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INTRODUCTION

One of the remarkable features of the Christian religion is the diversity and breadth of commentaries that exist concerning its Holy Scriptures. Over thousands of years, literally thousands of people from every imaginable background and condition have written commentaries on the Bible. Of particular interest are those commentators who chronologically are closest to the actual authorship of the sacred texts. For Christians, these would be the early church fathers, who guided and expounded Scripture for the church during its first few centuries. They faced the daunting challenge of defining the new faith, as well as combating heresy and complacency. Among these fathers there emerged distinct schools and traditions of interpretation, which would each contribute to what would eventually become orthodoxy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The historical setting that the fathers faced was unique in Christian history. It is important to take into consideration the challenges and difficulties these men confronted when comparing their commentaries to those of this day. Christianity was a new religion, only a few hundred years old, which faced persecution on numerous fronts. In addition, new and insidious heresies sprung up time after time, threatening the unity and orthodoxy of the church.

One of the first exegetical tasks the fathers faced was the distinction of Christianity from Judaism. If the Christians were ever to be considered more than simply another Jewish sect, it was necessary to convey why it was they were rejecting Judaism, and at the same time holding on to the Jewish Scriptures. The Old Testament would have to be read in a new light, as a Christian scripture. If salvation was through Jesus, what hope did the Old Testament saints have? Jerome tackled this issue in his commentary on Galatians: “The saints who lived long ago, however, were justified from faith in Christ, seeing that Abraham saw in advance Christ’s day.”¹

Living in a Hellenized world, the fathers had to distinguish Christianity from the belief system of the day, whether it be the pagan mystery cults or Greek philosophy. How would the Christian doctrine of the goodness of matter (“And God saw that it was good”) be received in a Platonistic culture, which considered matter evil? How would the nature of God be defined, in terms of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Jerome tackled this issue in his commentary on Ephesians:

There is one Lord and one God, because the dominion of Father and Son is a single Godhead. The faith is said to be one because we believe similarly in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism is one. We are all baptized in the same way in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are immersed three times so that the sacrament of the Trinity may be apparent. ... There is one baptism in the Spirit, in water and in fire.²

Finally, it was necessary to illustrate how the Bible could be used and applied to the Christian life. Then, like now, believers struggled with common moral issues dealing with money, sex, and power. Great preachers like Chrysostom delivered eloquent homilies, exhorting Christians to live a life worthy of the calling. When Old Testament texts were

¹ Jerome *Epistle to the Galatians* 1.2.15

² Jerome *Epistle to the Ephesians* 2.4.5-6

difficult to interpret and relate to the audience, the Alexandrians adopted elaborate allegorical methods to explain them.

It is useful in discussing the hermeneutical methods of the church fathers to categorize their methods into two schools of thought: the Alexandrian and the Antiochene. Besides the geographical and political differences of these two cities, there was a starkly contrasting method of biblical interpretation.

Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis

Alexandria was the intellectual and literary center of the Jewish Dispersion. It was there that the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) was produced, and Greek developments in cosmology and immortality. It was the home of Philo, perhaps the first great philosophic biblical scholar, and the first major exponent of the allegorical exegesis of Scripture. This allegorical method would characterize the hermeneutic of the Alexandrian fathers.

Alexandria was characterized by a “Hellenistic” Jewish Christianity, which was highly philosophic. The anti-flesh bias of Greek philosophy made its way into the Christian church of Alexandria, so that over time the divinity of Christ became emphasized, as opposed to his humanity. This bias is even reflected in their approach to interpreting Scripture. The plain (or literal) sense of the text is compared to the evil flesh, whereas the allegorical (hidden) meaning is thought of as spiritual.

Antioch, by contrast, was not a center of thought and philosophy, but was rather a center of trade. It was not nearly as Hellenized as Alexandria, and the nature of the Christianity there was markedly less philosophic. Rather, a naturalistic interpretation of Scripture flourished, in which the Incarnation was emphasized, rather than simply the

divinity of Christ. Also, the allegorical methods developed in Alexandria were not employed by the Antiochene fathers, who favored a much more literal interpretation of Scripture.

