

Extracts from

**SANCTIFIED VISION:
AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE**

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Back cover blurb:

Sanctified Vision explains the structure and logic of the early Christian interpretations of scripture in late antiquity. These interpretations are considered foundational to the development of Christianity as a religion and offer insight into how these leaders thought about doctrine and practice. By analyzing selected portions of patristic exegesis, the authors illustrate specific reading techniques used by the early church fathers to expound the meaning they believed intrinsic to biblical texts. This approach is organized around three basic analytic strategies: literal, typological, and allegorical. The literal strategy is a rigorous and extensive analysis that identifies particular word associations that intensify scriptural meaning. The typological strategy interprets distinct patterns of events within scripture and applies those patterns to other events in scripture and the history of the church. The allegorical approach to biblical reading, like the typological strategy, seeks patterns in the text, but these patterns are more diverse and represent larger themes or beliefs of the early church. Within this analytic framework, the authors explain the larger structure of patristic exegesis and argue for the importance of this structure in the emergence of Christian orthodoxy.

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“a long pilgrimage through the wreckage of modern theology” x

Chapter One: Scriptural Meaning Modern to Ancient

We saw the vast ocean of exegesis, and yet we did not see it. We recognized that most early Christian writing is saturated with biblical particularity, but as we continued to think in terms of doctrinal development, intellectual context, and social systems, the actual exegesis remained obscure and unanalyzed. 3

How many times must we read and teach Origen's *On First Principles*, a dauntingly speculative inquiry into the nature of God, the world, human existence and destiny, before noticing that the opening sentence stipulates that the Bible is the sole source of wisdom? To see that sentence and understand its meaning is like receiving a blow to the head. 4

This book is the fruit of our efforts to understand the structure of patristic interpretation of Scripture. 5

We were incapable of reading the church fathers because of our own assumptions about how the Bible ought to be read. 6

Slowly, we began to realize that the key issue rested in our preconceptions about what is significant about texts ... 7

Single unedited extract of pp.8-13 ...

At a more technical level, the assumptions that we find so influential in the modern context tend to solidify into a theory about how words, sentences, symbols, narratives, and so forth work to communicate what is important. Most modern readers hold a referential theory of meaning, which assumes that our words and sentences are meaningful insofar as they successfully refer or point. So,

we can say that the biography of Washington refers. We call the biography good because we think it accurate. We can argue about how to assess accuracy. Some hold to the supreme importance of the facts of history. Others think that a biography should evoke the subject's larger personality or world view. Nonetheless, this is a debate united by a common referential theory of meaning. The Washington biography is good insofar as it successfully refers to or communicates the subject matter, the particular x considered to be important.

We need to be clear that the referential theory of meaning does not settle any important or interesting questions about just how to characterize the subject matter to which texts refer. There can be continual discussion about just what the x might be, and the modern study of hermeneutics should be understood as an ongoing debate about this issue. The more empirical side argues that words and sentences should be best understood as referring to facts or states of affairs in the world. The more phenomenological side of the debate finds this position too simple-minded and draws attention to how texts convey the consciousness or experiences of the author. Nonetheless, the common referential theory of meaning gives an overall structure to the modern approach to interpretation.[p.8 ends]

One should adopt reading techniques that help one proceed from what the text says to what it seeks to represent. Reading is an act of movement from understanding the words to comprehending the facts and events (the empiricist preference) or ideas and experiences (the phenomenological preference) that the words seek to communicate. To use a spatial metaphor, a referential theory of meaning encourages us to read out of the text and toward the true subject matter to which it seeks to refer.

Modern biblical study is shaped by the modern theory of referential meaning. The Bible is significant because it refers. The Bible has an x, a subject matter, and good interpretation helps readers shift attention from the signs or words to the x that is the real meaning of the signs and words. For example, modern scholars assume that the gospel stories matter because they tell of the life, teachings, and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, most modern readers can see that the gospel stories do not refer directly. They do not read like a detailed modern biography, firmly supported by citations from memoirs and other documents of the day. The lack of clear historical accuracy is even more evident in the historical narratives of the Old Testament. The story of Abraham and his descendents, the story of Moses and the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt, as well as the stories of the kings of Israel, do not refer in any straightforward way. All the narratives in the Old and New Testaments have layers of tradition and are shaped by the cultural contexts of their composition. Moreover, they are clearly composed to serve communal, religious interests. They are not "historical" in the sense of intending to provide a dispassionate, objective account of personalities and events.

