Ancient Interpretation of Sacred Books

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Preface

The correct interpretation of ancient sacred texts was a potential source of rival argument between different groups when they used the same texts to bear authority but were far from united. The ancient Church was in this position in relation to the rabbis of the Synagogue.

The apostle Paul thought and argued like a rabbi, and some of the discussion recorded in the Gospels between Jews and the scribes and Pharisees reflects the disagreements of related communities of Church and Synagogue. Texts which the infant churches interpreted of Jesus as Messiah were otherwise understood by rabbis.

The Christians soon found that divisions in their own ranks were or could be rooted in different expositions of biblical texts. A letter ascribed to Basil the Great warns monks that debate about biblical exegesis can be dangerously divisive and not conducive to harmony.

Since these lectures were delivered to an eminent audience at the British Academy this topic has been the subject of attention by a number of scholars listed in the Further Reading section.

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The third of the original lectures has been enlarged with new material to become the fourth chapter in this publication.

Abbreviations

Works of St Augustine

C	*Confessions*
CD	*De civitate Dei*
CE	*De consensu evangelistarum*
DC	*De doctrina Christiana*
DP	*De dono perseverantiae*
E	*Enchiridion ad Laurentium*
Ep.	*Epistolae*
EPs.	*Enarrationes in Psalmos*
F	*Contra Faustum Manichaeum*
Fel	*Contra Felicem Manichaeum*
GL	*De Genesi ad litteram*
P	*Contra epistolam Parmeniani*
PM	*De peccatorum meritis*
PS	*De praedestinatione sanctorum*
S	*Sermones* (S. Guelf. = Guelf collection; S. Maur. = Maurinus collection, both in G. Morin's edited volume, *Sancti Augustini sermones post Maurinos reperti*, Rome, 1930)
T	*De Trinitate*
TJ	*Tractatus in Johannis Evangelium*
UC	*De utilitate credendi*
UE	*De unitate ecclesiae (= epistola ad Catholicos)*

Works by other ancient authors

Basil (the Great), bishop of Caesarea	
ep.	*epistolae*
Clement	
Strom.	*Stromateis*
Diog. Laert.	Diogenes Laertius
Eusebius	
PE	*Praeparatio evangelica*
Jerome	
ep.	*epistolae*

Justin

D	*Dialogues*

Origen

Cel.	*Contra Celsum*
in Joh.	*Commentary on John*
in Levit. hom.	*Homilies on Leviticus*
in Matt. ser.	*Homilies on Matthew*
in Num. hom.	*Homilies on Numbers*
De princ.	*De principiis*

Philo of Alexandria

Cherub.	*De cherubim*
Det. Pot.	*Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat*
Ebr.	*De ebrietate*
Jos.	*De Josepho*
Leg. al.	*Legum allegoriarum*
Migr. Abr.	*De migratione Abrahmi*
Post. C.	*De posteritate Caini*
Prob.	*Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit*
Qu. Gen.	*Questiones et solutiones in Genesin et Exodum*
Som.	*De somniis*

Plato

Rep.	*Republic*

Plutarch

Mor.	*Moralia*

Stobaeus

SVF	*Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*

Xenophon

Symp.	*Symposium*

1

Augustine and the Creation of Biblical Culture

Augustine of Hippo (to be distinguished from his namesake, the monk sent by Gregory the Great to convert the Anglo-Saxons in 597) is simply one of the formative minds of western culture, and if one considers his relatively humble social origins in fourth-century society that is in itself remarkable. He was the clever son of a small-time pagan farmer and Monnica, his devout Christian wife, in a modest town, Thagaste, 45 miles from the coast in what is now eastern Algeria and was then the Roman province of Numidia. He was born on 13 November 354 and died on 28 August 430 in his seventy-sixth year. Apart from approximately five years in Italy, his life was spent in North Africa, in opulent provinces of the Roman empire but where the Church was sharply divided.

His conversion to orthodox Christianity took place at Milan in July 386. Five years later he was coerced into accepting ordination as presbyter at Hippo, now the seaport of Annaba, and four or five years after that he was consecrated bishop at Hippo where he stayed for the rest of his life.

His encounter with the Bible is our subject today. Brought up by his Christian mother, Monnica, he rebelled in adolescence. Aged 18 as a student at Carthage, he read a philosophical dialogue by Cicero, *Hortensius*, where Cicero defends the study of philosophy as indispensable not only for the wise government of affairs, but also for personal happiness. Hortensius had expressed the opinion that philosophy was irrelevant to good management of public affairs; Cicero strongly dissented. Reflective thinking contributes to contentment; indulgences in food, drink, and sex create dissatisfaction and insatiable urges.

Cicero's words made Augustine pick up his Bible. He was disappointed. Like many who start their Bible reading with Genesis, he was outraged by the violence and the sex, the polygamy of the patriarchs, Lot's intercourse with his daughters, murder by Moses, the animal sacrifices (bribing God?). In the New Testament he was baffled by the incompatible genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke.

He found himself drawn towards the Manichees, mythological theosophists who, despite hostile government disapproval, had their own meeting houses and powerful propaganda. The Manichees assured him that the New Testament was drastically interpolated, in the interest of linking it to the Old, which was not a moral book. (For example, in Romans the title 'son of David' applied to Jesus must be an intrusion.) But the Manichees appealed with glee to Romans 7, with its portrait of humanity racked by inner conflict between good and evil, thereby vindicating their dualistic account of the world. To the Manichees God is good but not all-powerful and so not strong enough to get rid of evil; all he can do is to prevent it taking over altogether. To affirm the supreme God to be both good and omnipotent must, in Mani's view, entail making him responsible not only for goodness but also for evil. The fact that evil is built into the very structure of the physical world of matter and bodies Mani thought demonstrable from the way in which human beings regard sex. Without it the human race would not have survived. But did it come from a good creator? With its animality, its power to cause more pain than pleasure, its association with shame, the nausea of early pregnancy, the high risks of ancient childbirth, above all its defiance of rational control, Mani thought it all had more to do with the prince of darkness than with the heavenly light. Mani presented a challenge to the orthodox Christian tradition, on which he and his followers were largely parasitic, by his identification of large parts of the Old Testament as deficient in morality, and therefore as part of the total problem of evil to which he sought to offer an explanation. He also scorned the sacraments of baptism and eucharist if understood to mean that they are ordinary means of grace; they may symbolize some universal truths but cannot be instruments of any particular divine presence or gift.

The Manichees held Augustine for a decade, attacking the orthodox with the argument that the Church asked for simple faith and submission to authority. It soon became clear to Augustine that Mani's mythology could not be described as rational; Mani rejected Genesis, but his account of the science of eclipses contradicted the best ancient calculations. (Augustine is the first to observe that scientific method is vindicated by its capacity to make correct predictions (*C* 5. 3. 6). As he lost confidence in Manichee myth, he moved into radical scepticism. How can one justify assenting to propositions of which no one can be sure? Is anything certain outside pure mathematics? Some ingredient of scepticism was to remain embedded in his mind. The famous discussion of the nature of

time in *Confessions* 11 ends by concluding in effect that it lies beyond our powers: 'I know what time is, provided no one asks' (*C* 11. 14. 17).

At Milan the bishop was Ambrose, well read in Greek theology and philosophy, at home in Plotinus and Porphyry, as much as in Philo and Origen; moreover, he was eloquent in the pulpit, and the city professor of rhetoric used to go to the cathedral to admire the oratory. Augustine found himself drawn by the bishop's exegetical method. Ambrose convinced him that the Manichee rejection of Old Testament allegory was wrong. (Manichees were far from consistent in this.) St Paul declared the letter kills, the spirit gives life. Old Testament texts where the literal interpretation was offensive should be taken symbolically.

Augustine came to think it right that deep truths should be veiled. A shroud of mystery prevents a cheap valuation of a text, just as a woman pursued by a man does not give herself away easily. Allegory dispels boredom. An oft-repeated truth is exciting when rediscovered in a poetic image; the more fanciful, the more exciting. We value most what costs us most (a labour theory of value!).

A Neoplatonic circle at Milan drew him to read Plotinus and his disciple Porphyry whose introduction to Aristotle's logic had recently been translated into Latin. That influence combined with Ambrose's preaching helped to bring him to conversion — acknowledged in *C* 1. 1. 1. He was disillusioned with secular ambitions for power, wealth, honour, and sex. In July 386 in a Milan garden he decided to renounce these things, and to identify himself with his mother's orthodox faith which Ambrose had shown him to be profound and true.

Nevertheless Porphyry, who in youth is said to have been a Christian, came to hate Christianity, and significantly directed the main weight of his fifteen books against the Christians into an attack on their sacred books. Paradoxically his writings on Neoplatonic mysticism were among the sources of an impetus which impelled Augustine to the Church. The Neoplatonists, wrote Augustine, could see the goal, but not how to get there. They had no comprehension of the soul's need for forgiveness through the Redeemer; the confession of sins and, above all, the eucharistic memorial offering remained unintelligible to them (*C* 7. 21. 27). Porphyry was content to discover Neoplatonism in the text of Homer by means of allegory. He wanted to deny resort to allegory to Christian exegetes of the Bible. But he taught Augustine that the world of mind is greater than the world of matter; that God is wholly incorporeal; that what we call evil is really the lack of goodness. Augustine thanked God that he had read Porphyry before he seriously began to read the Bible (*C* 7. 20. 26).