JEROME

Jerome is rightly considered the greatest biblical scholar of the Latin church. He translated an enormous number of works from Greek to Latin, and is best known for translating the Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Scriptures. Origen, the greatest biblical scholar of antiquity, was a prominent influence on Jerome, although later Jerome would break with Origen and his allegorical tradition (although not completely, as is reflected in his commentaries).

Jerome's commentaries are remarkable for their academic thoroughness. Throughout them, Jerome exhibits an in-depth knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek. He often makes us of word studies in his commentaries. He writes, in his commentary on Galatians: "It is not that Peter and Cephas signify different things, but what we would call in Latin and Greek *petra* ('stone') the Hebrews and Syrians both, because of the affinity of their languages, call *cephas*."³ Whereas his contemporaries wrote homilies which expounded the moral implications of the texts, Jerome delved into source texts. In his commentary on the word "covenant" in Galatians 3:16, he notes "If anyone carefully collates the Hebrew Scriptures with the [Greek version of the] Seventy, he will find that where *testament* is written, what is meant is not 'testament' but 'covenant.'"⁴ No doubt Jerome has carefully collated the entire Hebrew Scriptures!

³ Jerome *Epistle to the Galatians* 1.2.11

⁴ Jerome *Epistle to the Galatians* 2.3.15 SEQ

In addition to Jerome's knowledge of the original languages is his familiarity with original manuscripts. In his exposition of Galatians 3:10, he considers which version of the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 27:26 Paul was following. He writes, "We consider it uncertain whether the seventy interpreters [of the Septuagint] have added *everyone* and *in all* or whether it was in the old Hebrew and deleted by the Jews."⁵ He proved his knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures to be thorough, as in his analysis of Ephesians 5:14: "The one who is content with a simple answer will say indeed that Paul must have read this phrase in some arcane prophet or in the writings called apocryphal...I have nowhere found this written after diligently scouring all the editions of the ancient Scriptures and the texts of the Hebrews themselves."⁶

In addition to familiarity with the original languages, Jerome displays his in-depth knowledge of the historical background to the texts as well. In his commentary on Galatians 6:12, Jerome describes the impact of laws published by "Caius [Julius] Caesar and Octavianus Augustus, and Tiberius, the successor of Augustus" on the Jewish population scattered about the Roman Empire.⁷ Again, this is an aspect that most other commentators of his time left untouched.

It's unclear what Jerome's debt to Origen is from his commentaries, but ... he writes at one point in his commentaries, "There is also another explanation [i.e. Origen's], which it is the reader's prerogative to accept or not: Suppose what is called here *the prison* is the body."⁸ So it appears that he has not at this point completely renounced Origen. It also

⁵ Jerome *Epistle to the Galatians* 2.3

⁶ Jerome *Epistle to the Ephesians* 3.5.14

⁷ Jerome *Epistle to the Galatians* 3.6.12

⁸ Jerome *Epistle to the Ephesians* 2.4.1

reflects the allegorical interpretational style of Origen, which Jerome has adopted to large degree.

The Alexandrian allegorical method displays itself numerous times in Jerome's writings. In Galatians 1:17 Paul writes that after becoming a believer, he "went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus." (Gal. 1:17, NIV) Jerome finds difficulty with the literal sense of this text, and in turn adopts an allegorical meaning: "How are we to explain this narrative...He teaches that the Old Testament, that is, the son of the bondwoman, was established in Arabia. And so, as soon as Paul believed, he turned to the Law, the Prophets and the symbols of the Old Testament..."⁹ As is customary to the Alexandrian exegetes, Jerome uses an allegorical interpretation when the literal does not make sense to him. And not only does this method explain difficulties in the text, it is also the higher approach! He writes, "Today also, so long as we...explain the Scripture according to the letter, we are praised and respected and held in admiration. But when we make a small attempt to pass on to greater things, they stop acclaiming us and become resistant."¹⁰ To Jerome, an allegorical interpretation is a "greater thing" than explaining Scripture literally, or "according to the letter." When Paul writes in Galatians 5:17 about the flesh struggling against the Spirit, Jerome comments, "*The flesh struggles against the Spirit*: that is, the literal and flat understanding of Scripture fights against allegory and spiritual doctrine."¹¹

