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**The First Christian Exegetes
(Patristic Period)**

Dr. Mojtaba Zarvani*

Dr. Javad Firoozi**

Abstract

Bible exegesis in Christianity has a long history behind. Jesus was in fact, the first interpreter in Christian tradition. To make a harmony between the *Old Testament* and the *New* one, he interpreted certain versus of the Jewish scriptures. The history of exegesis in Christianity is going to be discussed here, in three different schools of thought: Alexandrian School follows the allegorical method; Antioch School, interprets the Bible literally, while Roman (Latin) School follows the amalgamation of the previous ones. Each school is represented by Church Fathers of its own.

Key words: 1-Bible 2-Exegesis 3-Literal interpretation
4-Allegory 5- Church Fathers 6- Old Testament 7- New Testament

1. Introduction

In Christian tradition "Bible" as a divine scripture, contains both the Old and the New Testaments. Literally speaking, the word "Bible" means "the books" or, "the scrolls", as it meant in Greek¹ and Latin. The first usage of this word is seen in Jerome's works, who as a church Father applied "Bibliotheca" to a divine book, collected in a volume (8, p: 1-2; 3).

As a scientific discipline, Bible interpretation among the Christians, initiated in the second century in reaction to the Gnostic mysticism, while the first interpreter was not but the Christ himself. He considered the Old Testament, witnessed to his prophecy. So, his disciples followed him. This way, the main word of the Old Testament, was thought to be a means to a more important aim; *the*

* Assistant Prof. of Tehran University

** Assistant Prof of Semnan University

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authority of the Christ. Therefore, all the events in the Old Testament had already been narrated to pave the way for a coming Savior. Typological interpretation² helped the exegetes do this job. Paul said:

"Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ" (Corinthians, 10/pp:1-4).

But was there any reason to necessitate this kind of interpretation? Having a look at the situation in which Paul and early Christian teachers lived reveals that Christianity faced so many barrens and had much difficulty in going on, towards its very aim, otherwise. It lacked above all a reasonable and satisfactory justification for being. Paul, among others tried to make content those scholars who tentatively considered the situation.

In his deep desire to make converts, Paul had made himself an absolute slave to men to win them, becoming a Jew to Jews and a Gentile to Gentiles. He would be anything to anybody to convert him. Why? For the sake of the Gospel, that he might share with them in it. According to him, the Christianity must win (11, p: 959). Paul thought that within the unstable circumstances of his time he was responsible to spread the seed of Christianity everywhere, and to make it acceptable for everyone. He hinted that the crown may be lost. Some others on the contrary, put much force on keeping the Verses in their apparent form; as they literally meant. The latter ones didn't care about the context, doing their best to interpret the Scriptures in a genuine manner.

Paul assumed that the Church was the heir of the OT scriptures, being the true Israil of God. So he worked out his exegesis on lines which would have been familiar to the Rabbis or to Philo. This way, the "cloud" could be taken to be a type of Baptism (*Ibid*).

According to Paul all the Old Testament was an introduction to the Church. (10, p: 59). This method, when spread, motivated the Christians to interpret both, the Old and the New Testament, and to establish multifarious schools of interpretation. Little by little, the typological method of exegesis, led to a new method, called allegorical exegesis³. By this method, not only was it possible to

consider a certain kind of historical events, but every possible narration, was seen as a type of an elevated reality.

2. The Impact of the Jewish exegesis

Following the Jews, New Testament authors have interpreted the Old Testament literally. Nevertheless we find a certain air of freedom about their exegesis, which is not seen in rabbis' method. This freedom, no doubt, has come from Jesus himself (5, p: 107).

As Collins mentioned, in the NT there are more than 200 direct quotations from the OT. If references of all kinds are counted, the total number is about 350 (3, p: 497). In these quotations, OT verses were interpreted, either allegorically or metaphorically in general, or by using literary allusions. Being so, one may come to the conclusion that Christians were in a way or another, under the influence of Jewish hermeneutics. Moreover, we even know that the theological system in Christianity, is very closely related to the Jewish one (5, p: 108)

Above all, in the Last Supper, Jesus interprets the Old Testament idea of a covenant, in relation to himself and his disciples. It is this interpretation, which provided a seed for the growth of the later Christocentric exegesis of the Old Testament (*Ibid*).

