

PATRISTIC INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE WITHIN GOD'S STORY OF CREATION AND REDEMPTION¹

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Introduction

Many exegetes have grown increasingly dissatisfied both by the limitations and secularistic presuppositions of historical criticism, and also by the seemingly endless proliferation of undisciplined or ideological post-modern reading strategies, few of which seem to respect or even relate to the Bible as God's revelation. How instead can exegetes more effectively treat and interpret Scripture as God's Word to his people? Contemporary Christian and Jewish biblical scholars continue to develop approaches to theological interpretation of Scripture that are both contemporary as well as traditional and biblically grounded.

They are again looking to the Fathers of the Church for inspiration and guidance on how to interpret for today the Bible as God's Word. However, some of the interpretive approaches for which the Fathers are well known seem quite alien to contemporary scholarly sensitivities and preferences, particularly because of their apparent lack of methodological controls to prevent eisegesis into the text of one's own biases, or fanciful applications that bear little apparent relation to the obvious meaning of the biblical passage. Such concerns prompt the following questions:

- (1) Do patristic authors have anything to teach today's Catholic interpreters of Scripture (especially teachers and preachers) about reading Scripture?
- (2) If so, what?

Probably least attractive to contemporary biblicists are allegorical meanings that seem to be arbitrarily imported into the sense of the passage. Also foreign to contemporary exegetical approaches are the "four senses of Scripture," for which medieval exegesis is also especially known. Although the four senses do not appear as arbitrary as patristic and medieval allegorizing, their complexity and their grounding in medieval philosophy seem to presuppose a philosophical competence that many contemporary exegetes do not have.

1 I am very grateful to The Word Among Us Press and to Editorial Director Patricia Mitchell for granting me copyright permission to borrow heavily in this article from Chapter Two, "Developing a Theological Approach to Scripture," in my *Reading the Bible as God's Own Story: A Catholic Approach for Bringing Scripture to Life* (The Word Among Us Press, 2007). There the reader will find a fuller context, development, and exemplification of this article's arguments and conclusions.

Some early patristic figures, however, exemplified a much simpler and more direct theological approach to interpreting Scripture. For example, St. Irenaeus generally avoided allegory because he was combatting the heretical allegories by which the Gnostics managed to deform the basic meanings and narratives of Scripture either into their polar opposites or into completely unrelated myths and theologies. Also, against Arians, St. Athanasius was defending the pivotal doctrine of the Incarnation of the Son of God, who was both true God and true man (and ultimately the dogma that God is One and Triune). The Arians did not depend on allegory, but they used literalistic interpretation of particular words and expressions of Scripture (the Greek Old and New Testament) as proof texts for their doctrine, without sufficient account of their fuller biblical context. They especially failed to consider the context of a given text within the overall sweep of Salvation History.

The principal defense of Fathers like Irenaeus and Athanasius against heretical interpretations, whether of undisciplined allegorizers like Gnostics, or of proof-texting readers like Arians, was to interpret individual scriptural passages within the overarching biblical narrative from God's creation to redemption and ultimately to eschatological judgment and new creation. This approach is proving quite attractive to contemporary scholars who respect and use historical criticism to determine the human meaning of passages, but also want to read those passages as part of God's overall biblical narrative and revelation.

Patristic Biblical Interpretation

Catholics do not have to create theological biblical readings *ex nihilo*, from nothing. They have centuries' worth of examples of theological readings of Scripture—beginning in the Bible itself with the later Old Testament and the New Testament, in which subsequent biblical texts reinterpreted and reapplied earlier passages. Theological interpretation of Scripture flourished through the patristic and medieval periods, up until the widespread rejection of those “pre-critical” interpretative approaches in the modernist age. A significant, if partial, reason for that rejection was Enlightenment rationalism and its rejection of dogma.²

Catholic Church authorities for some time resisted this modernist rejection and the use of the new critical methods, but the “Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation” in Vatican II finally gave full official ecclesial approval to

2 See Luke Timothy Johnson, “Rejoining a Long Conversation,” in Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 35–63. Johnson discusses and recommends consulting Church Fathers and pre-critical interpreters of Scripture. Because the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century followed the bloodshed and devastation from the religious wars in Europe, it sought to replace by critical reason such irrational and destructive behaviors and beliefs that were generated by conflicting religious beliefs and denominations.

