

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

ANTIOCHENE METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

RELIGION 492

BY

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INTRODUCTION¹

The debate regarding heresy and orthodoxy has long ensued the Christian Church, and a major source of this debate is the varied interpretations of the Biblical text. The hermeneutical principles espoused by the patristic writers in the Antiochene school during the fourth and fifth centuries were criticized and rejected; most of its adherents were condemned as heretics. Interestingly, however, these principles that were once under great scrutiny have become foundational in most modern endeavors to disclose the proper interpretation of Scripture.

¹Some editing of the form has been done in order to bring the paper closer to the Turabian style guidelines. Dr. Cranford

ANTIOCHENE METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

In the development of the Christian church, the period lasting from the Council of Nicaea until the Council of Chalcedon in 451 is considered by some scholars to be the “golden age of patristic exegesis.”² This era is characterized by the teachings of both the Alexandrian and the Antiochene schools. Due to the relationship between these two schools and their methodologies, it is important that the Alexandrian school, which preceded the Antiochene, be understood. The composition of the schools at Alexandria and Antioch is a difference that should be carefully evaluated. The school at Alexandria was indeed a structure much like that which the word “school” connotes — “a scholastic institution, properly organized and placed under the patronage and supervision of the local bishop.”³ The school at Antioch was, indeed, different because

² Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 451. Bray dates the patristic period from approximately 100 until at least 451. He argues, however, that this period could likely be extended to 604 and the reign of Pope Gregory the Great. The period can be subdivided into four different stages. The initial stage lasted from the New Testament times until about 200, and the second or Origenistic stage lasted from 200 until the first Council of Nicaea. The third stage, which will be the major focus of this essay, lasted from the aforementioned Council of Nicaea until the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and the last stage of the patristic period lasted from Chalcedon until the reign of Gregory the Great.

³ Manlino Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis*. trans. John A Hughes and ed. Anders Bergquist and Markus Bockmuehl. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 67.

it lacked the hierarchy of authority. According to Simonetti, Antioch's school was comprised of merely a group who were united by their common theology and exegesis.⁴

Clement of Alexandria and Philo represent two adherents to the Alexandrian school, which believed that each word in the Biblical text was chosen for a precise reason.⁵ Although the words did maintain a distinctive meaning, this meaning could be hidden on the surface level. Clement of Alexandria along with his fellow interpreters adhered to the following principle in their interpretations: "All theologians, barbarians and Greeks, hid the beginnings of things and delivered the truth in enigmas and symbols, allegories and metaphors, and similar figures."⁶ To remedy this hidden nature of truth, the Alexandrians believed that their interpretations must open up the symbolic language used in the text. Proper interpretation, which according to Alexandrian thought would disregard the unimportant surface details, came as the result of allegorical reading.

Allegorical interpretation was not a novel idea developed by the Alexandrians. This method flourished in its use by Greek philosophers long before the Alexandrian school applied the allegorical method to Biblical exegesis.⁷ The Alexandrian school defended its position by arguing that Jesus' use of parables in his teaching validated their use of allegory in exegesis. They insisted that because his parables were not wholly understood by everyone that heard them, they could rightly conclude that the true meaning of a text will remain elusive to those who are

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ Karlfried Froehlich, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 15.

⁷ John Breck, "Theoria and Orthodox Hermeneutics," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2001): 198.

not elect.⁸ They believed that a true understanding of Jesus' purpose and an appropriate elevation of the elect demand that the Scriptures be interpreted through allegory. According to Manlio Simonetti, the Alexandrians believed the text to be "pregnant with meaning."⁹ This true, spiritual meaning centers on Christ, and, in the eyes of the Alexandrians, each page of the Biblical text must point toward the presence of Christ.

Although this essay will focus on the specific exegetical tradition of the Antiochene school, it is important to recognize the historical background from which this school emerged. For this reason, we must not only consider the influence of the Alexandrian school but also the widespread issues that the church faced during this time. The process of uncovering the setting for these early Christian writers will aid in the quest to understand how and why their exegetical methods evolved in the way they did. Several issues confronted the church fathers during these early years of the development of Christianity. The following paragraph includes a summary of some of the key points presented by Bray's explanation of the tensions that existed.¹⁰ Although there was an imperative need to distinguish Christianity from Judaism, a controversy emerged in the need to interpret the Old Testament in way that could allow the text to become authoritative within the Christian community. Because of this need, many patristic writings elaborated upon the Old Testament, and a major source of conflict between the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools lay in their understanding of the way that Christ fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. The church fathers not only needed to separate Christian doctrines from those of the surrounding

⁸ Simonetti, 36.

⁹ Ibid., 72.

¹⁰ Bray, 95-96.