The Alexandrian disdain for the flesh comes through clearly in Jerome's exegesis. He writes, commenting on Ephesians 3:1, "We often read that the body is called the prison of the soul. The soul is confined as if in a cage."¹² The idea of the body being a "prison" or

⁹ Jerome *Epistle to the Galatians* 1.1.17

¹⁰ Jerome *Epistle to the Galatians* 2.4.15-16

¹¹ Jerome *Epistle to the Galatians* 3.5.17

¹² Jerome *Epistle to the Ephesians* 2.3.1

“cage” for the soul is common in Platonic philosophy. This bent lead to some strange conclusions, as in his comments on Galatians 1:16, “far be it from me to reckon Peter, John and James as ‘flesh and blood,’ which cannot possess the kingdom of God.”¹³ Clearly, Jerome had an unbiblical view of the flesh. He writes: “Just as a person may become truly holy even in the flesh, when he lives in the flesh and has his conversation in heaven, when he walks on earth and, ceasing to be flesh, is wholly converted into spirit...”¹⁴

CHRYSOSTOM

Chrysostom is the most popular of the Greek fathers. His works include of a large number of homilies, in which he draws spiritual application from the literal rather than the allegorical sense. He is one of the few Antiochene fathers whose reputation survived the Nestorian crisis.

In contrast to Jerome, Chrysostom considers Galatians 4:24 not a use of allegory, but typology: “*Allegory* is used improperly for typology. His meaning is this: ‘This story does not say only what is evident but relates other things as well; hence it is called *allegory*.’”¹⁵

Paul, Chrysostom would say, is not questioning the historicity of the events surrounding Hagar and Sarah, but is using them as *types*, which foreshadow future events. Theodore of Mopsuestia, another Antiochene father, makes a similar case against the allegorical method of the Alexandrians:

Those who are at great pains to pervert the meaning of the divine Scriptures...abuse this saying of the apostle’s, as though they thought that they could derive from it the power to suppress the entire sense of holy Scripture in their aspirations to speak ‘allegorically,’...[but] the apostle does not deny the history or pick apart the events of the

¹³ Jerome *Epistle to the Galatians* 1.1.16

¹⁴ Jerome *Epistle to the Ephesians* 1.2.1 SEQ

¹⁵ Chrysostom *Homily on Galatians* 4.24

distant past, but he has stated them as they happened at the time, while using for his own purpose the interpretation of these events.¹⁶

Chrysostom, in contrast to Jerome, applied the biblical texts to the immediate pastoral needs of his flock, not engaging in philosophical digressions or textual analysis.

Commenting on Ephesians 4:26, he writes, “Do you wish to have your fill of anger? One hour, or two or three is enough for you. But do not let the sun go down and leave you both enemies...Quell the evil impulses while they are fresh.”¹⁷ This type of pastoral exhortation is common in all of his commentary.

In his writings, Chrysostom defends the goodness of the “flesh” against the influence of the Platonists. He argues:

If they will, let them be not only circumcised but emasculated. But where are those who dare to emasculate themselves, drawing upon themselves the curse, slandering the divine creation and acting like the Manichaeans? For the latter say that the body itself is a deceiver and the work of evil matter. By their deeds they have given an impetus to these evil doctrines. For they cut off the member as an enemy and an intriguer.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Despite the many distinctions evident between the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools, there existed a shared set of beliefs that C. S. Lewis would one day term “Mere Christianity.” Shared was the belief in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, the divinity of Christ, and the key tenets of salvation. Each school to some degree contributed by countering heretical trends emerging in the ancient Christian church. Jerome and Chrysostom, although extremely different in their backgrounds, style, and philosophical approach to Scripture, were truly pillars of the Christian church.

¹⁶ Theodore of Mopsuestia *Commentary*

¹⁷ Chrysostom *Homily on Ephesians* 14.4.25-27

¹⁸ Chrysostom *Homily on Galatians* 5.6