




Classical Models for the Interpretation of Scripture:

Patristic and Middle Age



The Big Question: *What To Do With the Hebrew Bible?*

Early Solutions (from last week):

Matthew – see in Christ the fulfillment of Hebrew Bible **prophecies** (Matt 1:22-23) and **types** and **Jesus as reinterpreter of Torah**

- **Paul** – identify **types** and prophecies in the Hebrew Bible **fulfilled in Christ** (Adam ~ Christ) and **beyond in the believers** & their experience



New Testament and Its Canonization

- ◆ The use of the NT writings as authoritative scriptural documents developed slowly during the 2nd c.
- ◆ Early in the 2nd c., local churches used the Gospels (most often Matthew*) and a few other writings. Three of the Pauline Epistles – 1 Corinthians*, Romans*, and Ephesians* – were often cited. 1 Peter* and 1 John* are mentioned by Papias*.



New Testament and Its Canonization

- ◆ Development of Marcionites and other Gnostics (Valentinians): reject HB, invented Canon
Principle: Paul and Luke as authoritative
- ◆ Used against him and the Gnostics by Irenaeus, then Tertullian, Clement, and Origen.
- ◆ Only in the 4th c. was there agreement about the canon, a specific list of books. Athanasius's festal epistle (367)... not accepted by the Arian Church (majority church in West until 6th c.)

The Apostolic Fathers

(1 Clement, Didache, Shepherd of Hermas, Epistle of Barbabas)

- ◆ The legal portions of the Hebrew Bible are largely ignored (better **Sermon on the Mount**)
- ◆ When legal materials are used, they are spiritualized to point to Christ (**as types of Christ & his sacrifice**)
 - The red heifer (Numbers 19)
 - The scapegoat (Leviticus 16)
 - Moses crossing his hands during the battle with Amalek foreshadows the cross of Christ (Exodus 17:8-13)
- ◆ Appeals are made to HB heroes as (**moral**) **examples of faith** (Noah, Abraham, Judith, Esther) [**vs. types**]





- ◆ the Apostolic Fathers (Christian writers of the first and second centuries:) read the Hebrew Bible largely in light of the New Testament. Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna,
 - **typological/allegorical**
 - a christological hermeneutic = usually **Christ is complete and final revelation**
- ◆ This **Christ-centered** reading is taken even further by the early Christian apologists: (remember: NT still not settled as Scripture)
 - Justin Martyr (c. 114-165 CE)
 - Irenaeus (c. 130-200 CE)
 - Tertullian (c. 160-225 CE)

An Encounter of the Literal Kind

Christ-centered interpretive concerns led another early-Christian thinker to a very different valuation of the HB – ***THROW IT OUT!***

- ◆ **Marcion** (c.85--165 CE) a literal reading
 - God asks Adam, “Where are you?” (Gen 3) God must be ignorant!
 - God tells Joshua and the Israelites to kill innocent people in the conquest – God must be cruel and immoral.
 - *This god of the Hebrew Bible who created the world can not be the same God of Jesus and must therefore be a totally different god.*



Allegorical vs. Literal Interpretation

- ◆ **Interpretative theory was also important in the Greek world** for reading texts foundational to Greek society (Homer, etc.) Greek readers also utilized allegorical and literal approaches.
- ◆ Greek, Jewish, and Christian interpreters share the goal of understanding and applying their texts in new cultural, linguistic, ethical, political, social, and economic contexts.
- ◆ The two great centers of Christian learning in the 2nd to 5th centuries CE closely paralleled the Greek and Jewish hermeneutical patterns we have observed (allegorical and literal).



The Exegetical Schools of Alexandria and Antioch

♦ The school of Alexandria

- preferred the allegorical approach to interp.
 - What meaning lies *behind* the text, to what does the text point?
- **Clement of Alexandria (c. 180-215)**
 - Arguing to pagans that Christ is the supreme source of knowledge in the HB, NT, and even Greek phil.
- **Origen (c. 185-253)**
 - Applied allegory to “contradictions” in the HB such as light before sun (Gen 1) and instances where human passions and activities are ascribed to God.
 - Only the allegorical method could address the mystery of the divine-human relationship in the Scriptures.