reasonable use of historical-critical biblical exegesis.³ Within a surprisingly short time after Vatican II, however, the hard-earned authorization from Catholic teaching authorities to use historical-critical exegesis of Scripture has been followed by intensifying dissatisfaction by some Catholic biblical scholars with the increasingly apparent pastoral limitations of exclusively historical-critical readings. This has led to some tension not only among Catholic biblical researchers, but also between Catholic biblicists and patristic and medieval historians who specialize in “pre-critical” biblical interpretation by ancient and medieval Church Fathers. Systematic theologians also can find themselves torn between grounding their use and citation of Scripture predominantly on historical-critical biblical interpretations (as they typically seem to have done since Vatican II), or seeking scriptural interpretations more attuned to theological explanations and views of reality.

The recent reclamation of the Fathers of the Church for lessons and models of theological interpretation of Scripture has not been without its strains. Therefore, it will be helpful to revisit some tensions, misconceptions, and prejudices regarding patristic and pre-critical biblical interpretation in recent Catholic scholarship. Although the allegorical tendency for which patristic and medieval writers are most widely known will not be the primary approach followed in this essay, it does seem important to explain briefly what is usually meant by allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Related and sometimes overlapping terms are used when discussing allegory, such as typology and figural reading, which we need not fully distinguish nor individually explain here.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a readily available summary of the chief distinctions among kinds of interpretation or senses of Scripture. Its two principal and most important categories are the literal sense and the spiritual senses (nos. 115–119); the spiritual senses are usually subdivided into the “allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses” (no. 115). The *Catechism* explains that because of the unity of God’s saving plan (no. 112), the realities and events about which Scripture speaks can be signs of other realities (no. 117). The three spiritual senses are, therefore, the *allegorical* (in which one referent can stand for another, for example, crossing the Red Sea as a sign of Christ’s victory and Christian baptism); the *moral* sense (which relates Scripture to acting justly, as “written for our instruction,” 1 Cor. 10:11); and the *anagogical* sense (which relates Scripture to its eternal significance and our future hope, e.g., seeing the church on earth as a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem, no. 117).⁴

3 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [the Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965) 12–13, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchar, S.J., (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 19–31, at 24–25.

4 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 112, 115–119.

To allegorize a biblical (or any) text usually involves isolating individual words, phrases, or details in the passage from their natural meaning in their original contexts, and then correlating those words with some other word or reality that was not part of the passage's original meaning or context. For example, it was common for Christians in ancient and medieval times to allegorize the two human lovers in the ancient biblical Hebrew love song, the Song of Solomon (or Canticle of Canticles), as referring to the love of Christ for the Church, his bride. This allegory from the Song of Solomon illustrates the perduring value that some biblical allegory retains. The symbolism of Christ and his bride the Church, which has been especially immortalized in the comparison of husband and wife to Christ and his bridal Church in Ephesians 5:21–33, remains of crucial importance in Catholic biblical interpretation and doctrine.

Augustine

At the heart of the disputes over approaches like allegory is the extent to which allegory does or does not express or presume the apparently intended meaning of the original human biblical writer. Roland Teske exemplifies the issues at stake in an illuminating case study comparing Augustine's literal and christological (spiritual) interpretations of the Good Samaritan. Augustine generally interprets this parable christologically (allegorically correlating the Good Samaritan who helps the fallen man with the incarnate Son helping fallen humankind). Augustine also, however, can interpret the parable literally (in ways acceptable to historical critics), and has produced several examples of its literal interpretation. Nevertheless, there is an added theological richness in Augustine's christological interpretation, which can exemplify the entire economy of God's salvation of fallen humans through the Incarnation of the Son. Augustine himself admits the difference between the meaning intended by the human author and a meaning which the text can call to the reader's mind even if it was not part of the author's original point. If the latter spiritual meaning is congruent with the overall message of Scripture as interpreted in the Church, Augustine would consider it as a legitimate understanding of the text's message from God to the reader.

