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The Patristic and Medieval Church

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The Patristic and Medieval Church

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"While there are certain standards such as the Rule of Faith that ensure the preservation of the authority and authenticity of Scripture, there were many conditions during the early formation of Scripture that impacted its interpretation and consideration. As with any significant theological or philosophical work, there were many varying interpretations of Scripture introduced by key figures of the time period, and several of these influential schools of thought will be considered in this work. In particular, the Antiochene and Alexandrian methods of biblical interpretation, the Vincentian canon, and teachings introduced both by early church fathers and heretical leaders will be presented. In addition, a discussion of the various reasons why interpretation is unavoidable when considering Scripture will also be conveyed, as it appears in the following section."



Katie Kreutter

The Patristic and Medieval Church

Introduction

While there are certain standards such as the Rule of Faith that ensure the preservation of the authority and authenticity of Scripture, there were many conditions during the early formation of Scripture that impacted its interpretation and consideration. As with any significant theological or philosophical work, there were many varying interpretations of Scripture introduced by key figures of the time period, and several of these influential schools of thought will be considered in this work. In particular, the Antiochene and Alexandrian methods of biblical interpretation, the Vincentian canon, and teachings introduced both by early church fathers and heretical leaders will be presented. In addition, a discussion of the various reasons why interpretation is unavoidable when considering Scripture will also be conveyed, as it appears in the following section.

The Unavoidability of Interpretation in Regard to Scripture

Interpretation is unavoidable because life in an experiential and variable environment is unavoidable on Earth. All living organisms with cognitive faculties are capable of interpreting the circumstances they encounter in daily living to some degree. It is apparent that the perception of the world by all thinking creatures, and, in particular, human beings, will be affected by cultural and socioeconomic factors by default. This is no different in the case of analyzing Scripture, since Scripture is normative but interpretation is not.¹ While the text contained in Scripture is un-changeable because it is available in written form, interpretation of the text can be oral or written, and is more transient in nature as it “[m]ay be explained, debated and tested.”² Interpretation is based

¹ Paul W. Livermore, “The Historical Outline of Patristic and Medieval Christianity,” (lecture, BHT 512NE Session 2.1, Northeastern Seminary, February 10th, 2011).

² Livermore, syllabus.

upon the written word, yet it is by definition influenced by the worldview of the person or persons reading and examining the text. Since interpretation includes a degree of application on the part of the interpreter, and, thereby, typically contains “elements not present in the ancient situation” of Scripture, it is necessary to hold a clear contextual understanding to avoid misconstruing the intended meaning of the language of the text.³ While such an understanding existed early on in the history of the Christian church with the apostolic tradition and Rule of Faith, there remained many debates surrounding reliable interpretation of Scripture during the 2nd century AD.

Justin Martyr, for instance, was one of the first post-apostolic leaders to reference divergent views within Christian interpretation.⁴ In particular, he addressed the emerging controversy between Jews and Gentile Christians over differing interpretations of Scripture in regards to whether or not Gentile Christians adhere to Jewish rites and dietary laws.⁵ While Justin referenced Scriptural passages that seemed to indicate circumcision was for Jews only as “a sign that the Jews might be driven away for their evil deeds,” the very fact that he was responding to opposition from Jews indicates that this alternate viewpoint was also referencing Scripture to justify circumcision as a necessary rite.⁶

Differing interpretations of Scripture is also evident in the distinction between Gnostic and Catholic teaching, which was prominent within the development of the early church. Like Catholic teaching, Gnostic thought teaches the authority of Scripture, yet the teaching gives prominence to the Spirit of God, which was believed to have revealed specific, special insight to particular people with the idea of a secret knowledge available to a select few.⁷ Irenaeus challenged this mindset in *Against Heresies*, arguing that the citations of Scripture within Gnosticism were merely opinion and “baseless speculations” without justifiable credence.⁸ He bases his claim that these teachings are heretical on Scripture itself, citing such passages as “Freely ye have received, freely give” as contrary to a notion of a secretive method of revelation.⁹ Interestingly, as Thomas C. Oden suggests, it was the “unoriginality” inherent in Catholic teaching that prevailed over the unorthodoxy upon which Gnosticism thrived, perhaps due to an early understanding of the need for as much objectivity as possible as it contributed to a less biased Scriptural interpretation.¹⁰ This initial split in schools of thought was only the beginning of many non-traditional methods of interpretation, two of which will be discussed at present.