The Exegetical Schools of Alexandria and Antioch

◆ The school of Antioch

- preferred the literal/historical approach to interpretation.
 - What lies in/behind the text? What was the writer trying to say/address? What is the religious experience they present
- Bishop Theophilus (c. 169 CE)
 - Stressed that the HB was an authentic history of God's dealings with the Israelites. His *To Autolychnus* gave a chronology from creation to his own day.
- Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428 CE)
- Diodore of Tarsus (c. 378 CE)
- John Chrysostom (c. 380 CE)



Alexandria and Antioch Intersect

◆ Jerome (331-420 CE)

- Spent much of his life in Antioch
- Was a great linguist – *The Vulgate* – moved to Bethlehem to learn Hebrew for his work.
- Also influenced by Didymus of Alexandria during a visit in 385 CE.
- Thus his commentaries reflect some allegorical influence, but his linguistic work emphasized the literal text.



Alexandria and Antioch Intersect

◆ Augustine (354-430 CE)

- Worked to combine Alexandrian and Antiochene concerns for the good of the Christian community.
- The Bible has a communicative function: enlighten the reader about God's salvific activity in the world.
- The Bible as primarily about faith, hope and love: "A person who bases his/her life firmly on faith, hope and love, thus, needs the Scriptures only to teach others."




The Middle Ages (500-1500 CE)

- ◆ The Church endured significant losses in this period due to Muslim conquests (North Africa and large parts of the eastern Roman Empire).
- ◆ Christian learning was kept alive in cathedral schools and, primarily, in monasteries.
- ◆ Gregory the Great (c. 540–604 CE)
 - Champion of the allegorical approach
 - He compared the act of reading the Bible with the building of a house: upon the historical foundation we erect the walls with the help of our spiritual reading, and then we color the whole structure by the grace of moral teaching .




Not Only Allegorical


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- ◆ Although the allegorical approach to Scripture largely dominated early medieval Christian exegesis, there was still significant interest in the literal approach. This was not only due to the Antiochene school, Jerome, and Augustine, but also to great Jewish exegetes of the medieval period:

- **Abraham ibn Ezra (1092-1167 CE)**
- **Moses ben Maimon [Maimonides] (1135-1204 CE)**
- **Solomon ben Isaac [Rashi] (1040-1105 CE)**


Multiple Senses of Scripture

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- ◆ In the final analysis, medieval Christian exegesis would not be characterized by a single interpretative approach, but several.
 - ◆ Although Origen had favored the allegorical approach, he recognized that Scripture itself suggests the need for a multiplicity of senses:
 - Proverbs 22:20-21 Have I not written for you ***thirty sayings*** of admonition and knowledge, to show you what is right and true, so that you may give a true answer to those who sent you?
 - 1 Thessalonians 5:23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your ***spirit*** and ***soul*** and ***body*** be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
 - Thus in theory, Origen allowed for the bodily (***literal***), soul (***moral***), and spiritual (***allegorical/mystical***) senses of Scripture.

Multiple Senses of Scripture

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- ◆ John Cassianus (5th century CE) had also proposed a fourfold theory of interpretation. Following Origen, he distinguished between
 - literal and spiritual interpretation, but then subdivided spiritual interpretation more sharply into:
 - **(1) tropological (moral)**
 - **(2) allegorical**
 - **(3) anagogical (future-oriented)**

The Medieval Four-Fold Sense of Scripture



As a result of these and many other influences, medieval Christian exegesis came to be characterized by a four-fold sense of Scripture. This schema is summed up by a Latin rhyme which follows Cassian's model:

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*

The *letter* shows us what God and our fathers did;
the *allegory* shows us where our faith is hid;
the *moral* meaning gives us rules of daily life;
the *anagogy* shows us where we end our strife.

The Four-Fold Sense: An Illustration


“Jerusalem” in Galatians 4:22ff gives a good illustration of the four-fold sense of Scripture.

◆ Four meanings of Jerusalem:

- Literal/historical – the city of the Jews
- Allegorical – the church of Christ
- Moral – indicates the human soul
- Anagogical – points to the heavenly city which is the mother of us all



Not the End, Only the Beginning

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- ◆ The four-fold sense of Scripture would not settle the debate between proponents of the literal and allegorical approaches to Scripture.
 - ◆ For example, Thomas Aquinas (1125-1274 CE) was a strong advocate of the literal approach:

“Nothing necessary for faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward clearly by the Scripture in its literal sense” (*Summa Theologiae* 1a. 1, 10).
 - ◆ An unfortunate result of the ongoing argument would be a growing rift between the literal/critical ideal of the “academy” and the allegorical which was the “popular” favorite.
 - ◆ It is this rift which the Oxford reformers and Luther would soon declare unacceptable. But this must wait for the lecture next week.