



Karim Guirguis

Patristic Hermeneutics: Truth and Scripture

Abstract

An Orthodox hermeneutical framework identifies truth only with God. This does not cease at Scriptural hermeneutics, but pervades throughout the entirety of Orthodox theology. In this way, an Orthodox epistemological framework is necessarily phenomenological. It is through an experience of God that any knowledge of Truth is possible. While not unanimously perceived in this way, many early Christians took this approach to Scriptural hermeneutics. In this way, the telos of Scripture becomes associated with Christ. Being moved by the Holy Spirit, the reader is led to Christ, who is the invisible image of the Father. As such, the experience of Scripture is necessarily Trinitarian. The literal text, accordingly, is used as a sign to point to



Karim Guirguis is working towards his MTS at the Orthodox School of Theology at Trinity College at the University of Toronto, Canada

something beyond the text itself, as opposed to containing ontological value. In this way, the teleological fulfilment of Scripture - in the same way as anything in an Orthodox framework - lies in God. Being existence itself God becomes the fulfilment of all things, most vividly Scripture which has its completion in leading to, and revealing, God.

Keywords

Scripture, Hermeneutics, Patristics, Orthodox, Truth

1 Introduction

Throughout Orthodox Christian history, there has never been an ecumenically accepted canon of Scripture. Albeit the expositions of early Christian thinkers, such as Athanasius of Alexandria¹ and Cyril of Jerusalem,² about books that are to be considered true, the Church as a body never defined a particular set of works that ought to function as Scripture. This is yet observed in the contemporary world with different communities that share communion with differing Scriptural canons.³ This diversity is able to exist within Christian - particularly Orthodox - praxis due to its hermeneutical approach. Any true being comes from God - *the* Being. As such, any truth only comes to be true due to its relation

¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, "Letter 39," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. R. Payne-Smith, vol. 4, 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), p. 552.

² Cyril of Jerusalem, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem: Works*, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, vol. 1, *The Fathers of the Church* 61 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1969), pp. 136-137.

³ For example, there are differences between the Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopian canons; see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (New York, NY: Clarendon Press, 1989).

to God who *is* Truth. In this way, Scripture - the written word - is related to Christ - *the* Word. The very τέλος of Scripture is to reveal Christ, bringing the reader to an encounter with Him, thereby bringing the reader to Truth. For this reason, Scriptural hermeneutics do not stand in isolation within - or from - the broader Orthodox framework. Rather, it follows the same hermeneutical method as the more general approach to Truth. As Fr. K. M. George puts it,

Biblical hermeneutics is not treated in isolation from the general theological hermeneutical approach of the Church. In other words, the question, 'How do you understand the Bible today?' is necessarily related to such questions as, 'How do you understand God, the Church, the liturgy or humanity?'⁴

For the early Christian thinkers, all knowledge ought to lead to God. This was the basis of all hermeneutics. Any true knowledge is that of *Truth* itself. As such, any real meaning that can be contained necessarily points to God. This is echoed by Basil of Caesarea,

Moreover, you will find that the world was not devised at random or to no purpose, but to contribute to some useful end and to the great advantage of all beings, if it is truly a training place for rational souls and a school for attaining the knowledge of God, because through visible and perceptible objects it provides guidance to the mind for the contemplation of the invisible... That it might be shown, then, that the world is a work of art, set before all for contemplation, so that through it the wisdom of Him who created it should be known.⁵

Accordingly, it's possible - and necessary - to recognize the inexhaustibility and incomprehensibility of Truth, and the necessity

⁴ K. M. George, "An Oriental Orthodox Approach to Hermeneutics," *Indian Journal of Theology* 31, no. 3-4 (1982), p. 203.