Interpretative Characteristics of Antiochene and Alexandrian Teaching

Antiochene thought emerged during the late 3rd century AD, and espoused theological thinking regarding the personhood of Christ.¹¹ This style of thought is

³ Ibid.

⁴ Livermore, lecture.

⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in ANF, vol. 1, ch. 18.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Livermore, lecture.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in ANF, vol. 1, ch. 1.

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in ANF, vol. 1, ch. 4.

¹⁰ Livermore, lecture.

typically linked to the Church in Antioch, and most likely originated with Lucian.¹² It is juxtaposed with Alexandrian theology, which emerged roughly a century beforehand out of the Church in Alexandria and the figure of Pantaenus, and emphasizes the divinity of Christ.¹³ This methodology emphasizes “the reality of the spiritual world and the allegorical exegesis of Scripture.”¹⁴ Although both schools are regarded as presenting entirely different interpretative approaches to the examination of Scripture, there are underlying similarities that seem to be present between them as well.

For instance, despite the tendency of Alexandrian and Antiochene theology to underscore more metaphorical and literal interpretations of Scripture respectively, each school reflects elements of the other in at least some capacity. Antiochene, for example, employs a three-fold method that considers Scriptural text to be depicting actual events that transpired within a historical framework, yet it still incorporates typological and spiritual elements into the method. These can be considered more allegorical in nature as they introduce a mode of consideration that extends beyond the limits of space and time to include a less concrete analysis of the message within the text as it relates to representation and abstract thought.¹⁵ In essence, “the importance of insight into the deeper, spiritual meaning of the biblical text,” is still maintained.¹⁶ In the same vein, Alexandrian interpretation, though examining Scripture from a more figurative perspective, does consider literal elements of interpretation, even if only as one small part of an overall symbolic analysis of the text and stories contained therein.¹⁷

A utilization of the Antiochene method of biblical interpretation is demonstrated by John Chrysostom in his *Homilies on St. Matthew*. A recognized proponent of this methodology, Chrysostom provided an exegesis of the story of the loaves and the fishes in Matthew through the lens of an understanding that this event actually transpired in history as a miracle, rather than espousing it to be a symbolic narrative with a more layered meaning.¹⁸

Similarly, in his work *First Principles*, Origen reflects the inclusion of Alexandrian theology. He describes Christ in metaphorical terms as “the truth,” citing Christ’s own declaration of himself as such in Scripture.¹⁹ Likewise, he does not only consider Christ’s literal words that he professed while living on Earth, but demonstrates the presence of Christ as the Word of God within both the prophets and Moses, extending the view beyond bodily limitations of a physical nature.²⁰ It is interesting to note that, while it would seem that Alexandrian theology would be reflected more within a contemporary, post-modern society, Antiochene theology is in fact more distinguishable today.²¹ This could be due to the emphasis within conservative Christianity to consider

¹¹ Livermore, syllabus.

¹² ODCC, s.v. “Antiochene theology.”

¹³ Livermore, syllabus.

¹⁴ ODCC, s.v. “Alexandrian theology.”

¹⁵ Livermore, syllabus.

¹⁶ ODCC, s.v. “Antiochene theology.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. Matthew*, in NPNF, series 1, vol. 10, homily 49, paragraph 1.

¹⁹ Origen, *First Principles*, in ANF, vol. 4, Preface.

²⁰ Ibid.

Scriptural text as it is written without generalizing or formulating extraneous conclusions.

Scriptural Consideration by Church Fathers and Arch-Heretics

As mentioned earlier, Christians with orthodox views and viewpoints considered heretical by the greater church both believed that their teachings reflected Scriptural insight accurately.²² The primary distinction between these two groups of people is found in the idea that the Apostolic Fathers followed the apostolic tradition when examining Scripture and considered “Scripture [as a] means of supporting the true faith.”²³ In contrast, those with heretical notions typically based their claims upon emerging perspectives that were not previously established.²⁴

In his work *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, John of Damascus reflects the way Scripture was viewed by early church Fathers, basing the authority of biblical text on its congruency with apostolic teaching and tradition.²⁵ Whether or not the Scriptural passage in question could be traced to an apostolic father positively correlated with whether or not it was considered as being of “the true faith.”²⁶ For the early church, apostolicity was synonymous with authoritative validity as it was believed that “[t]he church had faithfully proclaimed the same gospel from the time of the Apostles until the present day.”²⁷ This was a claim that was lacking by those professing heretical teaching, who introduced teaching that was inconsistent with this preserved tradition.²⁸