Once modern readers see the distance between what the biblical stories say and what likely actually occurred, the distinctive reading strategies of modern historical-critical reading become important. A technique such as source criticism seeks to unpack biblical texts and show the different layers of composition, some of which stem from certain time periods and communities, and others of which come from different eras and serve different interests. A well-known fruit of this approach is the distinction between the Priestly and Yahwist material in Genesis. Equally important are the attempts to organize the material in the three synoptic gospels into different source traditions that likely predate the composition of the canonical gospels. This effort should be understood as modern scholars trying to create a body of material that can function as memoirs, letters, and primary documents function in the writing of a modern biography. Assuming that the gospel stories, like all texts, are meaningful [p.9 ends] insofar as they succeed in capturing or referring to their subject matter, scholars set out to find sources by which we might discern whether or not the received texts do in fact succeed.

For us, the plausibility of the modern scholarly analysis that has produced these hypotheses is not at issue. What is important is how the referential theory of meaning motivates modern reading strategies. Modern readers of the Bible assume that, as in a biography of Washington, the events to which the scriptural narratives refer is what makes them important. Because the biblical accounts of history are so opaque and so different from scholarly histories, we are motivated to adopt reading techniques such as source and redaction criticism in order to refine our interpretation and, in this way, catch some glimpses of "what really happened."

Not a few modern scholars either were pessimistic about the possibility of reading the Bible as a source of information about actual historical events or were inclined to think that religious truths have an ideal and not historical form. In our case, when we thought about the narratives in Genesis and Exodus, we did not feel the need to determine the historical accuracy of the stories. We did not read

the story of the exodus or the ascent of Moses onto Mount Sinai as garbled accounts of historical events, so we did not need to look for possible sources and provide detailed assessments of the historical reliability of various details. Instead, we assumed that the narratives communicated a religious meaning. To discern it, we attempted to draw out the theological structure or symbolism. We read the stories as disclosing or pointing to theological truths about God's saving purpose. For example, we might have said that the meaning of the episode on Mount Sinai is best understood as a vivid narrative portrayal of the basic biblical truth that God initiates the covenant with his people in the act of sovereign command. Salvation comes from God alone. In this approach, the text does not refer to historical events; it refers to important theological or doctrinal propositions. The actual details of the story or the sequence of the words on the pages are not important. What matters is the religious or theological idea the text represents.

For a long time we were stuck at this point. We imagined that a concern for the historical reference of the Bible defined modern historical scholarship, and we thought that our theological readings represented a different approach. Of course, they are different, much as the biographer of Washington who seeks detailed accuracy differs from the biographer who tries to shape the material into a narrative that captures the spirit of Washington. Yet, the underlying, [p.10 ends] referential assumptions about meaning are the same. Whether reading the text to find out what really happened or to gain access to theological principles, the Bible's meaning depends upon tracing the arc of representation out of the words and into the subject matter. Like too many modern readers, we were inclined to show that the Bible can serve as a body of evidence for what really happened or, in our case, for theological propositions. Thus, no matter how differently modern interpreters assess the subject matter of the Bible or its religious significance, there is a united front. The Bible is important in light of its capacity to refer to some x - what really happened or timeless truths.

To our surprise, our views about the Bible's meaning were not held by premodern readers. Premodern readers assumed that events depicted in the Bible actually occurred as described, but surprisingly little of their interpretation depended on this assumption. They simply did not ask: "What is the event or truth to which the Bible refers?" For them, the text was woven into the fabric of truth by virtue of being scripture. As Irenaeus affirmed, "the scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His spirit." For Irenaeus and for the patristic tradition in general, the Bible was not a perfect historical record. Scripture was, for them, the orienting, luminous center of a highly varied and complex reality, shaped by divine providence. It was true not by virtue of successfully or accurately representing any one event or part of this divinely ordained reality. Rather, the truth rested in the scripture's power to illuminate and disclose the order and pattern of all things.

As a consequence, in patristic exegesis literalism functioned as the basis for interpretation. Scripture certainly did refer, evoke, symbolize, exhort, command, and more. In all these particular instances, the fathers took the text as doing something that reached beyond the literalism of the words. The words of the synoptic gospels pointed to events such as the life and teachings of Jesus. The opening verses of the Gospel of John referred to truths about the divine Word. The ten commandments represented God's will for human beings. The list could go on and on, but the important point is that the fathers treated all these aspects as local phenomena. Treated as a whole, the Bible absorbed their attention rather than directing it elsewhere, either to the events to which the text refers or the divine truths to which it points. Scripture was the magnetic pole of their thought. In this way, the fathers differ from modern readers, not in any particular assumption about a verse or episode, or in any specific method, but in their overall assumptions. Modern readers assume that the Bible means by accurately referring to an x, whether event, mode of consciousness, or theological [p.11 ends] truth. For the fathers, the Bible is the array of words, sentences, laws, images, episodes, and narratives that does not acquire meaning because of its connection to an x; it confers meaning because it is divine revelation. Scripture is ordained by God to edify, and that power of edification is intrinsic to scripture.

