Christians have been rescued from that sad condition by God's revelation of himself in Scripture, which is the light to guide us along the pathway of love until the day when we are at last taken up into his eternal presence.

For us today, appreciating Augustine really means understanding this above all else. We cannot always follow his interpretations of particular texts, and we have to recognize (as he himself did) that he was not always consistent in what he wrote. From our vantage point, centuries later, it is easy to find fault with particular details of his writings and dismiss them as irrelevant.

It is here that the great underlying principle of love applies. Augustine does not tell us that we have to agree with him in every detail—he changed his mind himself on many occasions, and recorded the fact so that nobody would think he was infallible. Rather, he points us along the way that he expects us to follow for ourselves. This is the way of fellowship with God, which is the way of love, the only principle of true and lasting understanding.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Augustine vs. Literalism

Why he was so fond of spiritual Scripture interpretation

There are passages in the Bible—obvious figures of speech, metaphors—that modern readers would not even think to take literally. But during the period of the early church, some of these passages still caused confusion among the uninitiated, giving enemies of Christianity fodder for their attacks. Among the confused ones was, at one point in his life, Augustine himself.

In the last months before his conversion, the brilliant young orator had become disenchanted with the Manichaeian philosophy to which he had adhered. He was finding himself increasingly attracted to Christianity. Yet, he still stumbled over one particular Manichaeian objection to Christianity—based on a too-literal reading of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In his *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees*, Augustine later reconstructed the Manichees' argument. They taunted the Christians, he wrote, "for believing that man was made to the image and likeness of God. They look at the shape of our body and ask so infelicitously whether God has a nose and teeth and a beard and also inner organs and the other things we need."

Not until he heard the great preacher Ambrose, bishop of Milan, exposit texts from Genesis *figuratively* did Augustine find this difficulty solved:

"It struck me that it was, after all, possible to vindicate his [Ambrose's] arguments. I began to believe that the Catholic faith, which I had thought impossible to defend against the objections of the Manichees, might fairly be maintained, especially since I had heard one passage after another in the Old Testament figuratively explained. These passages had been death to me when I took them literally, but once I had heard them explained in their spiritual meaning I began to blame myself for my despair. ... "

It was soon after this objection was cleared away that Augustine heard that voice in the garden, "Take, read!" and yielded to Christ. Significantly, he later chalked up his youthful skepticism not to mere over-literalism, but to something deeper and more universally human:

"I was deluded in the past when ... I tried to start by applying to the divine Scriptures critical discussion rather than pious research. Through my lax morals, I closed off my own access to the Lord. ... In my pride, I dared to seek that which no man can find unless he practices humility."

—Adapted from *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* by Christopher A. Hall. (c)1998 by Christopher A. Hall. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515. www.ivpress.com.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Resources: Reading over the Fathers' Shoulders

Here are several good guides to early exegesis, along with some of the best editions of the early interpreters' own writings.

Compiled by Collin Hansen

Getting to know the Fathers

Christopher A. Hall's *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (InterVarsity, 1998) is the best short introduction to the subject for modern Protestants. Hall understands the questions and reservations this audience brings to this study, and he addresses them helpfully. His book manages to retain the liveliness and passion of both the people it profiles and the contested questions it covers.

In Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God (Yale, 2003), Robert Louis Wilken gives an account of early Christian thought and practice that is scholarly, clear, and compelling. Wilken shows how Scripture provided the church with a dynamic foundation for worship, theology, and mission. He demonstrates convincingly that early Christian thought is no mere era of church history, but a vital source for the church's continued health.

Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters, Donald K. McKim, ed. (InterVarsity, 1998) is a helpful guide to biblical interpretation through the whole span of Christian history, explaining the contributions of the church's most notable exegetes. The book provides a brief biography and historical introduction to the noteworthy works of each figure. It also outlines the major debates and controversies

of each era, including the early church's Gnostic crisis and the diverse methodologies of Eastern and Western interpreters.