A crucial role in Augustine's conversion was played by the letters of St Paul. After wondering how he could get a copy at Milan, eventually he succeeded in buying or borrowing a codex of St Paul. The apostle held up a mirror to his own inner conflicts. He purged Augustine's mind of the Manichee doctrine of direct contradiction between Old and New Testaments. He also purged it of the Platonic notion that the soul might rise to the vision of God without the grace of the one mediator.[1]

Nine months passed between Augustine's conversion and baptism at Easter 337. He asked Ambrose for guidance in Bible study, and Ambrose recommended the prophet Isaiah. Augustine found the book obscure and too difficult to understand. 'I put it aside', he says, 'until I had acquired more skill in understanding the Lord's style of language' (*C* 9. 5. 13). The remark discloses that Augustine was evidently opening his Isaiah for the first time in his life and discovering the prophecy of the universal mission of the people of God among the Gentiles.

The part of the Bible that fascinated the new convert was the psalter. At Milan he had been riveted and moved to tears by the chanting of the Psalms at the cathedral. In preparation for baptism he also found his way to the Gospels. But he tells us nothing in the *Confessions* about Ambrose's instruction during Lent, and (for reasons which can be plausibly conjected) the fact that Ambrose was the minister of baptism for him is never mentioned. Augustine was appalled by the notion that the value of baptism might at any point depend on the personal quality or distinction of the minister.

By a tradition inherited from the Synagogue, those under instruction for initiation were often recommended to read the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament — the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus or Ben Sira', Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. Augustine's writings during the year after his baptism are particularly rich in citations from just these books.

But gradually the question pressed on him more and more: by what principles and methods can the right interpretation of Scripture be discovered? For Augustine that question about interpretation did not concern only the Bible. It raised vast issues about the interpretation of all books, all use of words. That question was much debated by the Greek philosophical schools, by Aristotle and the Stoics, who spoke of words as signs enabling the mind to move from what is obvious to what is not obvi-

[1] There is a good critical discussion of this by W. U. Kinzig, 'War der Neuplatoniker Porphyrius ursprünglich Christ?' in M. Baumbach, H. Kohler, and A. M. Ritter (eds.), *Mousopolos Stephanos. Festschrift für Herwig Görgemanns* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1998), pp. 320–32.

ous at all. The Greek philosophers were mainly interested in valid inference. Augustine began further back with the problem of the relationship of words to the reality to which they point. Do we need signs to know what things are? Or do we need first to know the realities before we can know what the significant words mean? For it is the words that make sense of what we experience, as the internal reasoning mind orders the information received by perception. The argument I have so tersely summarized is set out in a work he wrote as a layman on the subject of communication, verbal and non-verbal, where he points out that we do not know what words mean unless we know in what tone of voice the speaker utters, whether he is being ironical, making a statement, or asking a question, etc.

Eight years later, now under coercion, forced into ordination at the seaport of Hippo Regius (modern Annaba), Augustine embarked on a treatise about the interpretation of the Bible, entitled *De doctrina Christiana*, or *On Christian Culture*. The formal structure of the work is modelled on Cicero's book *De oratore*.

Augustine realized a truth pressingly familiar in our own time, namely that if Christian faith and life are to be effectively taught, the first necessity is to teach the teachers. He used to supply the texts of sermons to the bishop of Carthage, intended to be used as models by the Carthage presbyters (*Ep.* 41 of 397). Later he discovered that the bishop of Carthage, a good but not very eloquent man, was tempted to make use of the sermons himself (*Ep.* Divjak 23A.3).[2] But what teachers wanted to know were the principles for correct exegesis. To give them a ready-made sermon was to give the hungry a fish when what they needed was a fishing rod.

This question of exegetical principles had exercised another African theologian named Tyconius, whose allegiance was to the dissident schismatic Donatists, split from the Catholic Church by dissension about the toleration of compromise with the government during the persecution of Diocletian. Tyconius wrote a surviving book with seven exegetical rules.[3] These deeply impressed Augustine, who made much use of them both

[2] Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo, *Lettres* 1*–29* nouv. éd. du texte critique et introd. par Johannes Divjak; trad. et commentaire par. . . [Marie-Line Amadei et al.], Bibliothèque augustinienne t 46B ([Paris]: Études augustiniennes, 1987), pp. 377.

[3] F. C. Burkitt, *The Book of Rules of Tyconius*, *newly edited from the mss., with an introduction and examination into the text of the Biblical quotations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894); reprinted in USA with English translation by W. S. Babcock as *Tyconius. The Book of Rules*, Texts and Translations. Early Christian Literature series 7 (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1989).

with and without acknowledgements. Normal Donatist doctrine insisted that the true Church, the Church of the martyrs in unpolluted holiness, had survived only in Africa, indeed largely in Numidia, and that this was vindicated by the saying of the bride to the bridegroom in the Song of Songs 'Thou dost rest in the south', and by Isaiah 14. 13 which locates the Devil in the North. Tyconius wanted to say, by contrast, that both Christ and the Devil are geographically present everywhere.[4] Above all, Tyconius conceded that Scripture speaks of a world-wide Church, not a regional, geographically confined body.

Augustine liked that a lot. So he restates Tyconius' *Rules*. But his guide to Christian communication has much more to say. His handbook is intended as a guide to the clergy in expounding Scripture, and it has both a philosophical and a theological basis. First of all, there is a general problem of all language: when we use words to communicate truth, other words are signs of the realities to which they point. But words communicate misunderstandings too. Because the nations speak many languages, translations are needed and are not always accurate. Admittedly this both enforces humility and stimulates scholars to research; we value what costs us toil. In Augustine's understanding of the operations of providence, mistakes can be turned to beneficent results, and can be prevented from doing serious harm.

Nevertheless, Scripture presents the reader with problems. Many texts are obscure. The right principle is to interpret obscurities in the light of what is clear. Augustine is the first, I think, to formulate the proposition that even though much in the Bible is obscure, Scripture is clear on what is necessary to salvation (*PM* 2. 59; *DC* 2. 14). The clear texts are the basis for the apostolic rule of faith.

Seven days before baptism, the candidates both at Milan and in North Africa, having first learnt the creed a week earlier, declared their faith in the creed — an early relative of the text we call the Apostles' Creed.[5] For Augustine the creed defines the God to whom we pray (*S* 56: 1). And the creed declares necessary belief — that the world is God's world reflecting a divine beauty and order; that the incarnation is the climax of his self-revelation (with defiance of human expectation and rationalistic

[4] *Book of Rules*, Regula 7, ed. Burkitt, p. 75, para. 5.

[5] S. Guelf. 1 has the Milan text. *S* 215, ed. Verbraken, the African text. See S. Guelf. 1, in G. Morin, *Sancti Augustini Sermones Post Maurinos Reperti*, vol. i (Rome: Vatican, 1930), pp. 441–50 and '*Sermones* CCXV et LVI: *De symbolo* et *De oratore dominica*', ed. et introd. par Verbraken p, *Revue Bénédictine*, 68 (1958), pp. 5–40.

judgement). Many things which are credible on examination turn out to be false; and some things which are incredible turn out to be perfectly true (*Ep.* 153. 22; *PM* 1. 60). Here Augustine located the ground for affirming that the various books of canonical Scripture are a unity.

The central mystery of the incarnation is often not fully grasped. Many think Jesus was no more than a man (*EPs.* 62. 11), not discerning the divine hidden within (*TJ* 119. 4). Bishop Photinus of Sirmium, deposed in 351 shortly before Augustine was born, held that Jesus was indeed born of the Virgin Mary and was a very wise prophet, but was not also divine. That estimate of Christ was once held by Augustine himself (*C* 7. 19. 25) with the virgin birth as a divine sign or seal on the authority of Jesus as a teacher.

Augustine's friend and former pupil, Alypius, imagined orthodox doctrine to be that Christ was God clothed in flesh without a human soul and mind. He was surprised to discover that this Apollinarian notion was under formal anathema; it is rejected repeatedly by Ambrose as an utterly false view.

Augustine observed that the Church's understanding of the divinity of Christ is articulated more in St John's Gospel than in the Synoptists (*CE* 4. 10. 11; 1. 4. 7). The Redeemer cannot redeem if he is not one with the Creator 'I and the Father are one.' But he would be not able to redeem us if he were not in solidarity with us as man. He prayed to the Father (*TJ* 110. 3; *EPs.* 29. 2. 1) His way is our example.

