

**Part I**

**Reading the Fathers**

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL



# 1

## “IN MANY AND VARIOUS WAYS”: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS

---

BRIAN E. DALEY, SJ

Texts are everything in the modern (and post-modern) world. Since the rise of philosophical hermeneutics with Heidegger and Gadamer and Ricoeur, since the days of deconstructivist literary criticism and the growth of contemporary theories of philosophical and literary interpretation, scholars in the humanities have tended, increasingly, to see their work as dealing above all with written productions as their objects of study: texts that conceal as well as disclose the writer's intended meaning in written, time-bound, culturally determined words; texts that always involve both the reception and the destruction of older traditions of thought and language; texts that challenge the readers who come after them to enter and rearrange their world, like the furniture in a living-room.

For Christians, this focus on hermeneutics and textual theory can feel both natural and alienating. On the one hand, Jews and Christians and Muslims—perhaps more than any other set of religious traditions—regard their holy texts, their “Scriptures,” not just as the historic monuments of a sacred heritage, but as the place of God's continuing revelation: the foundation of their faith's present understanding of the reality of God, the chief guide towards how God calls us to act now. Our holy Scriptures form a book constantly in the process of being understood for the first time, a collection of writings that, by its very significance for their religious tradition, requires constant re-interpretation and re-application. On the other hand, for the faithful of all of these traditions, the text of what they regard as Scripture is not an object to be toyed with or even objectified, but a human, linguistic set of voices witnessing to an ultimate reality that is the reason all the other

realities we know exist at all. The book of Scripture, unlike all other books, is something sacred, human words communicating the Word of God; as such, it transcends time, and even its own original historical context. So the text of Scripture, precisely *as* Scripture, acquires for what are sometimes called “the religions of the book” both an urgency, a religious normativity, that no other writings in those traditions, however valuable, possess, and at the same time a translucency—an invitation to continuing reflection and interpretation—that other religious works can never have. What believers seek in them is not simply information, or historical evidence of ancient religious thought, but the reality of God as he speaks and acts in our midst.

Reading and interpreting Scripture correctly, then—discovering its meaning correctly so that we can understand it and live by it—presents us with unique challenges, if only because the one whom believers take to be speaking in and through the text is *God*, not simply a historical human author or editor. At the same time, human authors and editors, as well as translators and interpreters through the ages, have clearly been involved in the production of Biblical texts from their remotest origins. To know what the Biblical text *means* requires that, as far as possible, we know what these *authors* meant, and take that “original meaning” as a starting-point and guide for determining what it might mean for us today.

So reading the Bible and understanding it, in a way that allows us to take its content and meaning seriously, is clearly a complex, even paradoxical process that calls into play both a sophisticated conviction of God as creator, mysteriously yet really involved in human thoughts and actions, and of the ordinary human circumstances of literary authorship and the communication of meaning. In the words of the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, from 1965:

Those things revealed by God, which are contained and presented in the texts of Holy Scripture, were written under the influence of the Holy Spirit. . . . In the process of composition of the sacred books, God chose and employed human agents, using their own faculties and powers, in such a way that while he was acting in them and through them, they committed to writing, as genuine authors, everything which he willed—but only what he willed. Since, then, everything that the inspired authors or “sacred writers” affirm should be considered to be affirmed by the Holy Spirit, the books of Scripture should be confessed as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wished to be sealed in the sacred books for the sake of our salvation. . . . But since God, in Sacred Scripture, has spoken in a human way through human beings, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture—in order to grasp what God has wished to communicate to us—must carefully investigate what the sacred writers really intended to signify, and what it has pleased God to reveal to us in their words.<sup>1</sup>

This paragraph tries to walk a fine line between a more traditional understanding of divine inspiration, which saw the authors of the Biblical books as passive instruments for communicating the thoughts of God, and a more modern, historical and critical approach to the Biblical text, which approaches these works first of all as human compositions, written by particular writers in particular circumstances that inevitably frame their range of possible meaning for future readers.

The long tradition of Christian theology, East and West, has regarded the books of the Bible, and the various layers and sections that make them up, as being the definitive norm for our understanding of who and what God is, and how God acts in our world. For thinkers of the Western Enlightenment, however, the very notion of a God, who is genuinely transcendent, actually communicating in direct, intelligible and specific terms with creatures, seemed awash in contradictions; there may be a transcendent first cause of beings in the world whom we call God, it was sometimes argued, but information is communicated to human minds through language, action, and symbol, all of which are enacted within history, by finite historical agents. This emphatically inner-worldly understanding of historical reality, and of how history is investigated and facts ascertained, still stands in the background of the modern historical criticism of Biblical texts. Yet to many believers today who read Biblical texts in a spirit of faith, simply seeking to reconstruct the circumstances and possible "original intention" of Biblical texts is not enough to let us discover their meaning as *Scripture*: their significance through the centuries, and today, for the community of faith.