Books from the Fathers

Readers who want to access English-language translations of the Fathers' own writings will find a number of editions, some newer and more readable than others. Here are some of the best, culled from Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* and Donald K. McKim, ed., *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*.

• IRENAEUS

Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching, translated by J. Behr (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

Against the Heresies, translated in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (1885: repr. Eerdmans, 1987).

• ORIGEN

Commentary on Matthew, AnteNicene Fathers vol. 4, pp. 409-512 (Hendrickson, 1994).

The Commentary of Origen on St. John's Gospel: The Text Revised with a Critical Introduction, edited by A. E. Brooks (2 vols.; Cambridge University Press, 1896).

On First Principles (Harper & Row, 1966).

Homilies on Leviticus: 1-16, Fathers of the Church vol. 83.

Homilies on Luke and Fragments on Luke, edited by Joseph T. Lienhard, Fathers of the Church 94 (Catholic University of America, 1996).

The Philocalia of Origen: A Compilation of Selected Passages from Origen's Works Made by St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Basil of Caesarea (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911).

Selections from the Commentaries and Homilies of Origen, edited by R. B. Tollinton (London: SPCK, 1929).

- **ATHANASIUS**

On the Incarnation (St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1982).

Letters of Athanasius, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 4 (Hendrickson, 1994). This volume includes the first declaration of the 29 New Testament books as canonical.

- **GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS**

Orations and Letters, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 7 (Hendrickson, 1994) and ***Christology of the Later Fathers*** (Westminster John Knox, 1995). Both sets include the five great orations delivered by Gregory in Constantinople.

- **BASIL THE GREAT**

The Letters, translated by Roy J. Deferrari, 4 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1930; reprinted 1953, 1962, 1986)—Greek and English.

Letters and Select Works, translated with notes by Blomfield Jackson, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 8 (Hendrickson, 1994). Includes the ***Hexaemeron***, which provides a glimpse of Basil's method, and an index to the biblical texts referred to in his letters.

- **AMBROSE OF MILAN**

Letters to Bishops, Fathers of the Church, vol. 26 (The Catholic University of America Press, 1987). The best way to begin exploring Ambrose is to read his letters. Here, his colorful personality and his interpretive methods both emerge.

- **AUGUSTINE**

Christian Instruction, translated by John J. Gavigan, Fathers of the Church, vol. 2 (The Catholic University of America Press, 1947). This volume includes Augustine's exegesis of the first chapters of Genesis.

The Literal Meaning of Genesis, 2 vols., translated by John Hammond Taylor, Ancient Christian Writers, vols. 41-42 (Paulist Press, 1982). Includes ***Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees*** and ***On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book***, the heart of Augustine's exegetical work.

On the Psalms, 2 vols., translated by Dame Scholastica Hebjin and Dame Felicitas Corrigan, *Ancient Christian Writers*, vols. 29-30 (New York: Paulist Press, 1960, 1961). These treatments are in sermon form.

Tractates on the Gospel of John, translated by John W. Rettig, *Fathers of the Church*, vols. 78, 79, 88, 90, 92 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988, 1988, 1993, 1994, 1995). This book sheds light on Augustine's New Testament exegesis.

Joseph W. Trig, ***Biblical Interpretation***, *Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 9 (Michael Glazer, 1988). Includes fascinating correspondence between Jerome and Augustine in which they discuss exegetical questions.

● THREE MODERN SERIES

The 38-volume ***Ancient Christian Commentary series***, mentioned in our introduction (page 9), represents both a valuable tool for research, teaching, and preaching, and a unique, Scripture-centered window into the thought of the Fathers. Its translations (unlike those of some earlier editions of the Fathers' writings) are highly readable and its introductions and notes thorough and helpful.

Paulist Press's ***Classics of Western Spirituality*** series is an ever-expanding set of affordable paperback editions that provide modern translations of many seminal Christian writers, along with critical introductions and notes. Though ranging throughout church history, this series includes several important works from the early church fathers.

Paulist's ***Ancient Christian Writers*** series includes some less well-known figures and works along with major figures like Augustine and Origen. These are more expensive hardbacks.

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