Jewish sects, but also from the pagan mystery cults and Hellenistic philosophy. Inherent within the development of Christianity as a separate and independent belief system was the need to define the God of Christianity and the nature of Christ. We, in our modern mindset, take for granted the idea that Jesus Christ represents one person of a Trinitarian God and that he maintained a dual nature of both divinity and humanity. This, however, had not been previously discerned during the time of the church fathers. They were struggling with the tensions created by the nature of Christ, and Christological positions were often a major factor in separating opposing schools of thought and became a significant difference between heretic and orthodox beliefs. Within the formative stages of Christianity, the church fathers were struggling to determine how proper application of the Bible could be maintained. The most accepted application of texts became the allegorical interpretation. “Allegorical interpretation of Scripture allowed an entirely Christological reading of the Old Testament, so that . . . historical vicissitudes of Israel or details of the biblical account of creation held no interests in themselves.”¹¹ The church fathers that felt the need to maintain unity within the church; therefore, they highly valued the quest to determine a single authoritative text that could be shared by all believers. Following the affirmation of a singular authoritative text, the church father believed that the next necessity would be to develop a means of doctrinal interpretation that could be shared by all members of the church.

Simonetti argues that the formulation of the Alexandrian interpretive tradition was prompted by the polemic with the Gnostics.¹² The Gnostics juxtaposed the eternal realm of truth and the historical world of matter. In correspondence with this mindset, the Alexandrians ele-

¹¹ Simonetti, 55-56.

¹² Ibid., 34.

vated this realm of eternal truth and devalued the temporal historical event as having little or no meaning.¹³

The excessive spiritualism of the Alexandrian school, in turn, prompted the formulation of the opposing hermeneutic principles, which was initially centered in Antioch, but due to constant scrutiny and accusations of heresy, the school moved its location eastward to Edessa and eventually to Nisibis in Persia.¹⁴ Theodore of Mopsuestia, one Antiochene writer, explains his frustration with the Alexandrian practice of allegory: “When they start expounding divine Scripture ‘spiritually’ – ‘spiritual interpretation’ is the name they like to give their folly – they claim that Adam is not Adam, paradise is not paradise, the serpent not the serpent.”¹⁵ In the writings of Basil of Caesarea, this attitude can also be found:

There are those who do not admit the common sense of the Scriptures, for whom water is not water, but something else, who see in a plant, in a fish, what their fancy wishes, who change the nature of reptiles and of wild beasts to suit their allegories, like the interpreters of dreams who explain visions in sleep to make them serve their own ends. For me grass is grass – plant, fish, wild beast, domestic animal, I take it all in the literal sense.¹⁶

The school at Antioch contrasted the allegorical interpretive methods by accepting a more literal reading of Scripture texts. Although it may seem that the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools can be distinctly separated, any line of demarcation would be somewhat faulty because there were, indeed, adherents within each school that maintained a position of sensitivity to the criticisms of the other. The original tendency of scholars who studied Alexandrian and An-

¹³ Breck, 198.

¹⁴ Froehlich, 20.

¹⁵ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary of the Epistles of St Paul. Latin Version with Greek Fragments*, vol. 1, edited by H.B. Swete, 1880. Reprint. Cambridge:1969, 95-103; Quoted in Karlfried Froehlich, ed. and trans., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 97.

¹⁶ Froehlich, 120.

tiochene thought was to highlight the irreconcilable differences between the two groups. In more recent decades, however, scholars have urged a reconsideration these apparent differences and acknowledgment that there is indeed some overlap.¹⁷

In an article highlighting the diversity within the Antiochene school, itself, Hieromonk Patapois writes, “ the degree of divergence within the Antiochene and Alexandrian exegetical traditions depends very much on which Scriptural text is being expounded.”¹⁸ In spite of the differences in their exegetical methods, their aim remained highly similar: to search for revealed truth and to explain the ways in which the Old Testament should be related to the early church writings. Breck notes that both schools shared two basic hermeneutic principles: first, that the Scriptures were indeed inspired by the Holy Spirit who uses the words of a human author to express Himself, and the second, that Christ had fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Covenant.¹⁹ Their major differences lie in the way that these two schools developed and applied their hermeneutical systems. Breck continues, “The Alexandrians sought to uncover allegorical symbolism, whereas the Antiochenes insisted on preserving the historical meaning revealed in and through the prophetic image of type.”²⁰ Froehlich echoes this idea that the differences cannot be measured in “soteriological principles;” instead the only proper means of distinguishing the two are the methodological emphases.²¹

¹⁷ Simonetti, 67.

¹⁸ Hieromonk Patapois, “The Alexandrian and the Antiochene Methods of Exegesis: Towards a Reconstruction,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44, nos. 1-4 (1999) : 196.

¹⁹ Breck, 201.

²⁰ Breck, 202.