The image of direction illuminates the difference we discovered in the fathers. Ancient readers of scripture moved within, across, and through the text, exploring its orienting, unifying potency. Modern readers of scripture move in the reverse direction, adopting techniques that lead out of what seems a confusing, inaccurate, and contradictory text and into a realm of history or theological ideas. Thus, premodern readers are rightly called precritical, not because they presumed the historical accuracy of scripture or because they failed to use the various techniques of critical analysis that characterize modern study of the Bible. Rather, they are precritical because they did not ask, "What gives meaning to the story of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai?" They assumed the authority of the dual accounts in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and they sought to order their interpretations accordingly. Instead of looking behind the text to the events, they looked into the text for clues and solutions.

For example, the fathers noticed that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John differed in detail, but this did not prompt them to look for the “true Jesus” behind the text. Instead the texts themselves provided the tools for reconciling the differences. The scriptures were treated as the context for divine meaning, the perfect language that instructed even in its apparent difficulties and imperfections. On this point, Origen testifies to the basic sensibilities of the church fathers. “If anyone ponders over the prophetic sayings with all the attention and reverence they deserve” - for Origen, the whole of scripture has a prophetic structure - “it is certain that in the very act of reading and diligently studying them his mind and feelings will be touched by a divine breath and he will recognize that the words he is reading are not utterances of man but the language of God.” Thus, for the church fathers, what scripture does in any particular verse or episode, which may entail presuming reference to historical events or intentions or theological ideas, was very much a matter of debate. However, Origen and the rest of the patristic tradition presumed, as their tacit theory of scriptural meaning, the importance of the words themselves. To know the words is prior to and more decisive than knowing if they refer and to what. Scripture is at the center of reflection. This assumption is the foundation of patristic exegetical practice. [p.12 ends]

The precritical presumption that the meaning of scripture is in the words and not behind them explains why modern readers find patristic exegesis so unfathomable. We read ancient commentary and seek to discern the x outside the text that governs the exegesis of the fathers, Some are inclined to think the key is their “literalism” that credulously assumes that the text provides reliable reports of actual historical events. Others tend to focus on doctrines, and they imagine that patristic exegesis is an extended effort to prove the truth of orthodox teachings by matching up scriptural verses with creedal propositions. Neither approach works because both assume that something akin to the modern theory of meaning as reference - either to history or to doctrinal propositions - animated the exegetical practices of the fathers. As we plan to demonstrate, if we stop anachronistically projecting the referential theory of meaning onto the fathers and accept that precritical interpretation of scripture presumes that the text is the subject matter, then patristic exegesis can be understood as a tradition of interpretation that makes sense on its own terms. pp.8-13

All this relates to lines on p.x – “George Lindbeck penned the oft-quoted line: the text absorbs the world, not the world the text.”

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He does not treat scripture primarily as a medium through which to discern spiritual patterns, likely historical events, or the intentions of the biblical authors, Although he will, in many places, emphasize each of these aspects as he sees fit, the appeals to reference are ad hoc. He does not push through or beyond the text to reach its “true meaning.” Instead, Gregory is following the purely verbal clue of the canonical use of rod and snake. He is intensifying the text as the key to its own interpretation. 17

When we impose modern assumptions about meaning, we cannot see that he ordered his exegesis centripetally. The arrow of analysis is directed toward and through the literal particularity of the text and not beyond it. 18

Our approach is organized around three basic strategies of textual analysis: intensive, typological, and allegorical. // These strategies make up the core of the book, but we do not want to give the impression that any of the three are “methods” in the modern sense of the word. As we shall argue in the final chapter, the fathers saw their reading as disciplined, but unlike modern intellectuals, they did not focus on method or technique as the key to reliable or accurate analysis. 19

The intensive reading strategy is a broad category that ranges from philological analysis that is indistinguishable from aspects of modern biblical study to word associations that are utterly alien to the critical sensibilities of contemporary readers. Across the range, however, we identify a common patristic focus on the particularity of biblical language, an almost sensual attempt to engage the words of scripture. 19

We adopt the term typology, but we do so without assuming a sharp distinction from allegory. For us, it designates a ubiquitous patristic interpretive practice that discerns patterns within and between discrete events depicted within scripture. 20