To conceive of the works contained in the Bible—narrative, moral and ritual commands, praise and lament, wisdom teaching and theological reflection—as embodying God's Word to humanity in more than simply a metaphorical sense requires, first, an understanding of how God acts in the world that allows for him genuinely to sustain and steer human speech and action for his own purposes, without infringing on the full, conscious activity of human prophets, poets and redactors. And it implies, too, that the ideas expressed in Biblical books, or the events narrated by Biblical authors, may well take on new significance, beyond the "surface" meaning of fact or law, when received as Scripture by the community of faith in later generations. So to understand the Bible as the Word of God—to read it as Bible, and not simply as a collection of disparate religious texts of varying ages—the interpreter needs to understand both God and the continuing meaning of human words: to be both a theologian and a linguistic, literary and historical scholar.

### *I. Oral Traditions*

For early Christian writers, in fact, it was clearly the understanding of Jewish faith in which they shared, the faith heard and professed in their Churches—centered on the conviction that God's promise to Abraham and God's cov-

enant at Sinai had found their fulfillment in Jesus—which was the primary claimant to being the vehicle of God’s saving revelation. Justin, for example, in his lengthy *Dialogue with Trypho* (written probably in Rome in the early 160s) makes relatively little direct reference to written documents about Christ,<sup>2</sup> although it is clear he is familiar with at least the sayings of Jesus recorded in the Synoptics. What he declares, in the dialogue’s opening narrative, is that he has come to Christianity as a result of looking for the best available “philosophy,” the way of life best suited to lead a person to happiness and hope.<sup>3</sup> Having been directed eventually to the Christian way, Justin is able to interpret the corpus of Israel’s Scriptures as finding their true, if hitherto hidden, meaning in Jesus’ life. Scripture, as written text, is for him the confirmation of a preached and lived message about who Jesus is.

Irenaeus of Lyons, writing his monumental treatise *Against the Heresies* some twenty-five years later, emphasizes that the disciples of Jesus first proclaimed the Gospel of salvation verbally (*praeconaverunt*), and only “afterwards, by the will of God, handed it down to us in written form (*in Scripturis*).”<sup>4</sup> As Irenaeus tells the story, Matthew wrote his Gospel text in Hebrew, while Peter and Paul were preaching the same Gospel orally in Rome; Mark, who was Peter’s “interpreter,” “handed on to us in writing what had been proclaimed by Peter,” while Luke did the same for Paul’s message.<sup>5</sup> The priority in the formation of the Christian message, in Irenaeus’s view, clearly also lies with oral, rather than with written witness—the oral witness preserved in the living traditions of the Churches around the world through the leadership of the Twelve and their successors.<sup>6</sup>

And if a discussion should arise on some issues of reasonable importance, should one not have recourse to the most ancient Churches, in which the Apostles were active, and take from them whatever is certain and substantially clear on the issue at hand? But what if the Apostles themselves had not left us written accounts (*scripturas*)? Should we not follow the order of tradition, which they entrusted to those to whom they gave responsibility for the Churches? Many peoples of those foreign tribes (*barbarorum*) who believe in Christ show their agreement with this arrangement: they have salvation written on their hearts, through the Spirit, without parchment or ink, and by carefully preserving the ancient tradition they believe in one God, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is in them, through Christ Jesus, the Son of God . . .<sup>7</sup>

Irenaeus goes on to summarize the story of Jesus’ life and death, and of his coming appearance as judge and savior, as it is contained in the “rule of faith,” and concludes:

Those who have come to profess this faith without written documents are, as far as our language is concerned, “barbarians,” but as far as what they hold, and their customs and behavior, are thoroughly wise because

of their faith, and are pleasing to God, behaving in all righteousness and purity and wisdom. And if anyone were to announce to them, speaking in their own language, the things that have been fabricated by the heretics,<sup>8</sup> they would immediately block their ears and flee as far away as they could, not even enduring to hear such blasphemous talk.<sup>9</sup>

The final criterion for recognizing the authentic Christian message, in other words—the interpretation of the world and human history that is genuinely based on the teaching and works of Jesus—is not any written text in itself, for Irenaeus, but rather the tradition of faith, maintained in properly constituted communities of faith, in which the texts that summarize that tradition are received and understood. Those who have been trained in this tradition develop, in his view, an ability to recognize Christian teaching intuitively, simply on the basis of living it.

It was Origen, however, writing a generation after Irenaeus, who recognized that this very process of maintaining and recognizing the faith is more complicated than it sounds. Origen's life's work was principally the careful interpretation of the texts used by the mainstream Christian Churches as Scripture. In his time, this included both the generally accepted Hebrew canon, as contained in the Septuagint and its various corrected versions, and the four Gospels and Pauline corpus, which by this point had almost reached a canonical status parallel to that of Israel's Bible in the Christian Churches.<sup>10</sup> In his influential and comprehensive treatise *On First Principles*—a work which, as I have argued elsewhere, seems really to be an attempt to sketch out the foundations and methods of Christian Biblical interpretation<sup>11</sup>—Origen begins the preface with a clear affirmation that the source of saving wisdom for all Christians ought simply to be the written teaching of Scripture:

All who believe and are convinced that "grace and truth have come into being through Jesus Christ" (John 1.17) and recognize Jesus as the truth, according to his own saying, 'I am the truth,' receive the knowledge which invites men and women to live well and happily from no other source than from the very words and teaching of Christ. But by "the words of Christ" we mean not only those by which he taught when he had been made human and was placed in flesh; even before [his incarnation], after all, Christ the Word of God was in Moses and the prophets.<sup>12</sup>