²¹ Froehlich, 20.

According to Bray, the Antiochene method of interpretation was characterized by the idea that “the spiritual sense (theoria) of Scripture was not allegorical, but was to be sought in the literal sense itself.”²² This idea of “theoria,” explains Froehlich, was originally associated with Plato; however, the Antiochene school redefined this term in a way that would deny the validity of the Alexandrian allegorical method. The Antiochene method, according to Diodore of Tarsus one of its adherents, “frees us, on the one hand, from a Hellenism which says one thing for another and introduces foreign subject matter; on the other hand, it does not yield to Judaism by forcing us to treat the literal reading of the text as the only one worthy of attention and honor.”²³

The Christological perspective, which shaped this school’s method of interpretation, was that the humanity of Christ was not altered by his divinity. Their rejection of allegorical methods led to a rejection of the idea that the Old Testament referred directly to Christ and an adherence to the idea that the Old Testament prophecies were rooted in their own culture. Some means of typology were accepted to explain passages that seemed to necessitate an allegorical method of interpretation. “In Antioch,” explains Froehlich, “the Hellenistic rhetorical tradition, and therefore the rational analysis of biblical language, was stressed more than the philosophical tradition and its analysis of spiritual reality.”²⁴

As mentioned previously, the Antiochene school did not mandate adherence to a specific method of interpretation. Instead, it was the commonality of perspective that drew these

²² Bray, 106.

²³ Diodore of Tarsus. *Diodori Tarsensis Commentarii in Psalmos. I. Commentarii in Psalmos I-L*, ed. J.-M. Oliver, Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca, VI. Turnholti: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1980, 87-94; Quoted in Froehlich, Karlfried, ed. and trans. *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 86.

²⁴ Froehlich, 21.

early Christians together. Due to the absence of a hierarchal body to determine the specific principles to be used in exegesis, the Antiochene methods flourished in a much more diverse way. It is necessary to study its adherents as individuals rather than study the collective identity because there is no singular text that sets forth the complete explanation of the tenets of the Antiochene school. Adherents to the Antiochene methods of interpretation include the following: Eusebius of Caesarea, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea.²⁵ Of these, John Chrysostom was undoubtedly the most popular and possibly the only one whose reputation survived the crisis in which adherents to the Antiochene methods were considered heretical. According to Simonetti, however, John Chrysostom does not play a significant role in a wholly exegetical examination because his tendency is to “educate, warn or edify his listeners, rather than to illustrate the text for its own sake.”²⁶

Eusebius of Caesarea, noted by some scholars as the “most systematic scholar which the ancient world produced,”²⁷ adhered to a mainly literal interpretation on the Scriptures. He argued that if there were a historical fulfillment for a prophecy, this should be the focus of reliable interpretation.²⁸ Although he restricted the case of futuristic fulfillment in Christ, he did allow for the idea that some prophecies find fulfillment in Christ only. Although Eusebius once hailed as the Patriarch of Antioch, he was eventually declared an Arian heretic. Gutzman argues that al-

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

²⁶ Simonetti, 74.

²⁷ Bray, 86.

²⁸ Simonetti, 56.

though his views did reflect ideas that were similar to those of the Arians, he was in the company of several other bishops at this time.²⁹

According to Manlio Simonetti, Diodore of Tarsus should be considered the true founder of the Antiochene interpretive method.³⁰ Diodore is known for his writing of a commentary on the Book of Psalms, which was preserved in a manuscript attributed to Anastasius of Nicaea in the eleventh century.³¹ The other works of Diodore were destroyed by the Arians whom he adamantly opposed.³² Eventually Diodore met a fate much like that of Eusebius; he was condemned at Constantinople as the founder of Nestorianism,³³ a heresy characterized by the teaching that Christ's human nature and his divine nature were completely autonomous and were only superficially joined in the person of Christ.

In the prologue to his commentary on the Psalms, Diodore delineates several of the methods that could be appropriately consigned to his hermeneutic principles. He opens his discussion of the psalms with a discussion of Paul's intended meaning in II Timothy 3:16. He affirms Paul's statement regarding the character of Scripture, and he concludes that this statement can be applied to the Psalms. Again, we see this tendency of the early Christian scholars to recognize the relationship between the Old and the New Testament. He argues that the Holy Spirit prompted David to use words that would appropriately embody the emotions of a larger group of

²⁹ K.R. Constantine Gutzman, "Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea and his 'Life of Constantine': A Heretic's Legacy," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42, nos. 3-4 (1997): 352.

³⁰ Simonetti, 59.

³¹ Froehlich, 21.

³² Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1961), 213.