The third major strategy is allegory, the topic of chapter 5. As we have noted, allegory is not conceptually or essentially distinct from typology. It is an extension of the typological strategy that does not limit itself to discerning patterns of and between events. Allegory is more fluid and ambitious. It seeks patterns and establishes diverse links between scripture and a range of intellectual, spiritual, and moral concerns. 21

[summary of chapter 2] In the next chapter, we describe what is best understood as a substantive patristic theory about the overall meaning of scripture. This theory was not focused on method, nor did it depend upon any particular account of scriptural inspiration and authority. ... As we hope to show, the patristic exegetical project was motivated by a conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is the way, the truth, and the life, Thus, the patristic tradition of interpretation is best understood as a continuous effort to understand how a faith in Jesus Christ brings order and coherence to the disparate data of scripture. 22

[summary of chapter 6] Similarly, the fathers recognized that communal [p.22 ends] accountability was crucial, According to Irenaeus, proper interpretation depends on fidelity to the apostolic witness, preserved in the canonical books and taught by the authority of those bishops who are successors to the apostles. Irenaeus calls this witness the “rule of truth” or “rule of faith.” This rule, which over the course of the early centuries of Christianity solidified into creeds, is an interpretive control that directs and orients the exegete as he employs various interpretive techniques. // Unlike most modern intellectuals, the church fathers recognized that good interpretation is most likely to flow from a good person. Patristic exegesis was, finally, a religious exercise. Right reading was a fruit of righteousness. 22-23

## **Chapter Two: Christ is the End of the Law and the Prophets**

Most contemporary biblical scholars are not, in a strict sense, scholars of the Bible. They are experts who specialize in certain books of the Bible or historical periods in which various portions of it were written. This is naturally so. 24

However, [the church fathers] their goal was to establish an overall interpretation of scripture. The diverse techniques they used to interpret individual passages, their readings of specific episodes and books of scripture, and their adoption of a technical [p.24 ends] vocabulary in theology were all oriented toward developing a take on the Bible as a whole. For this reason, no matter how diverse the particular exegetical judgments of the church fathers, they were part of a unified interpretive tradition. They could argue over the possibilities of allegorical interpretation. They could offer different interpretations of the first chapters of Genesis. They could use varying terms from the Greek philosophical traditions, All these differences, however, came together under a single goal - to read the Bible as a single text that taught a coherent, unified truth about the nature of God and human destiny. 24-25

For the church fathers, the unity of the Bible and the basic commonality of the diverse details of their exegesis, came from the conviction that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. It is natural that they should have adopted this conviction, for the pattern of fulfillment operates within the apostolic writings that were eventually collected and named the New Testament. The church fathers continued and maximized this apostolic effort to develop what we might call a “total reading” of scripture, organized around the fulfilling person of Jesus Christ. We cannot prove that their efforts succeeded. However, we can explain how the fathers pursued this ambitious interpretative project. // The basic structure of the patristic “total reading” of scripture bears some analogies to scientific inquiry. Scientists collect data, and their goal is to find theories that can account for or best interpret the data. The ideal interpretation is the most elegant and comprehensive. For this reason, a general theory of the data, something like a “total reading,” serves as a scientific goal. The early Christian exegetical tradition followed this basic pattern. Of course, texts are not the same as experimental data, and the church fathers did not operate according to the same methods as scientists. Nonetheless, the diverse and complex literality of scripture served as a great body of data. They thought it necessary to synthesize this diversity into a single interpretive scheme, and they were convinced that the coming of Jesus as the Messiah or Christ provided them with the basis for formulating a total reading or general theory of scripture. The body of data was fluid around the edges. The canon of scripture was not officially settled until the fourth century, and the fathers never settled on a single way of expressing the unity of scripture. Yet a common project is visible within the diversity. Unified by the conviction

that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of divine truth, the exegesis of the fathers was research into the Christ-centered unity of scripture. 25

Oceanus's use of three rhetorical terms:

a) *hypothesis* – “the gist of a literary work” 34 – theme / argument / plan

b) *economy* – administrative/managing structure and esp sequence

It's understanding of what the false teachers do ... “They are using their false hypothesis to rearrange the details of scripture into a false economy, a false order, just as the clever reader puts verses from Homer into a false sequence.” 37

Therefore, this arrangement of world history, this economy, should guide interpretation of scripture. If we follow the divinely coded sequence, then we can properly assess each piece of the mosaic, each moment of biblical history, according to its role in the good order and arrangement ordained by God. 38