⁵ Basil of Caesarea, *Exegetic Homilies*, trans. Agnes Clare Way, *The Fathers of the Church* 46 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), pp. 11-12.

of communicating Truth in the words of Scripture. Gregory of Nyssa expounds on this in his polemic against Eunomius,

Now if he sticks to the mere letter, and to that extent follows the Jewish opinion, and has yet to learn that the Christian is not a disciple to the letter, but to the spirit (for 'The letter,' it says, 'kills, but the Spirit gives life' [2 Cor. 3:6]), and if he is offering us the bare, literal reading of the text [of Scripture], as though God had spoken these sentences, and if this is his belief, he will simply be arguing that God also uses just the same spoken sentences as people use, and spells out his thoughts in sound and speech.⁶

Attempting to identify the Truth of Scripture with the historical, moral, or any other literal sense of Scripture forfeits the possibility of encountering Christ through the written word, consequently surrendering its ability to reveal any real Truth to the reader. Sebastian Brock comments on this: "Much more dangerous, and spiritually harmful, is the fundamentalist approach to the Bible which confuses spiritual truth with historical truth, thus creating a totally unnecessary conflict between religion and science."⁷ In other words, a proper method of Scriptural hermeneutics cannot coexist with any suggestion of realism. Rather, a proper approach to Scriptural interpretation must only seek Truth - it must only seek God. All other aspects of Scripture - regardless of their factuality - should never be the object of the search but are an attempt at verbalizing this Truth which ought to be sought. As Fr. John Behr puts it,

The preaching of the gospel of Christ in accordance with the Scriptures in this apocalyptic (rather than historical or heilsgeschichtliche) manner, as a mystery hidden from all eternity (though known to the prophets) and revealed at the end gives a much greater scope to the presence of Christ to

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium II*, ed. Lenka Karfíková, Scot Douglass, and Johannes Zachhuber, *Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language* 82 (Boston, MA: Brill Publishers, 2007), pp. 101–102.

⁷ Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, Gorgias Handbooks (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006), p. 55.

Moses and the Prophets, sojourning in them and teaching them about God.⁸

This was, in fact, the hermeneutical approach of the early Christian thinkers. For them, language, by virtue of being created, is limited and cannot exhaust the fullness of God. As such, whatever is contained within the words of Scripture is necessarily lacking. However, these words point to something that is *other* to them - they point to God. This is what attaches meaning to these words. The potential of bringing the reader to an experience of Christ - who *is* Truth - is what brings Scripture to be true.

2 Being and Non-Being

In the thought of early Christian thinkers the very notion of existence - or being - not only belongs to God but is an attribute that describes creation in relation to Him. God, simply, *is*. Anything else *becomes* through its approach to *Being* - to God. This theology is also echoed liturgically: "O You, THE BEING, Master, Lord, God of Truth, being before the ages and reigning forever."⁹ Early Christians would read this theology in the conversation of Moses with God, wherein God revealed Himself as "I am who I am" (Ex. 3:14 RSV). For the early Church, in the words of Gregory of Nazianzus, God *is* "absolute existence, independent of anything else. The actual, personal being of God in its fullness is neither limited nor cut short by any prior or any subsequent reality - so it was and so it will be."¹⁰ Furthermore, *only* God exists - or, rather, *is* existence itself - in this way, everything else that exists, only exists in its relation to God. In the words of Origen of Alexandria,

⁸ John Behr, "Lifting the Veil: Reading Scripture in the Orthodox Tradition," *Sobornost* 38, no. 1 (2016), p. 86.

⁹ The "Anaphora" in the *Liturgy of St. Basil of Caesarea* in the Coptic rite.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Lionel Wikham and Frederick Williams, Popular Patristic Series 23 (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2002), p. 108.

“And in him who truly exists, who said by Moses, *I am who I am* [Ex. 3:14], all things that are have participation, which participation in the God and Father extends to all, the righteous and sinners, rational and irrational beings, and absolutely everything that exists.”¹¹ This understanding of existence percolates throughout much of early Christian theology.¹² For something to be true - for it to truly exist - it must be intimately related to God. For this reason, despite the early discomfort with the presence of four distinct gospels, as made apparent by Tatian’s creation of a gospel harmony in Greek, the “Diatessaron,”¹³ the early Church, most explicitly through Irenaeus of Lyons,¹⁴ insisted on the inclusion of all four gospels into Scripture.¹⁵ The ability for the Church to accept this seemingly incoherent position is made possible through the patristic model of epistemology. An approach to true knowledge is necessarily phenomenological. Only