Contrary to historical criticism, however, Augustine held that the christological interpretation of the Good Samaritan can even be considered the teaching of Jesus himself. Teske suggests three lines of argumentation that Augustine might use to argue his point with modern exegetes. First, in *Confessions* Book 12, Augustine made the following argument against those who would claim that although his interpretation of Genesis has merit, it was not intended by the author of Genesis: there is no harm if one does not arrive at the author's intended point if we reach a truth that God shows us to be true. Similarly, Augustine might argue that without determining what Luke's intended meaning for the parable itself was,

Luke would have surely intended readers to be able to find in the parable other biblical truths even if he himself did not have them in mind.

Second, although Augustine clearly prefers the meaning of the author himself, this is not always ascertainable. If it is not, we should choose an interpretation that is supported by the context of Scripture and is prescribed by sound faith. His christological interpretation does agree with both the biblical message and sound faith. Additionally, sometimes a biblical passage has several true interpretations. Further, even if the human author was not aware of the christological meaning, the Holy Spirit who inspired him certainly foresaw and providentially arranged that such a meaning would occur to believing readers. Therefore, that sense is true even if unintended by Luke.

Third, for Augustine the goal of all biblical exegesis is practical—the love of God and neighbor. Through the instrumentality of the biblical text God directly works on the individual reader. Thus, for Augustine, no matter how learned an interpretation may be, if it does not build love in the reader, it has failed to understand Scripture as Scripture. Whereas an interpretation that does build love, even if it does not convey the precise meaning intended by the biblical author, does no harm and is guilty of no untruth. Augustine would, therefore, consider his christological interpretation of the Good Samaritan to be more theologically useful than a merely literal interpretation of the parable, and, therefore, to fulfill the ultimate purpose of exegesis of building love in the reader.⁵

Another important consideration about allegory is that already some New Testament passages had allegorized Old Testament details. An example is 1 Corinthians 10:1–4, especially verse 4, “and all [the Israelites in the desert] drank from the same supernatural [or *spiritual*] drink. For they drank from the supernatural [*spiritual*] Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ.”⁶ Other examples of patristic or medieval allegorizing, especially the further removed their allegorical details are from the central point of the biblical passage, are less attractive today. There may not be much current interest in allegorizing Martha and Mary, respectively, as active and contemplative spiritualities (for example, of “active” Jesuits and “contemplative” Trappists or Poor Clare sisters).

Irenaeus and Athanasius and Other Fathers

As mentioned above, other approaches of the Church Fathers that seem more inviting today for interpreting Scripture theologically (as God’s biblical message) are exemplified by Saints Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 125–203) and Athanasius

5 See Roland Teske, “The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37) in Augustine’s Exegesis,” in *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, eds. Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schaubelt, OSA (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 347–367, at 353–357.

6 *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments*, Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1965, 1966), emphasis added. Unless otherwise noted, all English quotations in this essay are from this version.

(A.D. 298–373). Both of these Church Fathers had to deal with alien or harmful interpretations and applications of Scripture, which supported non-Christian religious mythology or heretical forms of Christianity that denied vital Christian dogmas. To counter these misleading approaches to Scripture, both Irenaeus and Athanasius explicitly read and interpreted Scripture in the context of the entire biblical message of creation and salvation and of traditional Church summaries of biblical revelation in various versions of the “rule of faith.” They interpreted this way because they were Church teachers and pastors, instructing believers in ecclesial, liturgical, and pastoral settings, not in school settings like contemporary universities. Misinterpretations of Scripture threatened the faith of Christians entrusted to their care. This helps account for the vehemence with which Fathers like Irenaeus and Athanasius rejected heretical interpretations of the Bible.

For example, when ancient Gnostics took biblical words and passages out of context to elaborate their peculiar polytheistic myths of creation and salvation, which were quite foreign to biblical revelation and Christian salvation, Irenaeus insisted on reading biblical words and passages in both their immediate biblical context and in the context of the Church’s understanding of the central biblical message. Later, at the time of the Council of Nicea (325), when Arian Christians were using the literal meanings of biblical words, phrases, and passages to argue that the Word or Son of God was not divine but only a creature made by God (even if they admitted that he was the first to be created), Athanasius responded with an extremely close and careful reading of the same passages used by the Arians. Nevertheless, he was guided in his close reading by the overall biblical message of salvation as interpreted by the Church, in which the divine Son of God was begotten by the Father as equally divine without being a second God.