For Irenaeus, the coming of Jesus Christ is the decisive event that clarifies the divine economy. The scriptures anticipate future events. They lay out a sequence or order of divine purpose, but that purpose is unclear. ...without Christ, the economy of God would be as difficult to determine as the series “2, 4, . . .” We would not know whether the series should be continued “2, 4, 6, 8, . . .” or “2, 4, 8, 16, . . .” The coming of Christ, then, functions like the number “6.” It clarifies the meaning of the scriptural sequences in the Old Testament. The promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ. Christ brings to an end the ritual laws of Israel. The kingdom he establishes is spiritual. He triumphs over sin and death rather than worldly powers. Salvation is for both Jew and Gentile, and so forth. In each instance, the meaning of the prior sequence of divine events is made clear. 38

For Irenaeus and the patristic tradition, Jesus Christ is more than the indispensable piece of data. He also embodies the “formula” of the series. 38

c) *recapitulation*

Consider an ambiguous series of numbers such as “2, 4, . . .” We can interpret that series as  $x + 2$ . In doing so we are connecting the numerical series to a formula, Most of us do not see this connection as an interpretation. We tend to see  $x + 2$  as a handy restatement of the series, but a series is not the same as a formula. The formula  $x + 2$  can express a series that might start elsewhere, for example, “102, 104, . . .” For this reason, we can distinguish between a sequential interpretation of a series of numbers and interpretation by formula. When asked the “meaning” of a series such as “2, 4, . . .” we can make a local comment such as “6, 8, 10.” This clarifies the pattern by extending the series. The sequential interpretation offers “6, 8, 10” as an “argument” that the pattern in the series is not “2, 4, 8, 16, . . .” We can make the same point with an interpretation by the formula  $x + 2$ . When we do this, we are arguing that the series should not be interpreted as  $x^2$ . (p.31) + Christ is the “ $x + 2$ ” who provides the basis for a comprehensive interpretation. (p.40)

Jesus Christ is not the Bible. The scriptures remain the vast body of heterogeneous material, retaining its reality as a text that speaks about a vast array of events and people, and records laws, parables, proverbs, prayer, and poems. However, for Irenaeus and the patristic tradition as a whole, Jesus Christ is the hypothesis. He reveals the logic and architecture by which a total reading of that great diversity and literal reality may be confidently pursued. 41

The church fathers were convinced that Jesus Christ shed light on all things and provided the basis for the true reading of scripture. Hilary of Poitiers perhaps expressed best this ancient conviction at the beginning of his *Treatise on the Mysteries*:

Every work contained in the sacred books announces with words, reveals by the facts, and establishes by example the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ who, sent by his father, became a man, being born of a virgin by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is, therefore, he who, throughout this present age engenders, washes, sanctifies, chooses, separates out, and redeems the church in the true and manifest figures of the Patriarchs: by the sleep of Adam, by the flood of Noah, by the blessing of Melchizedek, by the justification of Abraham, by the birth of Isaac,

and by the servitude of Jacob. Through the entire unfolding of time, in a word, the assembly of the prophets, serving the divine economy, gave us knowledge of his coming incarnation.

Every aspect of scripture leans toward Christ, and to know his coming is like discovering the crucial piece of evidence or overarching hypothesis that suddenly brings the whole array of data into focus. 42

Exegesis was a spiritual discipline, a journey through the literality of scripture in which one is not only to dwell in the clear teachings of Jesus or the great theological pronouncements of Paul but by the very ambition of a total reading of scripture one is led through the thickets and brambles of seeming contradiction, blank oceans and dry deserts of obscure and uncertain material. For the fathers did not hold Jesus Christ as an inert truth; they believed that they could only dwell in him, and he in them, if they dwelled in his illuminating light. To read under his guidance was to dwell in his light; to interpret the mosaic of scripture was to catch a glimpse of his image. 44

### **Chapter Three: Intensive Reading**

Three forms: lexical, dialectical, associative.

Associative – pp.48-49:

In addition to the lexical and dialectical strategies of intensive reading, we add a third, more fluid and wide-ranging strategy, which we call the associative strategy. The associative strategy involves the countless ways in which particular words, images, or phrases are joined together in our minds. In a certain sense, the lexical and dialectical strategies are associative. For a dictionary provides definitions by associating a word with synonyms or descriptions, and the dialectical strategy probes unlikely or improbable associations that beg for explanation. There are, however, more open-ended forms of association, such as meter, alliteration, and rhyme. The human mind relishes verbal patterns: “Peter Piper picked a pepper . . .” While the ability to find them in texts may be undervalued in our scientific age (which is enamored of numerical patterns rather than word patterns), in antiquity, identifying such patterns was often viewed as a sign that a reader was on the right path. Our own time may not be as far removed from this poetic sensibility as we imagine. One feature of postmodern literary theory is a love of cute titles and clever terminology, and this love echoes the ancient presumption that finding and exposing verbal patterns is a key element of interpretation. A feminist literary critic who titles an essay “The Reproduction of Othering” is exploiting a range of associations that connects a key notion in postmodern philosophy (alterity or “otherness”) with a basic assumption of postmodern literary theory (that literature is a form of cultural production) and a feminist theme (fertility). On a more mundane level, a well-wrought pun brings a smile, and many chuckle when they hear a clever limerick. In both instances, what tickles the fancy is the play of words, not just the content of the sentence. [p.48 ends]