Above all, he embodies the love of God. Love to God and to our neighbour is the supreme theme of Scripture, and all Scripture is held in coherence by this hermeneutic principle. Moreover, for the community of faith, all Scripture is to be understood to speak of the presence of God both in Christ and to his people, that is both to the head and to the body of the Church, the *Totus Christus*, the complete Christ. In his humanity Christ is divinely predestined (*TJ* 105. 8; *DP* 67; *PS* 30). Through the Son of Man as teacher and prophet we pass through to the divine Redeemer, the Son of God. It is through this man that you come to God (*S* 141. 4; *EPs.* 134. 5; *S* 123. 3). But the human Christ Jesus is part of the transitory process of historical time. So the Gospels speak of Jesus as 'passing by' (*S* 88. 11 ff.). Beyond the successiveness of events there lies the eternal God. Philosophically minded pagans and indeed some Christians are puzzled and sceptical about the miraculous conception of Jesus and the resurrection, because they think God limited to what their little minds believe to be possible (*S* 184. 1). No true Christian, says Augustine, will say 'perhaps Christ was born of a virgin' (*T* 8. 5. 7; *E* 10. 34). The

resurrection is more than a contingent event, but no Christian will explain the language away as mere symbol (*UE* 10. 26; S. Maur. 86).[6] To be a Christian is to associate oneself with the community of faith to which the Gospel story of Jesus is basic, and to which the Scriptures are God-given testimony. The authority of Scripture inheres in the proposition that for the community of faith what is authoritative is what is apostolic (*Ep.* 82). Christ used the apostles' hands to write in his name (*CE* 1. 35. 54).

The Manichees say the Gospels and Epistles are interpolated. Yet they cannot produce any old uninterpolated codex. What they really mean is that they decide for or against any particular text according to whether they find it congenial or not. They delete from the sayings of Jesus what they themselves would not have said.

If Scripture is God given, the reader wishes to submit to it, not to pick and choose what he or she happens to like (*F* 32. 19; *Ep.* 28. 3. 5 to Jerome). Catholic bishops should not be followed if their teaching is contrary to Scripture (*epistola ad Catholicos* = *UE* 11. 28) an opinion echoed by Aquinas (*De veritate* 14. 10 and 11). Heretics love to quote John 16: 12: 'I have many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now.' And their main characteristics are not so much particular doctrines or speculations as moral flaws, above all angry impatience, feverish restlessness (*CD* 16. 2) and an incapacity to see what is perfectly obvious to everyone else (*P* 2. 3. 6).

Because Scripture comes to us with apostolic authority and with the witness of the universal Church, tradition and Scripture co-inhere with one another. On three occasions in his writings Augustine asks whether the original intention of the biblical author is the one and only correct interpretation (*UC* 8–13; *GL* 1. 19. 39; *C* 12. 18. 27). It may be difficult to be perfectly certain what the original intention was. When a text is clear, there is no problem. But many texts are not clear. Some, if taken literally, present special difficulties. The first chapter of Genesis was surely not intended as a piece of creation-science, and it brings discredit on the Church when less than thoughtful believers take it as a scientific account of the world's first beginnings (*GL* 1. 19. 39).

Augustine saw in the mathematical order of the cosmos the print of the wisdom and power of the Creator. Nothing could be more miraculous than the created world (*CD* 10. 12). Bible miracles are always vehicles of symbolic meaning (*Ep.* 102. 33). The world God has made remains open

[6] S. Maur. 86, in G. Morin, *Sancti Augustini Sermones Post Maurinos Reperti*, vol. i (Rome: Vatican, 1930), p. 324.

to his power, but that power is exercised so that human beings remain wholly free and responsible. What people think rational is what they are accustomed to (*S* 242. 1) and a miracle evoking wonder is by definition what we are not used to. The realm of nature is God's general revelation of himself. But a universal providence does not exclude manifestations of particular providences. In Augustine's world there is no such thing as chance, which is merely a name we use when we do not know the cause. His conversion in the Milan garden was occasioned by a random event — a child's voice over the garden wall saying TOLLE LEGE, pick up and read, where the last thing the child could have had in mind was the salvation of his soul (*C* 8. 12. 29).

To answer the Manichees Augustine expounded Genesis 1 allegorically. To answer Porphyry and the pagan Platonists he wrote a major work entitled a *Literal Commentary on Genesis*. Modern readers are often astonished to discover that the exposition is not what they understand by literal. The crux is whether the cosmos is actually created in the sense that it had a beginning, or whether creation is merely a poetic way of talking about the dependence of the cosmos on the divine will. Augustine's literal commentary is a sustained debate with Porphyry (never named). The basic axiom is that if the world had a beginning, it may also be moving towards an end of history.

In the *City of God*, Augustine is notoriously lacking in cheerful optimism about human society and government. The initial impetus of that great work came from the fears of pagan intellectuals and aristocrats that the culture of traditional Roman society would not survive the consequences of conversion to Christianity; the principles of love, justice, and peace would make realistic government impossible, even though emperors might talk otherwise. (A recently discovered edict of the emperor Valentinian I declares that 'it would be a sign of the moderation and gentle humanity of this reign if certain delinquents were treated with the maximum of severity and ferocity'.)[7]

Augustine shifted the question to different ground. To him the urgent question was whether Christian faith and practice could remain intact if it were part of the constitution of the social and political order. Above all, Augustine's biblical faith made him see history as linear, not cyclic,

[7] See F. Pergami, *La legislazione di Valentiniano e Valente (364–375)* (Milan: A. Giuffrè Editore, 1993), pp. 479–80; also S. Schmidt-Hofner, *Reagieren und Gestalten. Der Regierungsstil des spätrömischen Kaisers am Beispiel der Gesetzgebung Valentinians I*, Vestigia 58 (München, 2008), pp. 64–71 (with thanks to Noel Lenski for his advice).

moving towards an end determined by God in ways which we poor creatures cannot discern.

Augustine's influence has been pervasive in western thought. I will not catalogue it in detail. Let us simply put it this way:

If you think history is not a fatalistic cycle but a linear irreversible movement; if you think that the student of the Bible cannot afford to be indifferent to ensuring good manuscripts, accurate translations, clear distinction between canonical Scripture and apocrypha, and the necessity of symbolic or allegorical interpretation in at least some parts of Scripture; if you think the Church cannot be regional, particularist, doing its own thing indifferent to other churches; if you think that for the most part the inclinations of the human heart are base, that the mind can shift in a flash from high-mindedness to deadly sin, that any moral value we may possess is God's gift; I will not prolong the ifs. But if these propositions evoke an answering chord in your heart, then whether you know it or not and whether you like it or not, you are influenced by the way Augustine interpreted Scripture.

2

Embarrassment and Asset

In interpreting its sacred writings ancient Judaism was not monolithic. There was no single orthodoxy imposed on all exegetes. What mattered for the rabbis was that any given exegesis should be supportive of the Jewish community, and foster the observance of the Mosaic Law at least for circumcision, sabbaths, and food laws, and if possible also for the scribal traditions.

The Jews who believed that in Jesus of Nazareth God had visited his people and raised up a great prophet did not initially suppose that their appeal to the ancient Hebrew Scriptures could be faulted as somehow illegitimate. The Church moved out into Gentile society from an explicitly Jewish matrix. The earliest Christian missionaries were all Jews and their primary sacred texts were no different from those of the Synagogue. They naturally inherited from their upbringing a profound respect for the sacrosanct texts of their national community tradition. With the collection of books, they inherited both an estimate of their momentous significance as a vehicle of divine revelation in the continuing story of the people of God and also generally acknowledged methods of interpreting them in new contexts. Jewish rejection of believers in the messiahship of Jesus was a gradual and painful process, not complete until the end of the first century of our era. That the Gentile mission was extremely unwelcome to Jewish authority at an early date is certain. The Christian Jews in Judaea found themselves harassed (1 Thess. 2: 14–16) but the formalization of expulsion came later.

The ground of rejection was clear: the inherent unacceptability of the notion that the religion of the Old Testament, or Judaism in the sense of what most rabbis were agreed about, was in itself incomplete, and was in God's purpose destined to find its culmination in something no longer ethnic but wholly universal embracing all nations on earth. Among the Christians, to use a term anachronistic for the period under discussion, there was sharp disagreement about their continuity with the Mosaic faith. If their mission was to take them out to the Gentile world, on what terms were Gentile converts to be admitted to the community? Above all, circumcision was a storm centre. It is a noteworthy fact that the four

canonical Gospels of the second-century churches, which were written for believers by believers and inevitably reflect interests of the early communities for which they were composed, nevertheless include not a single saying ascribed to Jesus with a bearing on that issue. The Gospels have internal debates about the manner in which the Sabbath should be observed, not about the necessity of circumcision. The fact has a bearing on the question how far the evangelists reflect tradition wholly shaped by the community's problems.

That the teaching of Jesus was felt to challenge people seems self-evident. The saying about new wine and old bottles presupposes that. At the same time this saying's form reflects the debate about continuity: some thought the old wine was better even if some bottles were new.