The problematical forms of interpretation in both Gnosticism and Arianism tended not only to take words, phrases, or passages out of their natural biblical context. They tended also to read those words or passages with an exaggerated literalist interpretation that failed to respect the overall biblical revelation about the relationship of God to the world and about the history of God’s salvation of fallible humans.

At the heart of the approaches of both Irenaeus and Athanasius was a relatively simple and straightforward principle and procedure. Both Fathers read each biblical passage quite closely and with concentrated attention to details in the text, as biblical scholars do today. However, unlike most contemporary academic biblicists, Irenaeus and Athanasius also purposefully read each individual passage in the light of Scripture’s overall message of God’s creation and salvation.

Early Christian Fathers regularly read and steeped themselves in Scripture and participated in liturgies that featured biblical readings over the course of the Church’s liturgical year (readings which together commemorate most of God’s story of salvation). They expressed their personal and communal prayers in the

words of the Old Testament psalms, and they consciously lived within the biblical worldview. They understood themselves as created by God, as sinners with Adam and his descendants, as reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's Son. Through the Church's liturgical year, they placed themselves within the biblical events as participants in them. An especially striking Jewish example of such personal insertion into God's biblical story is the explanation to the youngest participant at a Jewish Seder celebration that God has freed "us" from slavery. In these ways both Jews and Christians derived from the Bible an overarching narrative.⁷ From the Bible's myriad details, plot lines, books, theologies, and cultural contexts, patristic writers discerned an underlying unified story line, a foundational biblical story. Commencing from the very beginning—the creation of the world and of humans by God—this story recounted the human fall from God's friendship and God's response through divine promises, covenants, saving acts, and use of human instruments to implement divine providence.

This biblical story finds its climax in the Incarnation of the Son of God and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It continues with the life of the Church up until the final judgment. Using this fundamental story as implied context and background for all the individual accounts and perspectives in both Old and New Testaments enabled the patristic authors to pay extremely close attention to individual details of particular biblical passages without losing a sense of God's overall biblical message.

As a further shorthand guide to keep the reader from getting lost in the maze of diverging and sometimes apparently even misleading strands among the many Old and New Testament books and authors, the Fathers used a "rule of

7 Christopher Seitz demonstrates that this kind of overall biblical narrative approach developed by the patristic authors is grounded in the New Testament itself. Using Lukan examples in particular, he illustrates how the expression "according to the Scriptures" situates the identity and mission of Jesus in the context of God's saving plan and actions recounted in the Old Testament. The Gospels and Fathers from the second and third centuries described Jesus by situating him in God's saving plan as revealed in their Scripture (= Old Testament) combined with the apostolic witness to Jesus (before the completed "canonized" New Testament). See Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 104. Seitz also relates the patristic use of the *rule of faith* to this use of the Old Testament narrative of God's saving plan. Because for Christians the Son and Father are one, both Old and New Testaments provide a unified witness to them via the Holy Spirit (Seitz, *Figured Out*, 6). See Lk. 16:31: "He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'" Compare also Lk. 24:27: "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." See also Lk. 24:44–49: "Then he said to them, 'These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.'"

faith,” or a basic hypothesis or story line of Scripture. They judged that the Bible’s foundational narrative had been authentically summarized by the Church in theological and philosophical terminology as the Church’s rule of faith:

It [the rule of faith] began with the confession of God as creator, briefly narrated the coming of Christ, told of his suffering, death and resurrection, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and ended by pointing to the return of Christ in glory. By presenting the story of the Bible in capsule form, the rule of faith or “pattern of truth” defined the subject matter of the Bible, thereby offering a commentary on the whole.⁸

This rule of faith was based on scriptural narratives, teachings, and evidence. It helped to keep readers’ bearings focused on the essentials of the overall biblical story and message and not to get lost in voluminous biblical details, stories, and theologies.

The education of most ancient and patristic writers was grounded in Greco-Roman rhetoric. In their book, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible*, John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno describe how Irenaeus borrows from classical rhetoric three key terms: *hypothesis*, *economy*, and *recapitulation*. Rhetorical teaching and theory called “the gist of a literary work” its *hypothesis*.⁹ The hypothesis of an *argument* is the argument’s basic outline, whereas the hypothesis of a *narrative* is the basic story line of that narrative.