The problem facing Christians, however, even in the third century, as Origen sees it, was not the availability of Scripture, but its correct interpretation. There were many Christian sects, many individual lines of understanding; everyone understood the Bible according to his or her prior assumptions about God and the world. What the community of believers needed was a set of criteria for making sense of the Bible itself, as the ultimate criterion of faith. He continues:

Because, then, many of those who profess faith in Christ are in disagreement, not only in small, insignificant things, but even in large, very significant ones—for instance, on God or on the Lord Jesus Christ himself, or on the Holy Spirit; and not only on them but also on other creatures, that is, on the dominations and the holy powers—for this reason it seems necessary first to lay down a clear line and an obvious rule on these details, one by one, and then to ask also about the other things.<sup>13</sup>

For Origen, this “clear line and obvious rule” can only be found in actively following Christ, and in understanding Christ in the way the Apostles have taught the Churches:

So since there are many who think they hold in their hearts what Christ holds—and some of them are of very different opinions from their forebears—yet the preaching of the Church is preserved, handed down through the order of succession from the Apostles and remaining in the Churches up to the present time, only that truth is to be believed that in no respect departs from the tradition of the Church and the Apostles.<sup>14</sup>

Concretely, this means that the “rule of faith,” which is itself distilled from Biblical teaching—the ancestor of what we think of as the great baptismal creeds—is the community’s common framework, within which the form of Christian life and the meaning of individual Biblical passages can be discerned. The Bible is the originating norm, by which the rule of faith is first formed; but the rule of faith—summarizing the Bible’s teaching as a whole—is in turn the interpretive norm, by which individual Scriptural passages are understood consistently with the Bible’s whole message.

So Origen sets out, in the first three books of this treatise, to explain the details and implications of the Church’s rule of faith. Going, not once but twice, through the assertions of the common creed—the affirmation of faith in a single, all-powerful God who has created all things from nothing in time; faith in God’s involvement in the history of salvation, as recounted in the story of Israel, and in the mission of Jesus, his eternal Son, to bring that history to fulfillment in his death and resurrection; faith in the role of the Holy Spirit, who “shares in honor and dignity with the Father and the Son,” inspiring the “saints, prophets and apostles” of Israel and the Church; faith in the reality and moral freedom of the human soul, in the certainty of God’s judgment on human actions, in the promise of bodily resurrection, in the role of other created spirits in our lives; and finally, faith in the divine origin and spiritual character of the whole of Scripture, as received in the Church. All of this, as teased out by Origen in the first three books of *On First Principles*, enables him, by constantly interweaving and interpreting Biblical texts from both Testaments, to reject the Gnostic understanding of Christian faith—which saw the laws and practices of ancient Israel as overturned by the news

of redemption in Christ, and which rejected the importance of the material world and the body we live in, as the work of a lesser creator. It also allowed Origen to open the way for a more synthetic understanding of the Christian Scripture as a single whole. In the final book, he then lays out some principles for interpreting the Christian Scripture authentically, "spiritually," in a way that will let us hear God's Word as it really is and be assimilated to his "incorporeal" nature.<sup>15</sup>

## II. Interpretation and Theology

The heart of Christian interpretation of Scripture, obviously, is the realization that all of its books and layers, with their variety in age, message, and literary form, constitute a single book and tell a single story—a story that includes *us*, as disciples of Jesus today, and receivers of his Spirit. The center of the story, for the Christian, is Jesus himself: he is the norm by which the story of Israel is understood, the unexpected fulfillment who gives meaning to the promises made to Abraham; and it is the faith and history of Israel, conversely, that allowed his followers, in the confusing days after his resurrection and in the early decades of the Christian community, to interpret Jesus within God's history, and to discern both breaches and continuities in their own relationship with God's original elect. At the heart of such an understanding of the Scriptures, then, is an understanding of God—a *theologia*—that sees in Jesus the key to understanding the story of God's relationship to the world. Christian faith sees Jesus primarily as God's creative and revealing Word, eternally active in a mysteriously "personal" way, and now made flesh and raised from the dead.

Irenaeus, once again, is the first to articulate his understanding of divine revelation precisely in terms of an incipient sense that the mystery of Israel's God must be different—more complex within its radical monotheism, more inclusive in its relation to creation—from what previous generations of Jews or Christians had guessed, if Jesus is really to play the crucial role Christian believers attributed to him, as the final revealer of God and the agent of God's saving work in the world. Both creation and revelation are the work of God's "Word," his *Logos*, which the prologue to John presents precisely as the key to Jesus' personal identity. In a dense passage of Book IV of *Adversus Haereses*, which is centered precisely on the attempt to point out the continuity of God's saving history in both the story of Israel and the story of Jesus, Irenaeus builds on Matthew 11:25–27 to articulate Christianity's new sense of God's being:

No one can know the Father without the Word of God—that is, unless the Son reveals him (Matt. 11.27)—nor can anyone know the Son without the approval of the Father. But the Son realizes the good will of the Father, for the Father sends, but the Son is sent and comes. . . . And for this reason

the Father has revealed the Son, that through him he might [himself] be manifested to all, and might rightly receive those who believe in him into incorruptible and everlasting comfort—for to believe in him is to do his will. . . . For the Father has revealed himself to all, by making his Word visible to all; and again, the Word has shown to all the Father and the Son, since he was seen by all. . . .