The parting of the ways between Synagogue and Church was a matter of regret to some, but welcomed by others in the Church. There was division of opinion between those who felt pain that the Synagogue excluded them, and those who took that exclusion to be a welcome sign that the destiny of the Christian mission now lay with the universal Gentile world. Midway between the positions we may place the apostle Paul's halfway house, namely, that the Gentile mission is a provisional and parenthetic stage to bring about a realization by Judaism of its own universal calling (Rom. 9–11). But all parties in the Church were of one mind in believing that, in this society bonded together by faith in Jesus, the authentic call and love of God was both proclaimed and heard. The very Word of God by whom the heaven and earth were made, who was present to both Moses and the prophets, had become embodied in the Jesus who changed the water of Judaism into the wine of the Gospel. But the Jewish water had not been discarded as waste.

It is easy to nurse illusions about the moment when early Christians came to know that that title is what they were. The title 'Christian' was not a self-designation, but first applied by external observers at Antioch (Acts 11: 26), and its currency presupposes that this community of disciples had much to say about the Messiah-title for their master. 'God's Anointed' was not in Jewish tradition a precise concept. In the Church the old form was given content by identification with Jesus, and in the New Testament corpus the recognition of messianic status for the Lord was a major preoccupation of exegetes of those Scriptures which even a writer as early as St Paul could think of as the Old Testament. Exegesis had direct bearing on the gradual breach between Church and Synagogue. The community presupposed in St John's Gospel clearly consisted largely of believers 'expelled from the Synagogue' who therefore

came to regard the Jews as a distinct body with whom their own society engaged in controversy. They did not as yet identify themselves as 'Christians', but had at least a name distinct from their main critics and opponents. Since expulsion from the Synagogue could hardly have been suffered except by those who, for the most part, were by blood Jewish, the polarity can only have been sharpened by claims that Moses himself was a prophet of the Christ and a critic of Judaism's finality (John 5: 45–7); Church and Synagogue shared the same Scriptures but interpreted them differently. For the Church, the prophets, with their universalist vision of Israel's mission being directed to the Gentile world, offered the key to interpreting the apparently narrower and more particularist Law. For the Synagogue, Law was primary, and the prophets were subordinate to it.

The early Christian missionaries to the Gentile world were, like St Paul, Greek-speaking Jews. They were fortunate to possess the Hebrew Scriptures in an already established and accepted Greek version, the Alexandrian Bible or Septuagint—in practice their Bible. The version of the Pentateuch in Greek had been made in Alexandria as early as the third century BC and would be gradually followed by other translations of the prophets and of the writings. The dignity and authority of the original translation of the Pentateuch are found strongly asserted in the 'letter' of Aristeas. This letter, or treatise, evidently composed by a Greek-speaking Jew wearing the mask of a pagan Greek, is a problematic text; scholarly estimates of its date range widely from 200 to 80 BC, and its purpose is so obviously propagandist that estimates of its veracity also vary sharply. The letter claims that the translation of the Mosaic Law was based on Hebrew scrolls of such superlative authority that they were specially brought to Alexandria from Jerusalem ; that the translation enjoyed the patronage of king Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–247 BC), notorious for his obsession with religious cults (Plutarch, *Mor*. 56E) and was placed in the royal library; that the work was done by seventy-two translators and was of total accuracy, indeed the task was completed in seventy-two days. A curse is pronounced on anyone proposing to make future changes, whether by addition or deletion, an imprecation which suggests a motive of preventing the recognition of a new recension differing from an established original.

The suggestion made by Paul Kahle in 1915 and restated in his Schweich Lectures on *The Cairo Geniza*[1] that there were already a number

[1] (New York: Praeger, 1947; 2nd edn. 1960); Schweich Lectures 1941 (London: for the British Academy, 1947; 2nd edn, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959).

of Greek versions of the Hebrew Scriptures current, and that the letter of Aristeas aimed to claim special and unique status for the Septuagint, has generally failed to enjoy the support of other scholars in this specialized field.

The letter of Aristeas claims that the translation of the Torah enjoyed royal patronage. The Jewish population of Alexandria was sufficiently strong, and Jewish soldiers in the Ptolemaic army were numerous enough, to suggest that there is no inherent improbability in the king wishing to please so substantial a proportion of his subjects. It is not necessary to assume that the king took the initiative in making the proposal, which could have been designed in the first instance for the proper religious needs of the Greek-speaking Jews of the land. In the third century BC it would have been a little unusual for Gentile persons of Hellenic culture to have a serious interest in Jewish history and literature.

Nevertheless such interest would not have been impossible. Late in the fourth century BC, Hecataeus of Abdera, writing on Egypt, included a brief notice that the Jews' constitution was modelled by Moses on Platonic lines. Aristotle's pupil, Theophrastus, writing on Piety, spoke of the Jews as worshippers of the supreme realm of the fixed stars and a race whose religion was philosophical in character. Anti-Semitic writers like Apion of Alexandria, could urge that the insignificance of the Jews was demonstrated by the silence of Greek historians about them. Josephus thought him remarkably unfair and inexact. In any event, the letter of Aristeas would make little sense, quite irrespective of its value as a historical document which may be indeed questionable, unless the author understood the Greek Pentateuch to be a missionary asset offering the Jewish community both a source of pride and a means of claiming hoary antiquity—and therefore venerable respectability for their sacred books. In facing Gentile critics, the author of the letter judged the Greek Pentateuch to be no embarrassment whatever. In ancient society people could feel some awe in the presence of written texts. In his *Life of Moses* (2. 6. 36) Philo could see the translators' work as divinely assisted with the aim to bring the majority or even all of the human race to know and observe God's laws.

The pride taken in the Septuagint by the Jewish population of Alexandria received an annual public expression in a festival commemorating its production, reported by Philo. The Jews were evidently right in thinking the translation a notable achievement. It was not only a massive and difficult undertaking, but also without precedent or parallel. Whether in the third century BC the Torah was read in Greek liturgically in the

synagogues may be a matter of dispute. But Alexandrian Jews whose mother's knee language was Greek, and whose knowledge of Hebrew may easily have been zero, would certainly have been glad to possess or to have access to a Greek version of the Law.

That the opening chapter of Genesis, with its sublime picture of the sovereign will of the Creator, won admirers among adherents of Hellenic culture is evident from the famous passage in the treatise *On the Sublime* (at 9. 9) attributed to Longinus. The passage also attracted critics: the medical writer Galen, in the second century AD, thought the Mosaic cosmogony at fault for ignoring philosophical considerations in describing how that world came into being (*De usu partium* 11). Galen's discussion demonstrates that at least the sublime beginning of the Greek Bible had attracted respectful attention.

The dispersion of Jews in the Mediterranean world aroused Gentile curiosity, combined with a mixture of respect and hatred. Their aniconic worship seemed like 'atheism' to critics, a scorning of the gods by which crops and wives were fertile: Josephus saw in religion the primary cause of anti-Semitism. Yet even enemies could grant that the Mosaic Law could be God-given, imparting social coherence and high moral standards. Josephus allowed that some miracles were explicable from natural causes, and that belief or disbelief was a matter of individual preference in such cases. His retelling of Jewish history in his *Antiquities* presupposes that he had to ward off attacks by critics of some parts of the story. The episode of the Golden Calf was simply too discreditable to be mentioned at all.

Critics of the Septuagint version, however, were more likely to be Jews. Aristeas has some defensive statements about the Septuagint in, for example, the statement that the translators used excellent Hebrew texts brought specially from Jerusalem. Where the Septuagint differs from the Masoretic Hebrew text, the variations suggest differences in the Hebrew model. But at Alexandria there may well have been complaints by Jews of the most observant sect who distrusted the Septuagint and did not think it sufficiently literal in its handling of a sacred text. In fact the translators manifest profound respect for the sacredness of their text, and in places take literalism to the point of being uncouth. Nevertheless, modern Septuagint scholars have been able to observe places where the translators failed to render the Hebrew correctly. That there was some feeling of distrust towards the Septuagint even before Christians began to appeal to it, may be deduced from the fragment of a Greek version of the Twelve Prophets, found in the Judaean desert and brilliantly interpreted by

Dominique Barthélemy [2] as anticipating the endeavours of Aquila to provide a Greek version more rigid in its rendering of the Hebrew text. This Hebraizing recension was known to Justin Martyr, perhaps mediated to him through a collection of 'testimonies'. The revisers who wanted to make the Septuagint more accurate and literal may have wished to bring the Greek version into conformity with a revision of the Hebrew, i.e. an incipient quasi-Masoretic revision moving towards an official and authorized Hebrew text.

That revisers were at work on the Septuagint seems a likely deduction from the phenomena apparent in Philo's quotations, most of which agree with the Septuagint but not all, with this minority presupposing a distinct recension. Again, in the New Testament most of the citations are in agreement with the Septuagint and, direct quotations apart, there are very frequent verbal reminiscenses.