According to Irenaeus, the main problem with heretical interpretation of Scripture is that it ignores the primary hypothesis of the Bible. While focusing on details and symbols, it fails to show how “the beginning, middle, and end hang together.”¹⁰ For Irenaeus, the hypothesis of Scripture is that Jesus fulfills all things. Jesus came according to God’s economy, and recapitulated everything in himself.¹¹

For Irenaeus the *economy* is the “outline or table of contents of scripture.”¹² Later generations tended to prefer the expression “salvation history” to the patristic word “economy.” An ancient rhetorical *recapitulation* is a work’s final summing up, repetition, drawing to a conclusion. In oratory it refers especially to the summary at the end of a speech that drives home the point of its strongest arguments. For

8 Robert Louis Wilken, “In Dominico Eloquio: Learning the Lord’s Style of Language,” *Communio* 24 (1997): 846–866, at 863.

9 See John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2005), 34.

10 O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 35.

11 O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 37.

12 O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 38.

Irenaeus, Jesus is the Father's summary statement, his Logos or Word, the purpose for the biblical economy as incarnating the purpose of God's economy.¹³

Patristic Reading of Scripture with the Rule of Faith

There were actually multiple early examples and variations of this rule of faith, even within a single author such as St. Irenaeus. The rule of faith was like a Creed, but the rule of faith was particularly meant for theologians and biblical interpreters, whereas the original setting for Creeds was the sacrament of Baptism.¹⁴ Later interpreters and readers of Scripture also came to use official Creeds as they would a rule of faith. The most significant Creed for biblical interpretation came to be the Nicene Creed, which Athanasius helped to formulate at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325.

The Nicene Creed was defined to counteract the heretical denial of Jesus' divinity by the Arians. Even though Arians accepted the biblical claim that the Son existed with God before the creation of the material world, they based their denial of his divinity on their interpretation of several biblical passages that seemed to imply that the Son of God was a creature. Compare John 1:1–3 ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...") with the claim by Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22–23: "The LORD *created me at the beginning of his work*, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth."¹⁵ The principal rejoinders that Athanasius makes against Arian biblical interpretation were for the most part his alternative exegetical arguments and interpretations of the same passages that were being used by Arians to deny Jesus' divinity.

St. Irenaeus emphasized the church's "rule of faith" as an indispensable key to reading Scripture, especially to counteract dramatically alien gnostic interpretations of Scripture. *Gnostics* (from the Greek for *knowing*) were heretical thinkers who were quite influential at the time of Irenaeus. They claimed to have extra-biblical oral revelation and inside knowledge that ordinary (and implicitly inferior) Catholic Christians did not have. At the heart of their religion was an alien mythology that claimed that human souls were sparks of the divine that somehow got trapped in evil matter. Salvation came primarily through souls *knowing* their true identity as sparks of the divine and, consequently, being freed from the shackles of their material bodies. Though the ancient gnostic religion is in the past, gnostic tendencies occasionally reappear, as in some aspects of recent "New Age" religiosity.

13 O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 39.

14 See Joseph T. Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority: The Canon of the Christian Bible in History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press [A Michael Glazier Book], 1995), 49–52, at 51.

15 RSV, Catholic Edition, emphasis added.

Irenaeus emphasized how Gnostics took biblical details completely out of their biblical context and significance, from which they then fashioned their eccentric unbiblical doctrines by using biblical vocabulary in unbiblical ways. Irenaeus likened their interpretations to taking apart a beautiful mosaic image of a king into its constituent pieces, and then rearranging those pieces into a new mosaic image of a dog.¹⁶ To counter such chaotic and arbitrary “proof-texting” of biblical words and passages in ways that were completely foreign to their biblical contexts and meanings, Church leaders emphasized that the Scriptures needed to be read in light of their basic message, which had been summed up in the church’s “rule of faith.”