Philo⁴, the great Jewish scholar of Alexandria was under the influence of Hellenistic culture. In Alexandria the current method of exegesis was allegorical. There, a fusion of various opinions, Eastern and Western was gathered in a certain kind of philosophy. In an air such this, Philo tried to synthesize Moses and Plato. Again, it was there that Jewish scholars provided Septuagint. Philo interpreted the first chapter of the Genesis as the forming of an incorporeal pattern, like a Platonic "idea". In connection with the six days of creation, his discussion of qualities of number "six" shows Pythagorean influence. He gave the meaning of the four rivers of Paradise as prudence, self-mastery, courage, and justice; the cardinal Platonic virtues. This allegorical method of interpreting the Bible influenced the Alexandrian school of Christian exegesis (1, pp:92-3).

3. The Problem of Authority

As the Christian church expanded into the world of Hellenistic culture, there emerged a hope within Christians to sweep up every heretical idea. So there came an anti-Jewish air to the existence. Marcion⁵, was convinced that he could distinguish between the essence of Christianity and the additions which the Jewish disciple of Jesus had made (5, *Ibid*). Marcion accepted one gospel and that was of Luke. He criticized and denied what he believed to be the interpolations of Judaizers. So, for a man like him, the Old Testament had no authority. It was irrational and immoral (*Ibid*). According to him, allegorical interpretation in defense of the book, was not justifiable. But actually in the second century atmosphere, allegorisation was inevitable, should Christianity to be reserved.

In such circumstances, the church had the right of free allegorization to interpret the scripture. Specifically, those who had received the apostolic teaching through the apostolic succession could be trusted as interpreters. Accordingly, being away from the life of the main stream of Christianity, one was unable to get the right meaning of the books. As such, late in the second century, Irenaeus⁶, bishop of Lyons, set forth this principle in his work against heresies:

"When they are refuted from the scriptures, they shift their ground and censure the scripture, declaring that they are wrong or are not authoritative, or that there are various readings, and that the truth cannot be discovered from these by those who do not know the tradition" (*Ibid*).

"According to Irenaeus *the church is the guardian of scripture*. The same point of view was espoused at Carthage by Tertullian. Irenaeus and Tertullian agreed that the only correct exegesis is to be made according to the rule of faith-essentially the common Christian creed" (Italics added).

4. Patristic Exegesis

From the second century onward, there begins a new era in Christian interpretation, called Patristic period. Lasting nearly to the eighth century, it could be divided into separate Fathers; Fathers before Origen (c.185-c.254), Origen, Alexandrian, Antiochian, and the Latin Fathers.

Before Origen, the Apostolic Fathers left no Biblical exegesis in the strict sense. Generally, the Apostolic fathers did not attempt to prove their ideas by using Biblical verses (3, p: 498).

Origen was the first Biblical scholar to study scriptures critically. His many exegetical writings appear in scholia (simple notes on difficult or obscure passage), commentaries and homilies. Origen was the first to set forth his ideas about hermeneutics. Influenced by Plato's distinction between body, soul, and spirit, he divided the senses of Scripture: 1) an historical sense, which is literal, that the Biblical text directly conveys; 2) the moral sense; 3) the spiritual sense, which contains all other senses that can be derived from the Biblical text. But he didn't claim that all Scripture contained these three senses.

4. 1. Alexandrian Fathers

Alexandrian school was the first academic and theological school in Christianity. It was established in the second century. In Alexandria, it is said that East and West met. There, a combination of Greek philosophy, Judaism, and many other Oriental cults, with Egyptian culture existed.

The famous school of Alexandria was active in 185.A.D. Clement of Alexandria (C.150-C.215), Pantanus' pupil, brought it into the light. In Alexandria, the characteristics of the Catholic Church had not so fully developed. In Clement we find a fusion of various cultures of the time (9, p: 73).