In broad and general terms, the Bible carried by the first Christian missionaries was the Septuagint (the 'Scriptures': Romans 11: 26, 10: 11, 9: 17). They used the same translation as that used by hellenized Jews in their concern to present their ethnic community to their puzzled and at times unfriendly neighbours. The quotations from these hellenized Jews (found in Clement of Alexandria and especially in Eusebius of Caesarea) show clear influence of the Septuagint, and incidentally illustrate the concern to soften the more unHellenic asperities of too faithful a translation of the original Hebrew. This Greek Old Testament was, then, a major asset for the early Gentile Greek-speaking churches. In the Latin-speaking West there could be more difficulty, though in Rome the early Christian community was Greek-speaking. It is possible that parts of the Old Latin version of the Hebrew Scriptures were made from the Septuagint by Jews and taken over for Christian use. But the transition from Greek to Latin was made only slowly by Christian communities. The Old Latin Bible originated probably in the endeavours of a variety of translators in different western provinces during the second century. Their work certainly did not reflect Cicero's opinion that a good translation ought to avoid giving a literal word for word rendering, but should convey the meaning in a manner faithful to the idioms of Latin thought and language. The Old Latin Christian translations mirrored their inherited Jewish belief that, in words inspired by God, the least phrase may be sig-

[2] D. Barthélemy, *Les devanciers d'Aquila: première publication intégrale du texte des fragments du Dodécaprophéton* (Leiden: Brill, 1963).

nificant and therefore even the most awkward unidiomatic word-order ought to be preserved.

It followed that the Old Latin Bible was yet more uncomfortable and inelegant for Latin speakers than parts of the Greek New Testament, such as St Mark's Gospel or the astonishing grammar of the Apocalypse of John, for educated Greek speakers. That situation provided some of the impetus for the making of Jerome's Vulgate at the end of the fourth century. The versions of the Old Latin Bible used in the churches of Italy differed from those current in North Africa. Augustine thought the 'Itala' superior to African versions on the ground of 'combining greater literalness with greater clarity'; but some of its terms and phrases which were unfamiliar on the south side of the Mediterranean occasionally had to be explained.

In the prologue to his version of the Gospels, Jerome justified his labours by the sharp observation that in the Old Latin the number of versions was almost equal to the number of manuscripts; it was hard to find two with an identical text. His revision, under the patronage of Pope Damasus, was intended to bring more order and uniformity. Although his revision was profoundly conservative and in places only superficial, for a time it precipitated storms of protest from laity offended by departures from familiar language (as at Oea in Libya; Augustine, *Ep*. 71). The revision made its way in the Latin West rather slowly, and its progress was far from uniform. Early in the sixth century we find Avitus bishop of Vienne in the Rhône valley (d. 517) normally quoting the prophets from Jerome's Vulgate, but the books of Kings, Job, and the Psalter from the Old Latin, while citations from the Pentateuch and Proverbs come now from the one, now from the other. By the fourth century it was not unknown but it was uncommon for a Church to have the entire Bible in a single codex; it would cost about 18 solidi. It would have been normal to have the Pentateuch in one codex, the prophets in another, and so on.

Jerome followed the example of the old Latin version or versions in ignoring the principle dear to Cicero that one should avoid close literalism in translation. He thought that inappropriate for a sacred text (*ep.* 57. 5–6). But he found it possible to soften the asperities in 'translationese' of the versions he was aspiring to replace.

But the Bible was a book for insiders—for believers—to serve the stimulation of devotion. In the third century Origen devoted the greater part of his life to the exegesis of Scripture, whether by full-scale commentaries on so vast a scale that none has survived complete and intact or by homilies or by scholia on particular passages. He was helped in

producing this mass of material by a wealthy patron named Ambrosius who provided shorthand writers to take down what he dictated and to make copies. Origen felt his life's work was to interpret the Scriptures and thereby ward off Gnostic exegesis and rebut criticism from the pagan intelligentsia. He insisted that biblical commentaries were not for entertainment but to disclose spiritual meaning. He believed that the Pauline threefold division of spirit, soul, and body also applied to Scripture. Beginners understand the surface meaning, but beyond that lies a moral sense, and higher still a spiritual or mystical sense.

3

Nose of Wax

Justin was the most important defender of Christianity in the second century, mainly because he had been converted to believe in Platonism and could use his philosophy to help him to make his faith intelligible to rational inquirers. He also engaged in debate with Jews. Justin (*D* 7–8) conveys the impression that in his time, about AD 150, a Jew was being converted to Christian belief virtually every day. It was understood that in Justin's eyes Jewish converts would continue to keep the Torah. In Origen's time there were Christians who kept Jewish observances on the good ground that Jesus had done so e.g. Passover and circumcision (see Origen, *in Levit. Hom.* 10. 2; cf. Celsus in *Cel.* 2. 6–7)

Justin was born at Nablus in Samaria to Gentile parents. He used his philosophy in his two *Apologies*. In his *Dialogue with Trypho* he left posterity the principal document of learned debate between a Christian and a well-informed Jew in the mid century; it was a condition of success in Trypho's eyes that there could be no contradiction between texts. Justin accepted the inspiration of the Old Testament Scriptures. A question, however, on which disagreement was possible was the identification of messianic prophecies. Trypho was puzzled by Justin's affirmation that Jesus descended to earth as God and was born of a virgin in accord with Isaiah 7: 14. For him the Messiah was to be a natural human being with ordinary blood, becoming Messiah by being anointed by a returned Elijah on the ground of his perfect keeping of the Torah. 'Virgin' in the prophecy of Isaiah 7 was a mistranslation by the Septuagint of the Hebrew word for a young woman. Justin defends the Septuagint translation, observing that the child's birth is said to be a 'sign' which could hardly be claimed for a young woman having a baby. The crux for Justin is that the miracle of the virginal conception was the evidence of Christ's divinity. He conceded that there were good Christians who did not think it necessary to believe in incarnation. Justin writes with remarkable respect for the keeping of the Mosaic Law. Observant Jews, provided they believe in Jesus the Messiah, will receive salvation in the mercy of God. (*D* 45. 9). Nevertheless Justin was sad that the Septuagint version was distrusted by observant Jews who preferred different translations. For him

the Septuagint was the Christian Bible rejected by Jews when they were uncomfortable with its too Christian meaning.

Later in the *Dialogue* there are sharp exchanges about variant forms of text. Justin mentions places where Christian scribes have glossed their Septuagint to make it ever more congenial, e.g. *D* 73 on Psalm 96 the Lord reigns 'from the tree' (perhaps the echo of a homily).

Is there a single agreed meaning?

'From the outset' in the development of the Church (remarks Origen, *Cel.* 3. 11) 'believers have disagreed about the correct exegesis of Scripture'. The context of this observation is a rebuttal of the pagan Celsus' supposition that the Christians were once united when the Church was small and united in its first beginnings, but have now split into numerous contending factions as a result of its growth in numbers. Origen continues with the further observation that there is no serious subject on which human beings do not disagree; indeed, the more serious the matter, the greater the degree of dissension (*Cel.* 3. 12; 5. 61). Once he allows himself the characteristic sentence that 'complete confidence in advanced matters of theology is possible only to two classes of people—saints in heaven and utter blockheads on earth (cited from his commentary on Genesis in the preface to Pamphilus' *Apology*.[1] Yet in the Christian debates all parties appeal to Scripture and treat the sacred writings as their title-deeds. Do not Christians claim to offer authority in those areas where human reason fails to attain? How is that claim compatible with contradictions in the interpretation of that authority?

The question has some perennial force. A letter of guidance for those embarking on the ascetic life composed late in the fourth century warns monks that charity among brethren is severely threatened not only by the surviving secularity that novices may bring into the community but also by that most dangerous practice 'exegesis' (Basil the Great, *ep.* 52).[2] The interpretation of texts in Christian history has been a contentious area.

In debate with Celsus, Origen further observes that the God Christians worship lies beyond mere human knowing and this is the cause of many serious errors about him (*Cel.* 7. 44). But Origen is sure that God has revealed what may be known of himself through the incarnate Lord

[1] C. H. E. Lommatzsch, *Origenis. opera omnia*, vol xxiv (Berlin, 1846), p. 296.
[2] *Bibliotheca Patrologiae Graecae*, vol. xxxii (4), ep. 52.

and in the instruments he uses for media of grace, namely the Bible and the sacramental life of the Church. All revelation is a condescension relative to human capacities and respects human freedom of decision. The possibility of error in interpretation inheres in the gift of free will and free judgement (*Cel.* 4. 3). So too, among the ministers of God, Origen remarks that there are many diversities (4. 4 and 8). The help God has given are Scripture and reason (4. 9), but it is inescapable that a collection of texts in which there is poetry, metaphor in abundance, symbolist writing (a type of composition in which perhaps the biblical writers were pioneers), myth or significant narrative, will be open to divergent judgements, especially to readers considerably later in time than the original authors.