The Church Fathers frequently recall how when humans rejected God and his commands in their desire to be as God themselves, no mere human could make up for that offense against God’s infinite dignity. Therefore, they often emphasized that the turning point in God’s biblical story of salvation was the occasion on which the Second Person of the Trinity (the Son or Word) became man (in the Incarnation) to reconcile humans to God and to “re-open the gates of heaven” as the unique mediator between God and man.¹⁷ To be able to function as mediator, God’s incarnate Son, Jesus, could not be merely a creature. It is because the Son of God is both truly God and truly man that he can mediate between and reconcile God and the alienated human race. Because the Son is of the same being as the Father, the Son also is God. Thus, the incarnate Jesus is both God and man.¹⁸

16 See *Irenaeus Against Heresies* (Bk. 1, Chap. 8, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* [ANF], vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe [American reprint of Edinburgh ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, reprinted 1969], 326): “How the Valentinians pervert the scriptures to support their own impious opinions: Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that this was the beautiful image of the king which the skillful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king’s form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king. In like manner do these persons patch together old wives’ fables, and then endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions.”

17 Wilken (“*In Dominico Eloquentia*,” 862) quotes Henri de Lubac: “Jesus Christ brings about the unity of the Scripture, because he is the endpoint and fullness of Scripture. Everything in it is related to him. In the end he is its sole object. Consequently, he is, so to speak, its whole exegesis” (citing *Exégèse Médiévale* 1:322 [ET 1:235]).

18 Especially helpful as a guide to patristic biblical interpretation are Frances Young, *Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1993), ch. 3, “Tradition and Interpretation,” 45–65, and ch. 4, “Jewish Texts and Christian Meanings,” 66–87. (*Virtuoso Theology* was originally published in London in 1990 by Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd., as *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture*.)

Because of the predominant role played by the Incarnation in the biblical account of salvation, the key to Scripture was generally recognized to be the doctrine that the Son was of the same being, nature, or essence as the Father, even though the wording of that teaching is more philosophical than biblical. To expound this doctrine, Athanasius and other Church Fathers used the philosophical term, *homoousios* (of the same being or essence), which they admitted was not even found in the Bible. They neither found this term or doctrinal teaching explicitly expressed in Scripture, nor did they extract this term from the Bible. Nevertheless, they judged that this word most fully and accurately expressed the fundamental biblical teaching about the Son, that he was not only “with God” in the beginning, before the creation of the world, as the Arians also held, but that he “was God,” as John 1:1 put it.¹⁹

The Scope of Scripture according to St. Athanasius

Athanasius accuses the Arians of misinterpreting Scripture because they do not read individual passages from within the “scope of Scripture.” The scope of Scripture refers to the reality about which the Bible is speaking. As he explains:

Now the scope and character of Holy Scripture ... is this,—it contains a double account of the Saviour [*sic*]; that he was ever God, and is the Son, being the Father’s Word and Radiance and Wisdom; and that afterwards for us he took flesh of a Virgin, Mary, Bearer of God [*Theotokos*], and was made man. And this scope is to be found throughout inspired Scripture, as the Lord Himself has said, “Search the Scriptures, for they are they which testify of Me.”²⁰

19 See Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1966), 33: “Theological statements are made by hard exegesis in light of the truth to which Scripture points. For Athanasius, the supreme example of exegetical and theological activity is the *homoousion* of Nicea. As a compressed statement, it becomes normative for all theological statement that is to be faithful to its proper object and consistent with other faithful statements.” See also p. 36: “The epistemological significance of the Nicæan *homoousion* doctrine of consubstantiality of the Incarnate Word and Son of God lies in the rejection of the Valentinian and Arian dichotomy that made the *Logos* in the last resort a creature of God ... and lies in the insistence that in Jesus Christ we have a *Logos* that is not of man’s devising but One who goes back into the eternal Being of God for he proceeded from the eternal Being of God. The Incarnation means that God has really given himself and communicated himself in his eternal Word to man.” See also for corroboration Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 253.

20 St. Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, Bk. 3, Chap. 29, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 409. Two key Scriptures Athanasius cites to express this “scope” are Jn. 1:1–3, 14 and Phil. 2:6–8.