The work of Arius, whose teaching was evaluated as heretical by leaders within traditional Christian thought circles, demonstrates the interpretive challenges that emerged when Scripture was considered more abstractly in ways that extended beyond what was taught by the Apostolic Fathers. The authority of the text became less clear, as it seemed that individual perspectives were being imposed upon the text without apostolic teaching as a basis, as in the case of Arius’ claim that the Son is not equal to the Father.²⁹ Athanasius argued that this misguided belief could have been avoided if Arius “had remained faithful to the church’s interpretation of Scripture.”³⁰

Vincentian Canon

Out of this aforementioned traditional lens for interpreting Scripture emerged the Vincentian Canon, which was instituted by St. Vincent of Lerins as “[t]he threefold test

²¹ Livermore, syllabus.

²² Ibid.

²³ Paul W. Livermore, “The Historical Outline of Patristic and Medieval Christianity,” (lecture, BHT 512NE Session 2.1, Northeastern Seminary, February 17th, 2011).

²⁴ Livermore, syllabus.

²⁵ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, in NPNF, series 2, vol. 14, pg. 41, paragraph 5.

²⁶ John of Damascus, paragraph 10.

²⁷ McGrath, Allister E., *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 29.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Arius, *Thalia*, cited in Athanasius’ *Councils*, part II, paragraph 15, in syllabus.

³⁰ McGrath 30.

of Catholicity” for “what has been believed everywhere, always and by all.”³¹ While this methodology did not disregard the inspiration of the Spirit, it regarded the “consensus of the faithful” as being primary to the formation of the “true teaching,” and it was to this teaching that the Spirit witnessed.³² Written relatively early during the history of the Christian church, the *Commonitory* wherein the Vincentian Canon is contained influenced the development of church doctrine and ecclesiology, and, centuries later, became the basic criterion for the Anglican Church in England.³³ Although St. Vincent considered consent of the faithful and tradition to be paramount to a correct consideration of biblical text, he insisted that Scripture itself was the foundational declaration for “Christian truth.”³⁴ Thus, in the Vincentian Canon, universality of belief in the one true faith, “which the whole Church throughout the world confesses,” precedes the more person-centered notions of antiquity and consent.³⁵ Nevertheless, even Scripture itself could not be considered to have absolute authority, as St. Vincent acknowledged that interpretation of the text is inevitable, as discussed earlier, which, he maintained, necessitated all three components of the Vincentian Canon, and ensured that there could not be a single “teacher” or component.³⁶ Rather, a symbiotic relationship must be present amongst the criterion for a less biased analysis of Scripture and the Christian faith.

Conclusion

While interpretation of Scripture is indeed inevitable by the very nature of the written text that must register on a cognitive level in order to be understood, the teachings of early Church Fathers and interpretative methodologies ensured that the viability and integrity of the Christian faith would be preserved and uncorrupted throughout the generations within history. Almost paradoxically, heretical teaching that differed from the apostolic tradition contributed to the solidification of the tenets of the faith that were believed on a universal and comprehensive level with historical foundations, which led to the development of evaluative criterion, like those present in the Vincentian Canon. Out of this evolution emerged a confidence amongst Christians that accepted beliefs and foundational teachings are indeed credible and authentic. That being said, the need to remain cautious when professing belief and teaching others in Christian community is of the utmost significance in contemporary society, since it is possible to become overconfident in this assurance and neglect the teachings of these original Christian leaders. As Karl Barth declared, “[Christians] cannot be in the church without taking as much responsibility for the theology of the past as for the theology of the present.”³⁷ If Christians neglect the insights and theological groundwork put forth by direct contemporaries of Jesus and those who ensured the preservation of their teachings, there

³¹ ODCC, s.v. “Vincentian Canon.”

³² Livermore, lecture.

³³ Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory*, chapter 2, in syllabus.

³⁴ ODCC, s.v. “Vincent of Lerins.”

³⁵ Vincent of Lerins.

³⁶ Livermore, lecture.

³⁷ McGrath 12.

is a great risk for misunderstanding within the faith and the corrosion of the ways in which the belief system was intended to be carried out on Earth. By implication, there exists the dangerous capacity for the faith to become irrelevant, ineffective, and even counter-Christian because of erroneous teaching. As a result, following the interpretative models of the past alongside continued study of these ancient primary sources will aid in upholding proper methods of application today.



Katie Kruetter and friends in Nicaragua