Clement would interpret Christianity as Philo did Judaism; by philosophy into scientific dogmatic. To him, the divine Logos has always been the source of all the intelligence and morality of the human race. "Faith" is enough for salvation, but the man who adds to his faith "knowledge", has a higher possession. Such a man is the true Christian Gnostic. The highest good to which knowledge leads is the knowledge of God. Clement didn't establish a complete theological school, but his pupil and successor, Origen whom we mentioned before, did the task (9, p: 74). Fathers of Alexandria interpreted the Scripture, allegorically. Alexandrians, unlike the Antiochians, believed that God had intentionally placed stumbling blocks in the Bible in order to awaken men's minds. There were hidden truths behind the literal meanings. Therefore the difficulties of scripture themselves suggest the existence of a deeper meaning.

Clement and Origen, both gave examples of such barriers from the Old Testament (5, p: 110).

There are days described in Genesis before the creation of sun and moon; obviously this is impossible; equally obviously there must be a hidden meaning. Origen finds these difficulties also in the New Testament: "Even the gospels are full of passages of this kind, as when the devil takes Jesus up into a high mountain..." The devil shows Jesus all the kingdom of the earth (Matt.4:8); obviously again there is no mountain from which all the kingdoms can be seen; therefore the story does not mean what it says. Furthermore, the Gospels disagree among themselves in regard to the order of events in Jesus' life. Therefore there must be an allegorical meaning.

The real purpose of Alexandrian allegorization was avoidance of the anthropomorphisms of the Old Testament which simple-minded Christians took literally; verses that considered God (Yahweh) as a human.

4. 2. Antiochian Fathers

The school of Antioch was established in the late third century, by St. Lucian of Antioch (240-317). We don't know a great deal about his method of exegesis; just only to the extent that it was literal. Of the main characteristics of this method, contrary to the Alexandrian one, was the emphasis on historical events, and typical sense (*theoria*). Of its great figures, were Diodore of Tarsus (c. 330-C.390), and Theodore of Mopsuestia (C. 350-428). This school came to the end in about 500.A.D.

In this school of interpretation the textual meaning was more important. Even if the OT were an introduction to the NT, the literal meaning of it could better serve this purpose. So one did not have the right to change its expression. In Antioch the meaning of a passage, its "theory", included both metaphor and simple statement. Obviously their analysis is more natural than their competitors. Some believe that the literal meaning of scriptures cannot exclude metaphor.

Though, one should not go to the conclusion that Antiochians used literal meanings in an absolute way. Chrysostom said: "We must not examine the words as bare words, else many absurdities will follow, but we must mark the mind of the writer" (11, p: 959).

The Antiochian air, was Aristotelian. Antiochians following the current Jewish tradition, interpreted scripture according to its surface sense. They accepted no metaphorical meaning. The literal meaning of "the arm of God" is that God really had an arm.

With an emphasis on literalism, Theodore declared that most of the prophecies of the Old Testament had a reference to future events within Jewish history, and not to Christ.

He said: "every passage of the Bible is provided with a literal meaning, whether proper or metaphorical. To deny this would be to suppose that the Holy Spirit would sometimes have spoken in order to say nothing..." (5, p: 111).

Antiochians noted for their literal and grammatical interpretation of the Bible. As philosophy and intellectual culture in Antioch were in their primary steps, the Greek thought had no place to expand. In Antiochian point of view, Christ was born in Jewish background. So, the reservation of the Old Testament could best support His divine prophecy. Therefore they didn't need illegalization.

4. 3. Latin Fathers

From the Apostle's period, Christianity began to grow in the West, above all in places of Greek origin. Clement of Rome (Clement, I;d. 101?) connected with Hellenistic synagogue. Many of the Greek writers had lived at Rome; writers like Justin⁷, Tatian⁸, Valentinus⁹ and Irenaeus. Even in Africa, Tertulian¹⁰ wrote his earliest works in Greek. But gradually Christianity began to express itself in Latin, and produced Latin literary works later on. It was in Africa that for the first time Latin literature of Christianity appeared. (4, p: 64)

Latin literary works of the Fathers grew in Carthage in mid-third century. The exegetical principles of both Antioch and Alexandria found adherents among commentators of the West. The greatest exegete of the ancient church, Jerome, derived much of his method from Antiochian sources. He translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Latin, and it won its way. This version was for centuries, the only translation authorized by the Roman Church (5, p: 111; 3, p: 500). At first, Jerome interpreted the book allegorically, but later, he inclined to literal exegesis.