So through [the fact of] creation itself, the Word reveals God to be the Creator; and through the world, the Lord who has made the world. . . . Through the Law and the Prophets the Word proclaims at the same time both himself and the Father; and all the people have indeed heard in the same way, but all have not believed in the same way.<sup>16</sup> And through the Word, made visible and palpable, the Father has been shown forth; and even though all do not believe him in the same way, still all have seen the Father in the Son. For surely the Father is the invisible side of the Son, but the Son is the visible side of the Father (*invisibile etenim Filii Pater, visibile autem Patris Filius*). And for this reason, everyone spoke with Christ when he was present, and called him God. . . .<sup>17</sup>

What Irenaeus struggles to say here is that God's own Word is constantly active as God's mediator with the world of time and space: bringing into being God's designs, and articulating within those designs God's purpose of life and healing. In the person of Jesus, the Word made flesh, this active force within God's being has become audible and visible to us. Jesus' role, as Son and Word, is to make God accessible to the world—a role that includes the formation of matter and living beings, the communication of Scripture, and ultimately the reconciliation of a fallen humanity through the sacrifice of the Cross. To see a continuity between creation, revelation and salvation, all as coming from the God who is ultimate Reality, demands a distinctive notion of what God is. It is on this basis that Christian faith ultimately would speak of that God as Trinity.

### *III. The Meaning of the Whole*

Throughout the Patristic period, in both East and West, this sense of the unity of revelation and salvation as grounded in the complex, embracing unity of God grew to be a central assumption of Biblical interpretation—one not often articulated with full clarity, but clearly implied for the perceptive reader. The Church's strong rejection of Marcion, who refused to acknowledge the Hebrew Scriptures as pertinent to the Gospel of freedom in Christ, led to the growing sense within the mainstream community of a distinctively Christian canon of Biblical books—including the Hebrew canon and adding to it the Gospels and the letters of Paul—by the turn of the third century. It also led to the insistence of theologians like Irenaeus and Origen that the correct use of the Christian Scriptures both implies and requires a distinctive

way of interpreting the Bible, beginning in the acknowledgement that Jesus is the final fulfillment of Israel's faith and hope. As so often is the case, however, it was really Augustine, two centuries later—Augustine as rhetorician, classical philosopher, pastor and preacher, and tireless reader of Scripture—who articulated most clearly and constantly this sense that the whole Bible, as Christians recognize and use it, is really about Christ.

In a dense and moving passage from his treatise on basic Christian instruction, for instance—the *De catechizandis rudibus*—written about 399 for an overworked Carthaginian deacon named Deogratias, Augustine emphasizes that Christian catechesis always is a matter of telling the full story spread out in all the books of the Bible, precisely as the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ:

Indeed, everything we read in the holy Scriptures that was written before the coming of the Lord was written for the purpose of drawing attention to his coming and of prefiguring the future Church. That Church is the people of God throughout all the nations [i.e., not just Israel or the present community of the baptized]; it is his body, and also included in its number are all the faithful servants who lived in this world even before the Lord's coming, believing that he *would* come even as we believe that he *has* come.<sup>18</sup>

Augustine insists, in the pages that follow, that the only reason God has intervened in the history of fallen humanity, the only reason for the incarnation of the Word and the teaching and life of Jesus, is "that God intended to reveal his love among us, and to prove it with great force."<sup>19</sup> There is a kind of rhetoric, he suggests, implicit in the whole story of Israel and reaching its climax in the story of Jesus, which is intended to persuade humanity to love in return:

Thus, before all else, Christ came so that people might learn how much God loves them, and might learn this, so that they would catch fire with love for him who first loved them, and so that they would also love their neighbor as he commanded and showed by his example—he who made himself their neighbor by loving them when they were not close to him but were wandering far from him. And all of the divine scripture that was written before the Lord's coming was written to announce that coming; and everything that has since been committed to writing and invested with divine authority tells of Christ, and calls to love. If this is so, then it is plain that on the two commandments of love for God and neighbor hinge not only the whole law and the prophets—the only holy scripture that existed when the Lord spoke these words—but also all the other books of divine writings which were later set apart for our salvation and handed down to us. Hence, in the Old Testament is concealed the New, and in the New Testament is revealed the Old.<sup>20</sup>

The message of the Bible is love, in Augustine's view: the astonishing news that we and our world exist because God loves us; the reminder that we have been called away from the idolatry and falsehood of self-love by God's ceaseless involvement of himself in the world; and the practical conclusion that therefore the only way to live well in the world is to love God above all things, and our neighbor as ourselves. To see this as the point of Scripture and of all the Church's preaching is to grasp also the unifying principle of correct Scriptural interpretation—the meaning of the whole that must shape and correct our attempts to make sense of every verse. Towards the end of Book I of *De Doctrina Christiana*, a broad but stunningly concise summary of the Church's moral and doctrinal teaching that sets the framework for effective Christian exegesis and preaching, Augustine expands on what we might call his "hermeneutic of love":