Mere play is not sufficient in most cases. An alliterative association of adjectives appeals because the underlying meanings of the words make sense. Thus, a broader associative strategy of interpretation involves exploring a potentially unlimited range of connections that turn not only on the literality of words but also their capacity to evoke layers of meaning. Almost any poem could illustrate. Consider, for example, “Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard,” written by the eighteenth-century English poet Thomas Gray. The first stanza calls to mind the day’s end: “The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day.” A few stanzas later, Gray evokes images of the graves where “the rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.” Still further on in the poem, the images shift to evoke the dignity of the rural lives buried in the graveyard, “Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife.” These elements - day’s end, the silent graves, the dignity of rural life - are only pieces of a complex poem. However, our minds easily associate the first stanza’s image of the day’s end with the passing from life to death, memorialized by the gravestones. The three quoted lines seem to belong together as evocations of endings. Further, we can make a more adventurous link, associating the day’s end and gravestones with the passing of premodern, rural forms of life in the early days of the Industrial Revolution. The day does not last forever; human life is not eternal; the culture we cherish will also be eclipsed. Thus, the interpretation moves from fading light, to fading life, to a fading social system.

What do such associations achieve? It is difficult to say just how and why the human mind is capable of responding so synthetically to the use of words. It seems almost second nature for a reader to move from word to word, image to image, and in so doing construct an interpretation that does not “explain” the text, but rather illuminates or organizes it. Just as the words of a crossword puzzle cross

and, in crossing, provide decisive clues about what comes next, so the words and images of texts cross and lead the reader forward toward the construction of associations only latent and potential in the material at hand. This building up of crossing links is the basic goal of the associative strategy.

... to show how Origen's lexical investigation of the specific source of the Greek word for the Passover opens the way for a rich interpretation of Christ as the Passover:

If the lamb is Christ and Christ is the logos, what is the flesh of the divine words if not the divine scriptures? That is what is to be eaten neither raw nor cooked with water. Should, therefore, some cling just to the words themselves, they would eat the flesh of the Savior raw, and partaking of the raw flesh would merit death and not life - it is after the manner of beasts and not humans that they are eating his flesh - since the Apostle teaches us that the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life [2 Cor 3:6]. If the Spirit is given us from God and God is a devouring fire [Deut 4:24, [p.52 ends] Heb 12:29], the Spirit is also fire, which is what the Apostle is aware of in exhorting us to be aglow with the Spirit [Rom 12:11]. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is rightly called fire, which it is necessary for us to receive in order to have converse with the flesh of Christ, I mean the divine scriptures, so that, when we have roasted them with this divine fire, we may eat them roasted with fire. 52-53 [Origen – *Treatise on Passover* 26.5ff]

Lexical interpretation can be broader than checking up on translations. It also involves creating a mental dictionary of particular uses of key terms. 53

The church fathers sought a synthetic reading of the whole Bible based upon the hypothesis that Christ fulfills the scriptures, but that synthetic reading was not a jejune exercise conducted at a distance from the semantic details of the biblical text. Patristic readers sought a synthetic reading in and through the details, and this endorsed a vigorous use of lexical commentary. One needs to see the pieces clearly in order to put the puzzle together. 56

[dialectical] Exploring how contradiction motivates distinctions that, in turn, illuminate other portions of the scripture is the goal of the dialectical strategy. 62

[associative] Ancient readers had the opposite reaction. They positively relished the way verbal associations can motivate leaps from one context to another. The same sensibility that makes us chuckle when we hear a clever pun was given much freer rein in patristic exegesis. 63

How strategies of intensive reading provide pieces for the grand mosaic of a total reading of scripture is even more evident in the use of the associative strategy. ... The effect is to draw scripture into a moment of verbal contemporaneity. From Genesis to Revelation, verbal echoes can be heard across all the differences of time, genre, and even subject matter. For the fathers, the associative strategy functioned like so many thin threads of connection between the disparate portions of scripture. 66