³³ Bray, 87.

people eventually including those within the Christian community in Diodore's time. He writes, "This understanding, however, does not impress itself upon us in the same way when we are just chanting the psalms as when we find ourselves in the very same situations which suggest to us our need for the psalms."³⁴ It may seem as though Diodore is advocating a somewhat allegorical reading of the text. He is careful, however, to distinguish the boundaries of an appropriate interpretation. "One thing is to be watched, however: *theoria* must never be understood as doing away with the underlying sense; it would then be no longer *theoria* but allegory."³⁵ He pleads that the idea of theorizing remains consistent with *theoria* but does not necessarily become allegory. "We may compare, for example, Cain and Abel to the Jewish synagogue and the church; we may attempt to show that like Cain's sacrifice the Jewish temple was rejected, while the offerings of the church are being well received as was Abel's offering at that time."³⁶

In spite of his belief in the importance of the historical background of a Biblical text, Diodore acknowledges that this document was not compiled at one time; therefore, a more difficult struggle in refining the text from its editors must ensue a careful interpretation. The psalms were collected in fragments and compiled in the order that the fragments were collected rather than in a chronological or thematic style. He criticizes the attributions made by editors who sought to find the historical event that preempted each psalm and were willing to assume a historical setting even when in doubt. He writes, "Nevertheless, with the help of God, we shall attempt an

³⁴ Diodore of Tarsus. Maries, L., ed. "Extraits du commentaire de Diodore de Tarse sur les Psaumes: Preface du commentaire—Prologue du Psaume CXVIII," *Recherches de Science religieuse* Paris, 1919, 82-86; Quoted in Froehlich, Karlfried, ed. and trans. *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 82.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

explanation even of these error as far as this is possible. We will not shrink from the truth but will expound it according to the historical substance (*historia*) and the plain literal sense (*lexis*).”³⁷

In the preface to the commentary on Psalms 118, he notes the important task of the interpreter in the quest for truth: “Now given the vast difference between *historia* and *theoria*, allegory and figuration (*tropologia*) or parable (*parabole*), the interpreter must classify and determine each figurative expression with care and precision . . .”³⁸ According to Diodore, figuration implies the prophetic use of an extended illustration. This is evident in Psalm 79 in which the prophet uses a vine as a description of the children of Israel.³⁹ The expression is clarified in the extended text as the prophet continues to talk to the people as if he were talking to a vine. Diodore concludes that although the Biblical text uses the term allegory, it does not use this term in the same way that the Alexandrians seem to do so.⁴⁰

Theodore of Mopsuestia, one of the first to use the technique of literary criticism in exegesis,⁴¹ was considered by many to be a “Judaizer” due to his literalist interpretation of the Old Testament scriptures.⁴² Theodore emphasized the gap between the Old Testament and the New. His perspective on the development of the sacred text influenced his understanding of the development of religion. According to Simonetti, Theodore argued that religion had evolved from its

³⁷Ibid., 85.

³⁸Diodore of Tarsus, *Commentarii in Psalmos*, 87.

³⁹Ibid., 89.

⁴⁰Ibid, 87.

⁴¹Bray, 88.

⁴²Farrar, 216.

pagan roots into Judaism and eventually into Christianity; in accordance with this evolution, the understanding of God moved from polytheistic to monotheistic to the Christian Trinitarian.⁴³

Theodore's interpretation of the Psalms prescribed an interpretation that only three Psalms should be interpreted as directly messianic and his interpretation of the Song of Solomon denied the popular mystical approach to this book.⁴⁴ He claimed that God prophesies in deeds rather than in words;⁴⁵ therefore, the words themselves do not hold the power in his hermeneutical approach. The words are only as powerful as the corresponding actions. His literal approach to the Scripture text sometimes led to his commentaries being nothing more than a restatement of the matter within the text itself.⁴⁶

In his commentary of Galatians 4:22-31, Theodore criticizes the twisting of the term allegory to suit the agenda of the scholar. His assumption is that Paul used the term allegory to compare rather than juxtapose the events of the past and present.⁴⁷ In opposition to Alexandrianism, he argues, "the apostle [Paul in his use of the term allegory in Galatians] neither does away with history nor elaborates on the events that happened long ago."⁴⁸

⁴³ Simonetti, 70.

⁴⁴ Farrar, 216.

⁴⁵ Farrar, 218.

⁴⁶ Simonetti, 71.

⁴⁷ Theodore, 99.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 96.

CONCLUSION

The Antiochene tradition represents one of the earliest attempts to employ the historical critical method of interpreting Scripture. Any understanding of the development of hermeneutical principles within Christianity cannot escape the tension created by the fact that such a currently prominent method met with such great opposition during its introduction to the community of believers. It remains incumbent upon each Biblical scholar to determine the way in which different aspects of Scripture should be treated and to develop an informed understanding which is faithful to the text itself and recognizes the role of church traditions such as that of the Antiochene interpreters.

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