So what all that has been said amounts to while we have been dealing with things [taught by Scripture], is that 'the fulfillment and the end of the law' and of all the divine Scriptures 'is love' (Rom 13.8; I Tim 1.5). . . . So in order that we might know how to do this and be able to, the whole ordering of time was arranged by divine providence for our salvation. This [sense of time] we should be making use of with a certain love and delight that is not, so to say, permanently settled in, but transitory, rather, and casual—like love and delight in a road, or in vehicles . . . , so that we love the means by which we are being carried along, on account of the goal to which we are being carried.<sup>21</sup>

As a result, Augustine here suggests a distinction between levels of correctness in Scriptural interpretation that appears throughout his own exegesis and preaching: between the attempt to find out the "original" meaning of any given passage, as intended by its human author and as we can identify it from what we know about the author's language, culture, and situation in history, and the more ambitious attempt to see this "micro-meaning" of a passage within the "macro-meaning" of the Scriptural narrative as a whole. Augustine continues:

So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine Scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them. If on the other hand you have made judgments about them that are helpful for building up this love, but for all that have not said what the author you have been reading actually meant in that place, then your mistake is not pernicious, and you certainly cannot be accused of lying. . . . Any who understand a passage in the scriptures to mean something which the writer did not mean are mistaken, though the scriptures are not deceiving them. But all the same, as I had started to say, if they are mistaken in a judgment which is intended to build up charity,

which is 'the end of the law' (I Tim 1.5), they are mistaken in the same sort of way as people who go astray off the road, but still proceed by rough paths to the same place as the road was taking them to. Still, they must be put right, and shown how much more useful it is not to leave the road, in case they get into the habit of deviating from it, and are eventually driven to take the wrong direction altogether.<sup>22</sup>

The exegete in the Church must always make real efforts to identify what a given text was originally meant to say; but we can misunderstand passages in Scripture, in their humanly intended and even their inspired meaning, and still grasp the sense of the larger Biblical context, in which their meaning comes to fullness.

#### IV. *Multiple Meanings?*

Augustine, in fact, along with a number of other great exegetes from early Christianity, seems to have been quite comfortable with the assumption that a given passage in Scripture might be capable of a number of different interpretations, all of which might be correct within the larger context of Scripture's overall message. Although determining the author's "original intention" is ideally the goal of exegesis when we are dealing with any passage, this may not always be possible to do with certainty, and the ecclesial preacher may sometimes be left with the alternative of allowing a generous pluralism. A classic example of this in Augustine's work is Book XII of his *Confessions*. Here, near the end of his great, experientially focused meditation on what it is to be a human being who yearns for God, Augustine turns his attention, in the last three books, to the first chapter of Genesis: a set of three guided reflections—sermons, perhaps—on the world of time and space, where human creatures must find the Creator. In Book XII, he is specifically trying to explain the relationship of Genesis's account of God's creation of "heaven and earth" (Gen. 1:1), as the dwelling place of living creatures, with the reference in Psalm 113:24 (Hebrew: Ps. 115:16) to "the heaven of heavens," which belongs to the Lord alone. With great ingenuity, Augustine argues that this special, highest part of creation could well be a world of intelligences and intelligible objects that is created, and so not eternal, but still free from the vicissitudes of matter and time, and always united with God in contemplation.<sup>23</sup> Yet he readily admits that there are a number of other, simpler interpretations of the Biblical language of "the heavens," all of which are plausible, yet none of which we can definitively assign to the original author.<sup>24</sup> Augustine concludes, with disarming frankness:

What difficulty is it for me when these words can be interpreted in various ways, provided only that the interpretations are true? What difficulty is it for me, I say, if I understand the text in a way different from someone else, who understands the scriptural author in another sense?

In Bible study, all of us are trying to find and grasp the meaning of the author we are reading, and when we believe him to be revealing truth, we do not dare to think he said anything which we know or think to be incorrect. As long as each interpreter is *endeavoring* to find in the holy Scriptures the meaning of the author who wrote it [a crucially important condition!], what evil is it if an exegesis he gives is one shown to be true by you [i.e., God], light of all sincere souls, even if the author whom he is reading did *not* have that idea and, though he grasped a truth, had not discerned that seen by the interpreter?<sup>25</sup>

His point here is clearly *not* to say that any interpretation we assign to a text of Scripture is equally authentic, as long as it fits within the larger context of the Biblical narrative, as we understand it; it is simply that even if we assume the author was guided, in what he wrote, by the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit's purpose is to guide us on the way of love—which is the way of Christ—we, as readers, may still legitimately disagree on how to read the details, yet still be in agreement about the guiding, overall message.

Assuming that the book of Genesis was authored by Moses, Augustine readily admits that he cannot say with certainty what Moses was thinking of when he laid out the steps of creation in the book's first chapter,<sup>26</sup> although he is convinced that Moses, too, intended to call his readers to obey the double commandment to love God and neighbor.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Augustine concludes,

Had I been Moses—had I been what he was, and had been commissioned by you to write the book of Genesis—I would have wished to be granted such skill in eloquence and facility of style that those unable to understand how God creates would not set aside the language as beyond their power to grasp; that those who had this ability and by reflection had attained to some true opinions would find in some terse words used by your servant that their true perceptions were not left out of account; and that if, in the light of the truth, another exegete saw a different meaning, that also would not be found absent from the meaning of the same words.<sup>28</sup>

## V. *Some Principles*

We have discussed here a few key passages from some of Christian antiquity's most celebrated interpreters of the Bible, to help us identify the main principles—fundamentally *theological* principles—those interpreters implicitly brought to bear on the text of Scripture, as they searched for its meaning. Let us now try to bring these principles together into a few simple theses, in the hope of discovering how the “spiritual” or “theological” exegesis they practiced might differ from the approach of modern historical and critical study.