As John Chrysostom reminds his listeners in a homily, one cannot “overread” the Bible, “For, just as with grains of incense, the more they are moved about with your fingers, the greater the fragrance they give out,” he writes, “so it is with the scriptures in our experience; the more you devote to studying them, the more you are able to discover the treasure hidden in them, and thereby gain great and unspeakable wealth.” [*Homilies on Genesis* 13.3] 67

[Postmoderns and premoderns share certain attitudes to language but disagree upon the existence of sacred texts]: One of the most important changes in contemporary intellectual culture has been the eclipse of ... modern prejudices about language. Instead of regretting the remarkable ability of words to generate multiple meanings, postmodern literary theory champions the ways in which specific words and images function more like intersections of forces than placeholders for determinate and fixed meanings. Today, we assume that words are historically saturated. They have a shaping force that can influence attitudes and behaviors. In fact, contemporary society seems so convinced of the associative potency of words that the use of masculine pronouns is much curtailed. We [p.67 ends] associate the use of *mankind* with oppressive social mores, and we worry words can echo in our consciousness and distort self-images, as well as in society, leading to oppressive behaviors. To avoid these consequences, we exercise as much verbal care as the church fathers. The difference, however, is that we are more likely to step back from the potency of words - or to use that potency to dance deconstructive rings around modern figures such as Jowett. Postmodern readers may wish to rub words together, as Chrysostom suggested, but those same postmodern readers do not think that there

are sacred texts with spirit- saturated words that contain an unspeakably great fragrance. The fathers did, and they believed that the fragrance was not only pleasant, it had the sweet odor of sacrifice that rose up to the heavens. 67-68

#### **Chapter Four: Typological Interpretation**

However, we adopt the term *typology* to draw attention to the practice by which the fathers moved beyond analysis of particular words and images toward the larger, unifying patterns of the Bible. They understood scripture to be a part of the divine economy. 69

...typological interpretation is rightly viewed as the most important interpretive strategy for early Christianity. Without typology it is difficult to imagine patristic theology and the concept of Christian orthodoxy it defined and supported as existing at all. 69

The church fathers' typological imagination was wide ranging. We limit ourselves to three patterns of typology, each of which play an important role in early Christian development of a detailed account of the divine economy. The first is the most central. it is an explicit display of the prefiguration of Christ in the Old Testament. The fathers were engaged in a complex double project: first, showing how Christ recapitulates that to which the Old Testament bears witness, and second, to illuminate the identity of Jesus Christ. The second use of typology sought to establish the scriptural basis for the practices of the early church, The upshot was a demonstration that the Christian church functions both in continuity with the chosen children of Abraham and according to the pattern established by Christ. In the third typological endeavor, the fathers used scriptural patterns from both Testaments to integrate the contemporary experience of Christians into those patterns. instead of discerning "Jan Brady moments," they read their lives and the history of the church as a series of "Jesus moments." 73

The inherently retrospective logic of typological reading ... In this way, for Justin, and for the church fathers as a whole, typological interpretation is best understood as an ever-expanding network of patterns and associations that refer back to the apostolic witness about Jesus Christ. The local types - in this instance Joshua/Jesus - function to illuminate how Jesus is the global or master type, the recapitulation of all things. 76

Thus, for the fathers, to call Christ the antitype identifies him as the master type in which all other types, whether before or after, find their fulfillment. 81

History, however, is a personal as well as communal reality. We live across sequences of events and experiences that include ritual moments such as baptism, but they encompass much more. Not surprisingly, the church fathers also used typological methods to interpret their own lives and the lives of those around them. 82

While we are sympathetic to patristic sensibilities, we recognize the problems associated with the premodern views, and we have no plans to recommend an uncritical reappropriation of ancient exegesis. Nevertheless, we hope that we have successfully shown that there is nothing arbitrary or anachronistic about the patristic use of typology as it functioned within the ancient divine economy that the fathers took for granted. The economy of Christ was as real and as totalizing for them as various modern economies of historical or spiritual experience are for us. When the fathers connected the person of Joshua with Jesus and the events of the Exodus with baptism, they did so not because they were tragically unschooled in historical method but because they saw these persons and events as in fact connected in the divine economy. 87

#### **Chapter Five: Allegorical Interpretation**

In Greek the word *allegoria* means literally "other speak," and therein lies its controversy. Allegories are basically interpretations that claim that the plain or obvious sense of a given text is not the true meaning, or at least not the full meaning. The words, events, and characters, so the allegorist claims, stand for something else; they speak for another reality, another realm of meaning. 89

Three main ways:

- 1) making sense of nonsense
- 2) adding to or bringing out what is there in the words of the text

3) “saving the sense” – interpretation which negates the literal meaning

The canonical justification for the patristic use of allegory is found in Galatians 4:21-26. 90