Nevertheless, the disagreements among interpreters of Scripture are disturbing to Origen. In his commentary on St Matthew he once cried 'Would that only readers alien to the Church were led astray in exegesis.' But in fact those who claim to be members of the orthodox Church are deceived and led astray in essential articles of belief, as witness the fact of their disagreement (*in Matt. ser.* 33, p. 60. 7 ff.).[3]

A variety of motives impelled Origen to search for a reliable method of interpretation and an objective vindication of allegory. He had to face not only pagan critics who thought Genesis an immoral and childish book, not conducive to allegory—much as other critics thought about Homer's myths. He also needed to answer Christians who laughed at his allegories (*in Levit. hom.* 1.1; 7. 4 ff.). To these unnamed Christian critics it was an axiom that history is to be interpreted as such (*in Joh.* 10. 18). Exegesis based on Hebrew names or numbers seemed superstition and dangerous occultism. Moreover, because allegory can make anything mean almost anything, it merely engenders doubt and scepticism that the Bible has any clear and certain meaning at all (*in Joh.* 20. 268–75). Like the author of the Epistle of Barnabas, Origen felt sure that anyone who recognizes the mission of Jesus to be divine will discern that the inner meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures does not lie in the literal sense (*in Matt. ser.* 27). To take them literally confines citizenship in the kingdom of God to the Jewish people and understands that kingdom in a wholly this-worldly sense; to see the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus as a universal and heavenly society imposes a different reading of the law and the prophets (*Cel.* 2. 5). Without allegory how could the Bible be seen as a unity, with a consistent message from the one and

[3] C. H. E. Lommatzsch, *Origenis opera omnia* (Berlin, 1831–46).

only God? Spiritually interpreted, the law becomes Gospel (*in Num. hom.* 9. 3. 4).

Origen was not unconcerned about the literal sense and about the establishment of the correct text, as his labours on the *Hexapla* show. The problem which led him to construct this enormous work, recording the various Greek versions of the Old Testament seriatim, was the relative authority of the Septuagint currently accepted by the Church and the Hebrew text employed at least in Palestinian synagogues. Origen wanted to underpin the credit of the Septuagint where it diverged from the Hebrew but also to enable Christian disputants in debate with Jewish rabbis to avoid appealing to texts or books which lacked recognition in the Synagogue. In the case of the New Testament writings he was very aware of difference among the manuscripts. Control could be achieved by comparing a great number of copies. But a personal recension of the New Testament text could upset critical believers, and Origen was content to mention variant readings giving preference to those with the greatest quantity of support among the copies available to him.

He often defends the literal sense when one might have expected him not to bother. For instance, when Lot's daughters took their father to bed, they were in the exceptional situation of seeing the cities of the plain destroyed; and perhaps to those who feared for the survival of the human race incest can be excused in the circumstances: was the act intrinsically evil? Circumstance and intentions decide. The eclipse at the Passion was only darkness, not an actual eclipse which could be impossible at Passover full moon. But to affirm a literal darkness allows recognition that it was symbolic as well.

But there is no possible reconciliation between the evangelists' placing of the Cleansing of the Temple. Some have argued that therefore the evangelists were in error, and therefore not inspired. Others have used the different chronology in St John to argue that the fourth Gospel is not canonical. The correct conclusion is that the evangelists had more important things to do than to relate to us events long past. Jesus is always coming to his Church to purify it, and to the individual soul too, and perhaps if there is spiritual wickedness in heavenly places, as the epistles say, Jesus ascends in triumph, his chariot drawn by both Jewish and Gentile believers, (the colt and foal of St Matthew), and cleanses the angelic powers of their sinfulness. That the story is symbol not history is surely self-evident. A carpenter's son could never have expelled a crowd of merchants. The evangelist was teaching the necessity of purification not merely of the

Jewish Synagogue but of the Church, a holy people always in need of purging, '*semper reformanda*'.

The modern world is sceptical of allegory. Yet curiously there is much admiration for symbolist writing. The fourth *Georgic* of Virgil has two apparently unrelated themes, namely how to get honey from the bees engendered by the rotting carcase of cattle and then the descent of Orpheus in search of his love, Eurydice. The lack of relationship is only apparent. The Hellenistic and later philosophers treated the honey and bees in the carcase of cattle as evidence of eternal life, and that theme is shared with Orpheus. Hofmannstal and Richard Strauss delight audiences with *Ariadne auf Naxos*, where the *opera seria* is apparently at war with the *commedia dell'arte*, but in fact both are telling us the same thing in symbol. Augustine repeated favourite themes in his sermons, but clothed those themes in different allegorical interpretations of biblical texts. His congregation were delighted by the ingenuity of it all, by the poetry of his exegesis. To modern readers Philo of Alexandria had the capacity to make exciting texts boring by allegory. But allegory is akin to poetry and something important is lost if it is forbidden.

It is a commonplace today that Platonists like Origen could not attach decisive true significance to historical events, which by their very nature are contingent; that is, it is always possible for them to have turned out otherwise. In his learned and unquestionably important book *Allegory and Event*[4] the late Richard Hanson contended that Origen's domestication of allegory led the Church astray, because 'all is merged in a morass of spiritualizing exposition which has no legitimate ground in historical reality'; that Origen's failure 'to take history seriously' evacuates the Gospel of meaning; and that he adulterated the Catholic tradition with Platonic venom which it is hard to get out of the system. In short, allegory robs the Bible of authority by giving it what Alan of Lille was to call a 'nose of wax', which could be turned in any direction at will.

In defence of Origen, it may be replied that there is far more than Platonism to his allegories; without this method of interpretation the early Christians had no reply to those difficult questions: if you believe the Law and the prophets were inspired by God, by what authority do you claim to be free of the ritual precepts? Yet it may also be granted that in a Platonist-dominated climate allegory was simply taken for granted as the appropriate method of understanding ancient texts held to be

[4] R. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM, 1959; reissued with an introduction by J. W. Trigg, 2002).

inspired. The citations from Homer and Plato in the *Enneads* of Plotinus exemplify this assumption. Origen had to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, and allegory provided him with an instrument for this end. To him, as for Philo, the ultimate criterion of truth and error in allegorical interpretation was acceptability with the community of faith where he found himself.

4

The Source of Authority

From the start Gentile Christians had a Bible: that of the Greek Synagogue. When they appealed to the 'Scriptures', they meant the books of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Law, the prophets, and the writings) which it was the traditional role of scribes and rabbis to interpret. Rabbis could expound the Torah in different ways. But whatever the divergences among Rabbis there was unreserved agreement on such matters as the necessity of Sabbath observance, food laws, great annual festivals like Passover or Tabernacles, or the Day of Atonement, the offering of sacrifices in the Temple worship, and above all circumcision, which went back beyond Moses to Abraham himself and was therefore older and more venerable than the Decalogue itself. Agreement on such non-negotiable necessities did not mean agreement on a multitude of other matters, such as divorce. Rabbis like Hillel and Shammai notoriously pursued different paths. The Judaism of the time of Jesus had a rich variety of disputing and conflicting groups—Sadducees, Pharisees, Qumran covenanters, Zealots committed to political action and liberation from Roman domination but among whom there were several factions.

The Jewish group which believed that in Jesus of Nazareth they discerned the fulfilment of messianic expectation and the inaugurator of the reign of God was distinctive in ways other than their discipleship and their estimate of their Master. They could attend the worship in Herod's great Temple, but could express some detachment about it. They were confident that, if it should happen to be destroyed in the war which the Zealot freedom fighters wanted, all necessary arrangements for appropriate community worship could be made within three days. After all, the completion of the building was entirely within living memory; it was finished about 9–8 BC. They picked up the ancient theme of the Hebrew prophets that ritual is a help, but a means not an end, and that what God desires is the inner spirit and purity of heart, without which correct ceremonial can degenerate into a self-centred boosting of the ego. Mercy was more important than sacrifice. Likewise, the observing of the Sabbath ought not to be interpreted with such rigour that actions of common humanity cannot be performed without provoking censoriousness. St

Mark's Gospel has matter critical not of the command to observe the Sabbath but of the scribal exegesis of that command which excluded simple necessities of human life (Mark 7: 1–2). A too rigorous enforcement of rules can in certain circumstances obstruct and annul the objective for which the rules exist. 'Summum ius, summa iniuria', said Cicero (*De officiis* 1. 10. 33). Ambrose would more than once tell his emperor that justice without mercy is not justice (*De obitu Theodosii* 25; *in Ps*. 118, 20. 40–1). In a word , great nicety in observing ceremonial laws about food or lustrations is capable of losing sight of the evil which comes out of the heart and mouth of man, and expresses an inward corruption of the will. The Passover memorial of the Exodus was kept by Jesus and his disciples, but Jesus discerned a redemptive meaning in his own death commemorated in the Christian Passover, the eucharist.

The Gospels never say that the Sabbath ought not to be observed by devout and loyal Jews, nor that Jesus wished his disciples to ignore annual festivals. Most significantly in the Gospels there is no trace of argument about circumcision. In St John's Gospel (7: 22–3) there is a brief controversy not about the obligation of this covenant sign, but about the rabbinic admission that the circumcision of a Jewish boy on the Sabbath is legitimate (Mishnah, Shabbat 18–19; Nedarim 3. 11) When one reflects on the passionate controversy on this issue in the Pauline Epistles and Acts 15, one is tempted to make deductions about the fidelity of the oral tradition behind the evangelists. No topic was hotter, yet sayings were not invented for Jesus to provide an authoritative ruling which would have settled the matter.