1) They assumed that *the Bible is a single book*, with a single overall message, despite the great variety of authors represented in it. What makes it a single book is simply that it is accepted as such by the Church, in a canonical collection whose contents were not finally established, in East and West, until the mid-fourth century, but which in general outline was already widely recognized, in an implicit but operative way, by the end of the second. This included the Hebrew canon of Torah, prophets and "writings"—in Greek translation—that Christians came to call the "Old Testament," and the collection of Gospels, epistles, and the Book of Revelation they called the "New." By seeing this double set of works as a single, normative collection or book to be used within the life of the Church, by giving it a privileged position in liturgy and theological argument, and by making it—as a whole—the endless object of serious interpretation within the community, early Christian writers sought to find in their Scriptures a single, coherent message. This message may not always have been apparent, but they assumed it was there.

2) They assumed, too, that the object of Biblical interpretation was to discover *the truth about the world we live in, and about ourselves*. Truth, for ancient thinkers, was generally understood to be first of all a quality of language, insofar as it accurately reflected the situation in the world to which that language refers;<sup>29</sup> for Augustine, as for most Christian writers, the truth is not only "what is, being just as it appears to the one who knows,"<sup>30</sup> but also is grounded in the infinite reality of God, who is "eternal truth, and true love, and beloved eternity."<sup>31</sup> So to search for truth in the Bible was to seek what really is *so*, as it is rooted in God who is always *just so*, yet always beyond the grasp of language and ideas, and who Jews and Christians believe *speaks* the truth to us—in human language and idioms—in the Biblical texts. The Bible is about God, about the reality God has created, and about what God does in his creation, based on God's self-disclosure.

3) The early Christians were convinced that *Bible texts are "inspired,"* at least in the sense that God was purposefully at work in their composition. This is not immediately obvious in the Biblical texts themselves, however. In Book IV of *On First Principles*, Origen offers an indirect approach to recognizing the divinely inspired character of Scriptures: in seeing passages from the Hebrew Bible "fulfilled"—given a fullness of application beyond their original context—in the words and actions of Jesus, and in recognizing the impact and broad acceptance of Jesus' mission now throughout the world, one discovers that God is real, present, and at work in the whole process of Biblical narrative.

Having demonstrated, in a concise way, the divinity of Jesus, and making use of the prophetic words about him, we have also shown that the writings that prophesy about him are inspired by God, and the writings that proclaim his coming and his teaching were set forth with full power

and authority, and therefore have taken hold of those chosen from among the nations. We must say that the *divine* element of the prophetic words and the spiritual part of the law of Moses came to light when Jesus was among us.<sup>32</sup>

Just as we only come to recognize the working of divine providence in human history retrospectively, and God's guidance is seldom evident in the moment when it is actually operating,<sup>33</sup> so the inspiration of Scripture—the fact that God is guiding human writers to speak his truth for the salvation of all peoples—is something that is only fully known in retrospect, when promises are fulfilled. The insight of Christian faith is that the focus of that fulfillment is *Jesus*, and with him the community of his disciples now gathered and led by his Holy Spirit.

4) The real *mystery* behind Scriptural meaning, for both the early Church and for exegetes today, is the mystery of *how God acts in the world*: how God can be seen as directing and guiding both natural events and human free acts, without eliminating either the laws of nature or full human intentionality. The world follows its inbuilt regularities, humans (and other spirits) freely determine their own acts, yet God is present in all these actions as ultimate cause, goal, and sustaining guide. Origen speaks, in the same fourth book of *De Principiis*, of the Holy Spirit's having "managed" (*ōkonomēsen*) the authorship of both the Old and the New Testament in such a way that both the truth needed by human beings to live well is eventually made sufficiently clear, and that enough "stumbling blocks"—inaccuracies, implausibilities—are left in the text to spur on the sensitive reader to seek a deeper meaning by reading those texts figurally.<sup>34</sup>

The real theological mystery, then, is again not simply the inspiration of Scripture but God's action in created history; and the challenge—as *Dei Verbum* suggests in the passage we quoted at the start—is to grasp that God's action is never a competitor with the natural activity of creatures, since it is God, as first cause of all things, who has given created natures the ability to function in the first place. In creating, understood as a constant active presence, God allows other beings to be what they are in fullness, and shapes and guides their activity without infringing on their proper, if limited, autonomy. In the language of medieval Western scholasticism, God's "primary" causality, as creator and first cause, almost never eliminates the functioning of the "secondary" causes he wills to be operative in nature; rather, God supports and steers those created causes in such a way that his will for the well-being of creation as a whole is achieved, while individual living beings continue to develop and work as genuine agents, using their own natural powers and even their own intelligence and freedom.<sup>35</sup> In terms of Biblical inspiration, this means that the Christian reader must take it for granted that the books we regard as constituting the Bible were freely written by human beings at various points in history, who used their own intelligence and languages and

literary traditions to compose works that they believed represented, in some way, a part of God's story with humanity. The guidance of the Holy Spirit, which we call inspiration, means simply that God caused the whole complex and growing collection to form, first of all, the faith of the Jewish people in himself as creator and Lord, but also that the collection—enlarged by the documents that witness specifically to the early disciples' faith in Jesus—pointed, in the end, to Christ and the Church.