Therefore, there are two lasting objections to allegory that highlight the real issues at stake in patristic exegesis. The first objection amounts to an appeal to modesty. As we have said, allegory is a revealing method of interpretation. Our assumptions about the deep structuring principles of reality are visible in the construction of an allegorical interpretation. ... For many modern scholars, this is unseemly. Better to operate more modestly, where the density of literality provides a thicker fabric for interpretation. Better to work locally and refrain from the synthetic interpretive efforts that must place texts within a larger frame of reference, within an economy. 112

The second objection is quite simple. In chapter 4, we heard from a modern scholar who saw the deepest problem with patristic interpretation: the church fathers really believed that God governs all things, that human beings have [p.112 ends] fallen into sin, and that the only begotten Son, who is the Word of God in the creation of all things, becomes incarnate to draw human beings into the divine life and bring the created order to its final perfection. In sum, they believed in the divine economy outlined by Irenaeus. This belief structured their interpretive imaginations in the same way our beliefs in various economies of historical, social, and psychological development shape our interpretive imaginations. Life is short. One cannot look for what might be real, One looks for what one thinks really is real. So, the church fathers looked for Christ and the ascetic life they thought Christ called us to live in everything, especially in the divinely ordained instrument of Christian revelation, the scriptures. The objection, then, is simply that their faith was a fantasy. Jesus Christ is not the incarnate Word of God. Reality is structured according to mundane laws of nature and the dynamics of cultural, historical development. // We cannot respond to these objections on behalf of the church fathers. We can only report that they did not view interpretive modesty as a theological virtue. They believed that God saturated scripture with a great wealth of truth, and zeal was the right disposition to take as an interpreter. “Seek and you shall find,” was a basic hermeneutic principle that they felt with existential force. And what of their belief in the divine economy? We are not foolish enough to try to defend their faith, which they knew to be a divine gift and not a human accomplishment. “Those who have eyes shall see, those who have ears shall hear.” 112-13

## **Chapter Six: The Rule of Faith and the Holy Life**

[One of the main theses of this book]: For the fathers, the scriptural text itself is the subject matter of interpretation; it is not the means to that subject matter. 116

Origen is typical. He describes the study of scripture as a subjection of the mind to the scripture, and in that subjection, one who ponders the details of the text will find that “his mind and feelings will be touched by a divine breath and he will recognize that the words he is reading are not utterances of man but the language of God.” 116

The same holds for the fathers. They treated the literal givenness of the scriptures as the deepest and most fundamental data. The scriptures are, to recall Origen’s blunt statement at the outset of *On First Principles*, the sole basis for wisdom. One can easily imagine a contemporary scientist uttering a parallel claim that the facts are the sole basis for lasting knowledge of the real world. Of course, unpacking just what it means to say that “the facts” are the basis for science is notoriously difficult. The philosophy of science is a rich and varied discipline because the interaction of scientific theory and experimental data is no clearer than the relationship between Origen’s speculative theology and the text of scripture. Nonetheless, the interesting questions and debates concern how data controls scientific inquiry; the consensus among scientists is that, however that control might be understood, it exists.// Patristic interpretation is structured and disciplined in much the same way as modern science. 117

Two disciplines – communal and personal

“Generally speaking,” writes Augustine, “it is this: anything in divine discourse [p.123 ends] that cannot be related to either good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative.” In other words, the discipline of the rule of faith, which for Augustine has a behavioral as well as doctrinal component, guides. It serves as the method for controlled reading.// When modern readers encounter this definition of proper method, they are taken aback, but they should not be. The analogy in modern

science is patent. When a scientist must decide which data are primary (to be taken “literally”) and which are anomalous (to be taken “figuratively”), the decision is most often made on the basis of existing theory. The experimental method produces data. It cannot interpret it. In the act of interpretation, the scientist asks what is consistent with the prevailing scientific consensus (“good morals”) and existing theory (“the true faith”). The difference, of course, is that what is judged anomalous in science is often discarded, and when it cannot be discarded, something like a figurative interpretation is offered. Scientists explain how the data are not “real” but are results of poorly designed experiments. Or, in still other cases, they develop an explanatory theory that argues, in essence, that the data only appears anomalous. The history of science has many examples of “figurative interpretation” of data. 123-24

For Augustine, the problem is not that we have bodies and live in a world of finite, temporal reality. Sin is not ontological, as if being created rather than uncreated were the original curse. The issue is our relationship to all the changeable, diverse features of the created world. We can either love and enjoy finite reality, taking it to be the sum total of what makes life worth living, or we can use that reality in order to make spiritual progress toward the infinite and eternal truth that is “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a single Trinity.” 130