This era (3rd-5th.C) witnessed the Bible, as authoritative and canonical. Already, the Bible had been fully recognized as the Book of God. As church fathers asserted, it was "the sacred

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writings", "the divine law", "the word of God". But here, in this very important period, there occurred a peculiar change which would last for more than 10 centuries.

During the decade that followed the death of Augustine¹¹ (the most famous of Latin Fathers), Vincent of Lerins (d.c. 450) in his *Commonitorium* (434) declared the primacy of Scripture, but stressed the necessity of interpreting it in accordance with *tradition*. This tradition was not, but that of the Catholic Church, because although "the canonical Scriptures are admittedly sufficient for everything, but they are misinterpreted" (7, p: 115).

Augustine among the Latin Church fathers is of a great deal of value. In his preaching he interpreted the Bible in allegorical or mystical way, but in his theological works preferred the literal method. He insisted upon the necessity of philosophical training for the proper study and interpretation of the written word of God (3, p: 501).

Augustine is also worthy of mention, for his hermeneutics. He influenced modern hermeneutics, and philosophers like Heidegger¹² and Gadamer¹³ (6, p: 33). Augustine's principle in exegesis based on the fact that the Bible is self-evident in itself, even for children. He criticized Origen on the ground that he had considered all verses of the Bible as allegory. According to Augustine hermeneutical rules should be merely applied, when the text is difficult to understand.

He has divided the interpretations of the Bible into two separate distinctions: "there are two things on which all interpretations of Scripture depends; the mode of ascertaining the proper meaning, and the mode of making known the meaning when it is ascertained". He then continues: "making known the meaning is a great and arduous undertaking... and it is presumptuous if I were counting on my own strength; but since my hope of accomplishing the work rests on Him Who has already supplied me with many thoughts on this subject I do not fear but that He will go on to supply what is yet wanting when once I have begun to use what He has already given" (2, p: 704).

Accordingly, Augustine's hermeneutics consider "Faith" as the most effective means to understanding. It is not the exegete, but the God, Who makes the Scripture understood. The interpreter, in his hard task of ascertaining the sense of a verse, has to trust on God.

The Latin period of exegesis, ends with Jerome and Augustine. They both set and fixed the future life of Christian exegesis, especially in the Middle Ages. Afterwards, there appeared no new method in interpretation. There is only one exception to the rule; the method, established and followed by Scholasticism, which is out the limits of our present article.

Notes

1. Biblia
2. A method of exegesis which takes a text as having a symbolic or anticipatory reference in addition to its apparent historical meaning.
3. A description of a topic or subject under the guise of another which is suggestive of it, an extended comparative metaphor. In Christianity it is a method which treats a text as if it was an allegory, and was thus important for Christians as a way of relating Jewish scripture (the Old Testament) to Christianity.
4. Philo of Alexandria (c.25 B.C-50.A.D).
5. d. c.160. Christian Gnostic and founder of a Christian movement which was a rival to Catholic Christianity in the second and third centuries.
6. c.140- c.200, known especially for writings against Gnosticism.
7. c.100-c.165, Greek theologian and teacher of Platonic doctrines. He adapted notion of *logos* to Christ and opened first Christian school at Rome.
8. second cen. Syrian Christian writer who broke with Roman church.
9. second cen. Gnostic philosopher and teacher. b.Egypt, went to Rome and taught. His famous doctrines called Valentinian Gnosticism.
10. c. 155-220, the first important Christian writer in Latin.
11. Augustine of Hippo (354-430).
12. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)
13. Hans-George Gadamer (1900-)

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