5) This multiplicity of authors and historical settings for the texts and works that make up the Christian Bible, all guided by God's loving purpose in a way that only gradually comes to light for believers, is really the reason that early Christian interpreters saw in the Bible not just a straightforward narrative (which, in large part, they assumed it was), but also a "*book of signs*." As history unfolds, the people faithful to God discover his plan of healing and salvation in ever-greater depth and detail, and—to their delight—find their own place within it. As this happens, they continually discover more about how God acts, and what his dealings with humanity really signify. So Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, gently upbraids two of his distraught disciples for not recognizing that God's word to Israel had been fulfilled in the events of his death and resurrection: "and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

Within this understanding of what the Biblical text, as a continuous whole, can signify, the traditional Jewish and Christian practice of *figural interpretation* makes, I think, perfect sense: not as a replacement for the careful attempts of ancient or contemporary scholars to establish what a text may have been understood to mean in its original context, or to discover what the author's or redactor's intent was in building the original elements into the text that we have, but rather as a way of seeing a text, or even a reported event or person, within the larger, specifically *Biblical* (and not simply the empirically verifiable) context of *telling what God does*. Thomas Aquinas, in an article of the first question of his *Summa Theologiae*—the question where he reflects on the "science" of "sacred doctrine" and its sources—wonders aloud "whether in Holy Scripture a Word may have several senses." Acknowledging the difficulties such an understanding of Biblical meaning presents to the discerning reader, Thomas nevertheless argues, with his usual common sense, that this is clearly possible, because *God* stands behind the human authors as the ultimate source of Scripture:

The author of Holy Scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify his meaning, not by words only (as humans also can do), but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science [= logically ordered branch of human learning], things are signified by words, this science has the property that the *things* signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification, whereby words

signify things, belongs to the first sense: the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal and presupposes it.<sup>36</sup>

Thomas goes on to subdivide this “spiritual sense” Christian interpreters find in Scripture into three kinds: what he calls “allegorical,” which sees Old Testament passages as pointing not just to their own immediate objects but to Christ; the “moral” sense, which indicates for the Christian reader how he or she must live now; and the “anagogical” sense, pointing beyond the practicalities of Christian life now to a hope for the eschatological future. Still, if one sees the Bible as written not just by human authors but by God, who guides them, then all of these “spiritual” senses can themselves also be seen as “literal,” in the context of the whole Bible, because all are providentially intended by God. They are all what the *real* author—the Holy Spirit—meant to say. So, alluding to *Confessions* 12, Thomas writes:

Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Scripture is God, who by one act comprehends all things in his intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says, if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Scripture should have several senses.<sup>37</sup>

From God’s perspective, in other words, all the signs that the faithful Christian reader finds in the pages of Scripture—signs in the Old Testament pointing to Jesus, signs in the New pointing to us and to our future—may well be understood as part of what the Bible, as intended by God, *really means*.

To be able to read the Bible responsibly as a book of living signs, without disregarding the importance of finding the original intent or historical context of any passage, demands of us first of all a deep sense of the reality of God, and a deep commitment to understanding the Bible as God’s Word. This is what we mean, I think, by *theological* interpretation: we begin our approach to the text from what we know of God, in the hope that it will lead us still closer to him. This, too, is what it really means to read it not simply as a collection of texts reflecting various evolving stages of ancient Mediterranean literary and religious history, but as *the Bible*: a single book or canon, manifold in origin yet—for the Christian reader—generally homogeneous in message, the book that is as a whole the normative witness to faith.<sup>38</sup> And this, in turn, is why the figural interpretation of Scripture, in the traditional Christian sense, is always by definition a *theological* way of understanding texts, not simply a literary method.

In his great early work, *Catholicism*, the influential mid-twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac draws a clear, if perhaps unexpected, connection between the universal, socially incarnate character of the Church and Patristic exegesis.

God acts in history and reveals himself through history. Or rather, God inserts himself in history and so bestows on it a 'religious consecration' which compels us to treat it with due respect. As a consequence, historical realities possess a profound sense, and are to be understood in a spiritual manner: *historika pneumatikōs*; conversely, spiritual realities appear in a constant state of flux and are to be understood historically: *pneumatika historikōs*. The Bible, which contains the revelation of salvation, contains, too, in its own way, the history of the world. In order to understand it, it is not enough to take note of the factual details it recounts, but there must also be an awareness of its concern for universality, in spite of its partial, schematic, and sometimes paradoxical mode of expression. It was in this way that the Bible was read by the Fathers of the Church. From Irenaeus to Augustine, by way of Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius, they all found in it a treatise on the history of the world. . . . If salvation is social in its essence, it follows that history is the necessary interpreter between God and humanity.<sup>39</sup>