The question was fairly central to the authority and interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Apostolic Decree of Acts 15 must surely have reflected what was the established compromise at least in the mixed communities for which Acts was written. Gentile Christians were not obliged to keep the ceremonial law, but in order to facilitate common meals with Christian Jews, there would be restraint in observing food laws. But then there was a problem: the Gentile Christians, just as much as the Jews who evangelized them, regarded the Hebrew Scriptures as God's law. Could one think these scriptures inspired by God and not observe the ritual precepts such as circumcision and Sabbath? The epistle associated with the name of Barnabas certainly saw the light at some time between the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in AD 70, and the time of the emperor Hadrian. It was written at a moment when in the Jewish community high hopes had been aroused that the Roman government would authorize and even assist the rebuilding of the Temple. Since hopes of rebuilding

could easily have been provoked at anytime by excited apocalyptic exegesis of Daniel chapter 9 (quoted in Barnabas 16. 8), one need not necessarily attach the date of Barnabas to a particular policy of an emperor in this period. Jerome's commentary on Daniel 9 records a Jewish exegesis that the desolation of the Temple was only temporary and shortlived. Be that as it may 'Barnabas' faced not only a confident Synagogue, but confident fellow Christians pressing the questions: How can you who accept the Law and the prophets as God's word yet ignore that law's ritual precepts? How can you claim to share Abraham's faith and ignore its covenant sign? And does not your assertion of freedom from the ritual laws glide irresistibly into an antinomian freedom from the moral law as well? Barnabas' answer is to propose an exegesis of the Scriptures to the effect that they have an inward spiritual meaning, and that only spiritual blindness will interpret the Law literally. The argument is forcefully presented in a manner reminiscent of rabbinic exegesis, though to a very different conclusion.

The Epistle to the Hebrews preferred to answer the same set of questions by urging that while the Mosaic Law was right and good, it has been superseded by a more excellent way. In St Matthew's Gospel and in the Epistle of James we meet two further reactions to the charge that Christians were not taking the Law of Moses seriously. In both texts there is an implicit rebuttal of the accusation that the Christians are lax in their ethic, and moving towards moral disintegration. For St Matthew's community, Jesus has brought something higher and better, not abolishing rules and ceremonies but pointing to a greater righteousness in the most inward motive, in purity of heart, above all in love. So far from being abolished, the Law and the prophets find their reaffirmation in the fulfilment of prophetic expectation and in the sacrificial pattern of redemption.

That in the apostolic age and after there were Christians who understood their freedom from the Law in a radically antinomian sense is certain from 1 Corinthians 6: 12–20 cf. 10: 23 'everything is permissible' and other texts such as Jude, 2 Peter, and the Apocalypse (2. 15) on the Nicolaitans.

The proposition that the sovereign moral principle is love is so pervasive in the diversity of writings that went to make up the New Testament that we may reasonably deduce that theme to be central in the teaching of Jesus. And evidently it facilitated the contentious move in the mission to the Gentile world. It was no enormous step from the primacy of love and purity of heart over legal ceremony to the suggestion that Gentile

adherents could be dispensed from observing Sabbath and circumcision, provided they respected the moral code of the Decalogue and exercised charity towards their Jewish brothers and sisters in the Church in the matter of table fellowship.[1]

That the earliest Christians derived their interpretation of their Master from reflection on the Hebrew Scriptures is self-evident. The fulfilment of prophetic expectation and aspiration is a pervasive theme in the documents. To say that Jesus is Messiah is to speak the language of Judaism. In Acts 26: 22–3 there are three questions being asked about this claim: is the Messiah one who suffers? Is he expected to rise from the dead? Is his message of salvation addressed not only to Israel but to the Gentile world as well? Acts 17: 2–3 on Thessalonica has two of these three questions. All three occur before Agrippa in 26: 22–3.[2] Texts were collected by Christians to underpin their answers to these three questions, florilegia analogous to matter found among the Dead Sea Scrolls but also to Papyri containing school anthologies in the Hellenistic–Roman world. The appeal to these texts implied continuity between the convenant of Sinai and the 'new covenant' of which Jesus spoke at the Last Supper, inaugurated by his death. But the ancient texts did not speak only of God's special election of Israel. They had tough things to say about the judgement of God on a disobedient people, and these words answered the question: How could elect people of God fail to recognize the moment of truth? Hence the undiscussed assumption that the followers of Jesus are the inheritors of the Old Testament, and have in Jesus the key to the interpretation of the sacred books. His death, like the Servant in 2 Isaiah, is representative, an offering for sin exhausting its consequences, establishing a covenant constituting a people of the saints of the most high, one by virtue of incorporation in the Son of Man. In a word, the New Testament doctrine of the person of Jesus appears as a mosaic of Old Testament allusions, in spirit closely akin to the original sense but making a decisive shift—discovering typology where non-Christian interpreters

[1] In the light of the investigation by W.-D. Köhler, *Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums in der Zeit vor Irenäus* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987) to which assents Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (London: SCM, 1990), St Matthew's Gospel was not perhaps as widely known and used in the second century as is claimed by Edouard Massaux, *Influence de l'Evangile de Saint Matthieu sur la litérature chrétienne avant Saint Irénée* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1950, repr. 1986).

[2] C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1952), pp. 16–17.

had not necessarily seen pre-figuration of the Messiah, and therefore re-reading the original texts to give them new meanings.

The Christians were not the first to offer a re-reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. The way for Christian Gentiles was already marked out by the more liberal Greek synagogues of the Dispersion. Professor Martin Hengel could warn us against the old and too simple contrast between a rabbinic Judaism in Palestine immune to influence from Hellenism and a Diaspora Judaism largely assimilated to the surrounding Hellenistic culture. It is certain that in Jerusalem there was extensive upper-class hellenization, and in the Dispersion care was taken to ward off excessive assimilation. Origen, writing at Caesarea, not Alexandria, once offers the social comment: 'Jews are in general not well read in Greek literature' (*Cel.* 2. 34). Nevertheless, Philo and Josephus were surely not almost unique in their familiarity with the Greek world. Philo was so far from being withdrawn from the social life of Alexandria that he can take for granted the propriety of attending dinner-parties and theatres, or of watching wrestlers and chariot-racing—entertainments which more puritan Christians like Augustine wanted their people to boycott.[3]

Hellenization certainly familiarized educated Jews with the allegorical methods which had been applied to Homer at least since the time of Anaxagoras (Diog. Laert. 2. 11) and was familiar to Plato, though he regarded it as insidious (*Rep*. 2. 378d; 10. 598d–606b; *Phaedrus* 229 c–e; *Cratylus*). The appellation 'Theios Homeros' (Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1034) was obviously intended to defend the poet against criticism from philosophers (see Xenophon, *Symp.* 3. 5f. and 4. 6f.)

Dio Chrysostom (53. 3–4) records Stoic exegetes who discovered in Homer a profound account of the phenomena of nature. Zeno himself went so far as to write about the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to harmonize all the apparent contradictions (53. 4) and to find there a source of high instruction in moral virtue (53. 11). Perhaps the gods were poetic personifications of cosmic powers.

This idealizing of Homer, the inspired authority who wrote philosophy in the form of noble poetry, was taken to exaggerated lengths at Pergamum, and this view therefore came to be mocked by the rival school at Alexandria. Eratosthenes, librarian at Alexandria in the third century BC, ridiculed expositions of Homer which attributed to him an amazing and accurate knowledge of geography. Strabo, a dedicated Stoic, felt

[3] Philo, *Leg. Alleg*. 3. 155 f.; *Fuga* 28 f.; *Sp.Leg*. 4. 74 f.; Theatres: *Prob*. 141; Pancratiasts: *Prob*. 26. Races: Eus. *PE* 8. 14. 58).

bound to defend Homer, combining both pleasurable entertainment and largely accurate science and history. Inspiration had enabled him to combine these features with deep philosophical truths.

In another context (10. 3. 9, 467), speaking of the mystery rites in both Greek and barbarian cults, Strabo remarks that mystery in religion induces awe before the transcendent divinity, whose nature lies beyond human sense-perception and mental capacity. The emperor Julian the Apostate (*or*. 7 against Heraclius, 216 CD) understood the old myths of the gods as nature's way of veiling its true self from the eyes of the unworthy. Maximus of Tyre, contemporary of Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second century AD, regrets that modern pagan theology has opted for philosophical clarity and has sadly discarded myth which has the merit of veiling the divine mystery in modesty.[4]

We notice here language about religion akin to the erotic—a theme developed by Reinhold Merkelbach in a study of ancient love-stories, where he argued that the ancient novelists were writing more about religion than about sex.[5] Most readers have been unconvinced. Nevertheless, the interpretation of love in Apuleius or early Christian exegesis on the Song of Songs illustrates how easy the transition would be in either direction. Both Plotinus and Augustine use erotic symbolism to describe the soul's mystical assent. The stronger the advocacy of celibacy the more likely the use of erotic symbols in a sublimated sense.