When the Old Testament is read in light of the New, the primary reality being revealed is that the Word or Son of God, who pre-existed creation with the Father and through whom the world was created, was not only “with God”²¹ but also “was God.”²² This divine “Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.”²³

Athanasius then refers to the Word’s pattern of emptying or *kenosis* expressed by Paul in Philippians 2:6–8. Though “he was in the form of God” (to be contrasted later with “form of a servant”) he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.”²⁴ Rather, “he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”²⁵ Further, “in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”²⁶ Not clinging to his being “in the form of God,” he took on “the form of a servant” which is identified with the human outward appearance or form.²⁷

Implicit is the contrast between the Word, who was in the form of God, not grasping at equality with God that he already had, and Adam, who was in the image of God, coveting: “you will be like God.”²⁸ In contrast to Adam who therefore disobeyed God, the Word in human form humbly obeyed God unto death, even that of the cross.

Athanasius goes on to argue: “Any one, beginning with these passages and going through the whole of the Scripture upon the interpretation which they suggest, will perceive how in the beginning the Father said to Him, ‘Let there be light,’ and ‘Let there be a firmament,’ and ‘Let us make man’”²⁹; “but in fulness [*sic*] of the ages, He sent Him into the world, not that he might judge the world, but that the world by Him might be saved ...” And the Son conceived by the Virgin shall be called “Emmanuel, which, being interpreted, is God with us.”³⁰ Thus reading all the Scripture in light especially of John 1 and Philippians 2, Athanasius perceives the scope of Scripture as extending from the pre-existent Word through his Incarnation, death and exaltation, to his status as Judge at the end of time. Thus, all interpretation must account for the objective reality revealed in Scripture. That object or scope of Scripture is Jesus himself, who is both God and man. Biblical

21 Jn. 1:1.

22 Jn. 1:1.

23 Jn. 1:14.

24 Phil. 2:6.

25 Phil. 2:7.

26 Phil. 2:8.

27 Phil. 2:7.

28 Gen. 3:5.

29 Gen. 1:3, 6, 26.

30 See Matthew 1:23.

statements must therefore be interpreted according to both his divine and human natures.³¹

Athanasius' Understanding of "Tradition" in "Scripture and Tradition"

Athanasius expounds Church "Tradition" by the command of Christ at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."³² Having "all authority in heaven and on earth,"³³ Christ commands his disciples (the Church), to convert all nations and to baptize them "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"³⁴ that is, in the single name of the one God as Trinity.

Disciples are to teach all nations "to observe all that I have commanded you." Their teaching is grounded firmly on the deeds and sayings of Jesus and neither adds to all those sayings or deeds nor subtracts from them. For Athanasius, therefore, the content of Church Tradition matches what is revealed in Scripture. Providing protection against human additions to and subtractions from Tradition (as in Arianism), the risen Jesus remains present with the Church. Tradition is not sustained in separation from Jesus' continued presence in the Church and guidance of all that the Church teaches: "lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."³⁵

Catholic teaching and Tradition comes from Jesus, through the apostles, to Church leaders and members, up to the present time, and until the end of time. Thus, for Athanasius, Tradition is equivalent to apostolic tradition, which in turn is equivalent to the content of Scripture. Since he considers the scope or core revelation and content of Scripture to be Jesus, God and man, who remains with the Church as Immanuel, Tradition is not separated from the continued presence of the risen Jesus, God with us. Grounded in the person of the risen Jesus, the God-man, Tradition is passed on not by mere human reasoning and speculation alone. It is passed on and received by both faith and by reverent (and obedient) reasoning from within the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church, not by profane meanings or mere human opinions.³⁶

31 Compare Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 238–239.

32 Matt. 28:19–20.

33 Matt. 28:18.

34 Matt. 28:19.

35 Matt. 28:20.

36 Compare Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 240–244, and St. Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* [Against the Arians], Bk. 3, Chaps. 29–30, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 409–410.

Monotheism and the Trinity in Reading the Old Testament

Despite the Church Fathers' belief in the Trinity, which differentiated them from their contemporary Jewish readers of Scripture, they never lost sight of the foundational truth, which the Old Testament and Judaism repeatedly emphasize, that there is only one God. The Fathers consistently confirm the Catholic understanding that the God who acts in the Old Testament is the same God who is Father of Jesus in the New Testament.