To read Scripture figurally, as well as critically and analytically, is not to abandon a modern sense of the history in which we live, but simply to see history in greater depth, as having "spiritual" significance—as rooted in God's reality, coming forth from God, leading to God. It is to read history in faith, and to see faith as the key to understanding history's comprehensive meaning. Genuine faith is not an alternative to historical study or scientific explanation, but an awareness of the ultimate origin and purpose, the meaning beneath the surface, of the phenomena our empirical sciences investigate. So the world, as well as the Bible, can best be read both in its "literal sense" and as a book of signs, promising the community of faith both a deeper understanding of the reality around us, and "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."<sup>40</sup> Christ, in whom God has finally spoken to us, after speaking through history "in many and various ways,"<sup>41</sup> offers us nothing less!

#### NOTES

- 1 *Dei Verbum* 11.
- 2 See, however, *Apology* 1.66.3 and *Dialogue* 100.4, where he refers to the Gospels as *apomnēmoneumata* (written "memoirs") of the Apostles concerning Jesus.
- 3 For an argument that ancient philosophy was primarily understood by its practitioners as a way of asking questions and cultivating mental practices that led to a freer, more intentionally ethical form of life, see especially Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- 4 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.1.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.* 3.3.1.
- 7 *Ibid.* 3.4.2.

- 8 Irenaeus is referring, of course, to the Christian “Gnostic” sects whom he is refuting here, such as the Valentiniens, whose understanding of Jesus, and of the material world and the human person, is substantially different from that of the main body of Christian believers in his time, despite the fact that they, too, can claim to have written Gospels containing versions of the story of Jesus, on which to base their faith.
- 9 *Adv. Haer.* 3.4.2.
- 10 On the historical development of the Christian Scriptural canon, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995). An older work, still valuable for its details, is Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1972).
- 11 “Origen’s *De Principiis*: A Guide to the ‘Principles’ of Christian Scriptural Interpretation,” in John Petruccione (ed.), *Nova et Vetera: Patristic Studies in Honor of Thomas Patrick Halton* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), pp. 3–21.
- 12 Origen, *De Principiis* I, preface 1.
- 13 *Ibid.* preface 2.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 See also my article, “Incorporeality and ‘Divine Sensibility’: the Importance of *De Principiis* 4.4 for Origen’s Theology,” *Studia Patristica*, Vol. 41 (2006), pp. 139–144.
- 16 See Rom. 10:16–18.
- 17 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.6.3; 4.6.5–6.
- 18 Augustine of Hippo, *De catechizandis rudibus* 3.6 (trans. Raymond Canning, *Instructing Beginners in Faith* [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006], p. 65).
- 19 *Ibid.* 4.7 (Canning, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, p. 67).
- 20 *Ibid.* 4.8 (Canning, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, p. 70).
- 21 *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.35.39 (trans. Edmund Hill, *Teaching Christianity* [Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1996], p. 123).
- 22 *Ibid.* 1.36.40 (Hill, *Teaching Christianity*, p.124).
- 23 *Confessions* 12.xv.19.
- 24 *Ibid.* 12.xv.22–xvii.26.
- 25 *Ibid.* 12.xviii.27 (italics mine).
- 26 *Ibid.* 12.xxiv.33.
- 27 *Ibid.* 12.xxv.35.
- 28 *Ibid.* 12.xxvi.36.
- 29 See, for instance, Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* 9 (19a33): “Since propositions are true in the same way that the facts (*ta pragmata*) are, it is clear that if things are in such a situation that whatever happens, the opposite is also possible, the denial will be equally necessary as the affirmation.”
- 30 *Soliloquies* 2.5.8.
- 31 *Confessions* 7.10.16.
- 32 *De Principiis* 4.1.6.
- 33 *Ibid.* 4.1.7.
- 34 *Ibid.* 4.2.9. Cf. 4.2.7–8, where Origen makes clear his conviction that what the Spirit primarily was concerned to bring about, in the composition of Scripture, was an understanding of basic doctrine: about God, Christ and his work, rational natures, and the nature of evil. Since not everyone is equally capable of investigating and understanding these matters in depth, God has brought it about that the teaching of Scripture, since the beginning, has been “wrapped” in stories and laws that are, in themselves, often true and helpful, but that invite the more curious and determined readers to move beyond them and seek deeper doctrines.
- 35 See, for instance, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 105, a.5, where Aquinas writes: “. . . the active powers which are seen to exist in things would be bestowed on things to no purpose, if these did nothing through them. Indeed, all things created would seem, in a way, to be purposeless if they lacked an operation proper to them; since the purpose of everything is its operation. . . . We must therefore understand that God works in things in such a manner that things have their proper operation.”
- 36 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a.10 (trans. English Dominican Province [Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1911/1981], p. 7 [altered]).
- 37 *Ibid.*

- 38 See again Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 8, resp. ad 2: "Sacred doctrine makes use of the authority of philosophers in those questions in which they were able to know the truth by natural reason. . . . Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable. For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets, who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other teachers" (trans. English Dominican Province, p. 6 [altered]).
- 39 Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), pp. 165–166 (trans. altered).
- 40 Hebrews 11:1.
- 41 Cf. Hebrews 1:1–2.