One of Seneca's letters (88. 5–6) addresses the question to which Plutarch once turned for one of his moral essays, namely what is the moral value of poetry in the education of the young when that poetry may be about topics that are not edifying? Seneca asks 'Do the liberal arts help to produce good and virtuous people?' What virtue is inculcated by teaching the young correct vocabulary, the length of syllables, the laws of metre and prosody, the study of ancient myths, and the theory of music? Ancient education was more designed to teach success in public speaking, not philosophical penetration. The teaching of virtue falls to the philosopher rather than the teacher of literature and rhetoric. Nevertheless interpreters try to bridge the gap by expounding Homer to teach ethics, despite the fact that his poems seem merely intended to entertain. The exegetes discovered in his hexameters an incompatible variety of ethical doctrines, sometimes they found Stoic absolutes, sometimes Epicurean hedonism (advising you never to do anything which leaves you feeling

[4] Maximus of Tyre, *Philosophumena,* 4. 5, ed. H. Hobein (Lipsiae: Teubner, 1910), p. 45.
[5] *Roman and Mysterium in der Antike* (Munich: Beck, 1962).

uncomfortable), sometimes a peripatetic concession that the epithet good can be properly applied not only to the soul's moral character but also to bodily health and good looks and even to wealth, high birth, good reputation on the ground that virtue alone is insufficient to ensure happiness (Diog. Laert. 5. 30); or Homer might even be found to give authority for Academic scepticism, regarding everything as uncertain.

Seneca goes on to voice no less impatience with learned commentators on Homer who try to decide in which part of the sea Odysseus wandered so long; such erudition does nothing to help one face the storms and temptations of the immediate present. Resort to allegory if the literal sense is either shocking or just impossible.

Criticism of myths of the gods made Homer embarrassing. The author who under the name of Heraclitus expounded *Questions in Homer* argues that the blasphemous myths about the gods prove the poet's intention to be allegorical (*Qu. Hom*. 22). Porphyry (*De antro nympharum*) quotes Cronius, the second-century Platonist, as arguing from the absence of any nymph's cave on the island of Ithaca that Homer intended it as a cosmic symbol. No such cave exists.

Whether or not Aristarchus, the textual critic of Homer at Alexandria, expressly formulated the proposition that the best interpreter of Homer is Homer is not certain. But it occurs in Eustathius' commentary, and much earlier than that in Porphyry.[6] In the fifth century Proclus declared that the best exegete of Plato is Plato himself.[7]

The principle was to be useful to the Christians. For Clement, Origen, and Augustine, it is axiomatic that orthodox exegetes can explain obscurities in Scripture from other biblical texts which are clearer, and do not need to resort to external sources.[8] Perhaps its earliest Christian statement is in St Paul's phrase that 'spiritual things are to be compared with spiritual' (1 Cor. 2: 13).

There was a major difference, however, in the way the Christians invoked the principle. As a criterion for the diction of a single author, the principle is sound and valid today. But the Christian Bible consisted of a great diversity of books: narrative, poetry, biography, letters and so on, written by numerous authors widely separated in time. To interpret an

[6] A. R. Sodino (ed.), *Porphyrii Quaestionum homericarum* (Naples: Giannini, 1970).

[7] H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink, (eds. and trans.), *Théologie Platonicienne* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968)) vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 10, 1–4).

[8] Clement *Strom.* 7. 9. 16; Origen *De princ.* 4. 24; J. A. Robinson, *The Philocalia of Origen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893) vol. 2 .3. p. 38.21 f. Augustine, *CD* 20. 17; Felix the Manichee has it in Augustine, *Fel.* 1. 17.

obscure passage in St Paul by a text from St Matthew, or vice versa, made assumptions about a common divine authorship, submerging the individuality of the human authors. If Homer could be allegorized to teach history, geography, and science it was no massive step to accord the same treatment to the Pentateuch. Philo was not the first learned and hellenized Jew to allegorize the Mosaic Law. He had predecessors, and did not approve of all of them, especially if they supposed that an understanding of the symbolic and philosophical meaning of the Torah dispensed them from any literal observance of Sabbaths, circumcision, annual festivals and temple cult (*Migr. Abr.* 89–93). A considerable argument has recently been advanced by the French scholar Richard Goulet in his book *La Philosophie de Moïse*[9] to persuade us that Philo's own exposition of the Torah was primarily and specifically designed to supplant and extrude one particular allegorical commentary. The targeted exposition found in the Pentateuch, and especially in Genesis, hidden references to the world of nature, to life and death, to sun, moon, and stars, to the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Indeed it is because this inner meaning was concerned with nature, physics, the Greek word 'physiologia' simply comes to mean allegory.[10]

What disturbs Philo about the exegesis to which he is objecting is that the interpreter understands the stories in Genesis to refer only to natural phenomena, not also to religion, morality and piety. For Philo the Pentateuch is a sacred text, and must have something to do with religion and morals. In other words, the Pentateuch was being too closely expounded in accordance with the Stoic model for Homer. For a sacred text it becomes a criterion for the acceptability of allegory that the meaning elicited is felt to be appropriate by the religious community which holds the writings to be sacred.

In short, Philo had a problem. On the one hand, some kind of allegory was indispensable to make the Pentateuch respectable in the culture of the surrounding society, and indeed to give its precepts relevance to observant Jews in his own community. On the other hand, he needed some rational principle of restraint since prima facie, allegorical interpretation could make anything mean anything.

Philo was sure that Scripture can never intend a meaning unworthy of

[9] (Paris: J. Vrin, 1987).

[10] Goulet 545; H. Leisegang in Pauly-Wissowa, Real-Encyclopädie der classisches Altertumwissenschaft 20: 1 (1941), 1129–64, and 1137 citing Philo: *Som.*i. 120; *Leg. al.* 60; *Cherub*. 121; Aristobulus before him, *in Eus PE* 8. 10. 2; Eusebius himself in *PE* 3. 1. 1–3.

God (*Det. Pot.*13). To justify his conviction that there is and must be an inner spiritual meaning lying beyond the outward letter of the Bible, he liked to draw attention to impossibilities like Cain's wife (*Post. C* 33 f.), or superfluities in the text such as 'he looked up with his eyes' in Genesis 24: 63 *Qu. Gen*. 4. 141). I will not give a long catalogue.[11] The impossibilities are enough to prove that a literal meaning is sometimes out of the question, and therefore that an allegorical meaning is always present. Yet it is normal for Philo to defend the literal meaning (e.g. *Ebr*. 130 and 144). He sees no reason to doubt that God could have enabled the serpent to converse intelligibly with Eve (*Qu. Gen*. 1. 32). He knew of critics who rejected all allegory as ridiculous and arbitrary (*Jos.* 22. 125). In reply he urges that a sacred text cannot be treated as a mere lesson in history or geography (*Som.*1. 52, 2. 300 ff.). Very sensibly we may judge, Philo thinks the Bible contains good history but, being a sacred text, has something more important to tell us, so that the historical facts are of secondary importance. We learn more about God from a fiction like the book of Job than from the lists of names in the genealogies recorded in Chronicles, lists which there is no good reason to think invented. The perennial power of the Psalter has a relation to its freedom from an original historical context. When the immediate historical context obtrudes, we feel less comfortable, as in Psalm 137 where the desire to take the oppressors' infants and dash them against the stones is one we hope religion may help us to suppress or sublimate.

To meet the critics of allegory it was desirable to formulate criteria and in several passages Philo mentions the 'canons of allegory'. The canons or rules appear to cover indications when allegory is necessary and justified rather than restrictions on the manner in which it may be applied. But among Philo's evident intuitions is the feeling that the literal meaning is only to be abandoned when it is absurd or impossible or unworthy of God; in short, that maintaining the possibility of literal interpretation whenever that can reasonably be done is among the ways in which the interpreter is restricted in freedom. Allegory is safeguarded from the charge of hopeless subjectivism by the proposition (not obviously logically coercive) that most of the text is also acceptable when taken on its surface meaning. And that is the way in which the religious community, in which Philo stands, naturally understands the sacred text.

[11] See C. Siegfried, *Philo von Alexandria als Ausleger des Alten Testament* (Jena: Dufft, 1875), pp. 165–8.

Can the rules be objective? Philo clearly thought that he found objective evidence for symbolist interpretation in the etymology of Hebrew names, *nomina sacra* of a special kind, and in the numbers mentioned in the biblical text. In looking to etymologies of names, Philo was in line with Stoic philosophers: Chrysippus explained the name Zeus as derived from the word for 'live' (z*ē*n) in that the supreme deity is the source of life, and his accusative Dia as derived from his causative nature, since the preposition '*dia*' means 'on account of, because of' (Stobaeus 1. 31. 11 = *SVF* 2. 1062)—exegesis which Plutarch thought 'implausible and forced' (*quomodo adul. poet. aud.* 31e). A second source, in biblical numbers was the subject of a special, sadly lost treatise by Philo (*Qu. Gen*. iv. 110). But his extant writings are rich in number symbolism which enabled him to find much Pythagoreanism buried in the Bible. One suspects that, although number mysticism looks implausible and forced to modern readers who wonder if Philo is being perfectly serious, even Plutarch and indeed most ancient writers outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition would not have found it to be so.

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