Gnostics at the time of Irenaeus had used St. Paul's phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:4, "the god of this world," to argue that there is a second god who created and rules this material world, different from God the Father of Jesus. Their second god (the creator) was jealous, vengeful, and inferior to the New Testament God of love and Father of Jesus Christ. Such gnostic arguments presumed also that they rejected the Old Testament as Christian revelation. By thus contending, Gnostics implicitly rejected also the unity of Scripture, which clearly emphasizes there is only one God.³⁷

Further disproof of the gnostic understanding of "the god of this world" comes from contemporary historical critical interpretation. Scholars today generally understand that "the god of this world" in 2 Corinthians 4:4 refers to a fairly common belief in later Old Testament writings and in the New Testament that Satan had usurped much of Adam's original dominion over earth, which had been debilitated when Adam rebelled against God. As a Jewish monotheist, Paul certainly was not referring to a second god in the strict sense.

Contrary to misinterpretations of such ancient heretics as the Gnostics, Irenaeus and other Church Fathers have demonstrated that the God who creates, saves his people from Egypt, gives them the Law, promises them a Messiah and Savior from David's line, and sends prophets to them is actually the Trinity. That is, not only is he the one and only God to whom Judaism has given constant witness; but he also is now recognized by Christians to be Trinitarian—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In hindsight, Christians know how God's Old Testament story of salvation is concluded—that is, in the reconciliation of alienated humans to God through the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of God's Son. Therefore, it is no longer instinctive or typical for Christians to continue to read the Old Testament as if they were the original Hebrews who were ignorant that their one God is actually Trinity.

Nevertheless, there remains a value in sometimes trying to re-read the Old Testament through the eyes of the original readers. Even though Christians may know "the rest of the story," they can come to a deeper appreciation of the richness of God's providential plan by attending to its intricate windings from its early stages with "fresh eyes." Still, this seems a matter of "both-and" rather than "either-or": ordinary Christians or students should not be forced to choose between

37 Wilken, "In Dominico Eloquentia," 862.

reading and understanding the Jewish books “either as the Hebrew Scriptures or as the Old Testament.” They might profit, however, from reading them “both as Hebrew Scriptures and as the Old Testament.”

Saints Irenaeus, Athanasius, other Church Fathers, and medieval saints have modeled for contemporary Christians how to read biblical passages both very closely in themselves as well as with theological insight into their deeper meaning. They give today’s Christians a methodology for reading any particular passage in either the Old or New Testament just as closely and carefully as is currently expected in academic exegesis, but also within the theological context of God’s overarching biblical story of salvation. Employed judiciously, patristic interpretative methods enable modern readers to attain greater theological and spiritual insight into any biblical passage.³⁸

Conclusion

Do the patristic authors have anything to teach today’s Catholic interpreters of Scripture (especially teachers and preachers) about reading Scripture? If so, what? They can teach us how to read Scripture theologically as God’s revelation and message addressed explicitly to us. The contemporary search for more explicitly theological interpretations of Scripture finds simple and appropriate models and examples in the Fathers of the Church. Patristic and medieval authors read the Bible as God’s Word addressed to them and to the Christians over which they were pastors and teachers.

They were able to do this because they read Scripture not merely as scholars who closely studied every word and expression in the passages they read, but as pastors, teachers, and believers who read individual passages from within the overarching biblical account of creation and salvation as God’s revelation addressed to them and to the Church which they pastored. They not only read and taught and preached Scripture. They also prayed Scripture in the context of sacraments and liturgical rites, and they expressed their prayers in the words of biblical psalms and canticles. They also lived within the biblical worldview as creatures of the one true Creator God, as sinners who needed and received reconciliation with God through the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of God’s Son, and as filled with the Holy

38 Especially helpful aids to theological interpretation have been the essays by Henri de Lubac (“Spiritual Understanding”), David C. Steinmetz (“The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis”), and especially David S. Yeago (“The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis”) in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Stephen E. Fowl, ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 3–25 (de Lubac), 26–38 (Steinmetz), and 87–100 (Yeago). Catholic underpinnings for concerns discussed in Johnson and Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, can be found in Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Subsidia Biblica; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2001), and David M. Williams, *Receiving the Bible in Faith: Historical and Theological Exegesis* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

Spirit and therefore members of the Son's Body, the Church, and children of the Father and brothers and sisters of Christ. This is what our patristic authors have to teach contemporary Catholic biblical interpreters.