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- ¹¹ Origen of Alexandria, *Origen: On First Principles*, trans. John Behr, vol. 1, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 75.
- ¹² See Ambrose of Milan, “On the Christian Faith (Book 5),” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin, and H. T. F. Duckworth, vol. 10, 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896), p. 287; John Chrysostom, *St. John Chrysostom: Commentary on Saint John The Apostle and Evangelist, Homilies 1-47*, trans. Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin, The Fathers of the Church 33 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1957), p. 146; Joseph T. Liehnhard and Ronnie J. Rombs, eds., *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp. 19–23.
- ¹³ Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great*, Oxford History of the Christian Church (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 109.
- ¹⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, “Against the Heresies (Book 3.11),” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), pp. 293.
- ¹⁵ See John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (SVS Press, 2006), p. 48.

through experience of - and an intimate relationship to - God is true knowledge possible. In this way, the words of Scripture attempt to contain what is ontologically beyond words to bring the reader to something beyond the words themselves.

2.1 Signs and Things

Adhering to God as the only Truth leads to the necessity for any text - or anything, for that matter - to be related to Truth in some way for it to be able to be considered true. However, it itself is *other* to the truth to which it points. In the words of Clement of Alexandria, "Since, then, the forms of truth are two - the names and the things...We must therefore occupy ourselves not with the expression, but the meaning."¹⁶ Again, this method of hermeneutics is not limited to Scriptural interpretation but spans the entirety of patristic theology. For instance, Basil generalizes this approach to hermeneutics, recognizing that creation ought not be considered an end, in of itself; rather, it ought to point to what is beyond it: "When through his illuminating power we fix our eyes on the beauty of the image of the unseen God, and through the image are led up to more than beautiful vision of the archetype, his Spirit of knowledge is somehow inseparably present."¹⁷ However, to posit that signs can be ontologically communicative of Truth suggests that there exists reality outside of God. Signs would then somehow be divine, relating these divine aspects to the beholder. This paradox is presented by Gregory of Nyssa, who writes,

Rather, just as we signal to deaf people what has to be done by using gestures and hand-signals, not because we ourselves have no voice of our own when we do this, but because it is quite useless to give verbal instructions to those who cannot

¹⁶ Clement of Alexandria, "The Stromata (Book 6.17)," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. William Wilson, vol. 2 (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), pp. 394–395.

¹⁷ Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen Hildebrand, Popular Patristic Series 42 (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2011), p. 82.

hear, so, the human race being in a way deaf and unable to understand anything sublime, we hold that the grace of God, which speaks ‘in diverse parts and manners’ in the prophets [Heb. 1:1], and frames the verbal expressions of the holy prophets to suit our mental grasp and habit, by these means leads us on to the apprehension of sublime things, not giving instructions in accordance with his own majesty - how should the great be confined in the little? - but in a form which comes down to the level of our small capacity.¹⁸

For this reason, signs must be distinct from the Truth; “All that is and that exists is from God, and for our guidance there are attached to beings the names which denote real things.”¹⁹ This same logic applies to words, and accordingly to Scripture. After all, in the words of Augustine of Hippo, “Words have force only to the extent that they remind us to look for things.”²⁰ In fact, words are invented for the very purpose of explicating something other to them. Words do not ontologically contain a particular meaning - a specific reality. Rather, they are designed to point to something beyond what they are. As Gregory of Nyssa puts it,

What springs up at God’s will is the reality, not the name, so that the reality which substantively exists is the work of the Maker’s power, but the sounds which identify things, by which verbal reasoning distinguishes things individually for accurate and distinct reference, these are the product and invention of the faculty of verbal reasoning, whereas this verbally rational faculty and nature itself is the work of God.²¹

As such, most of all, the words of Scripture not only point to *something* distinct from them but point to *the* Truth - to God. This

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium II*, pp. 112–113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁰ Augustine of Hippo as quoted in Tarmo Toom, “Augustine’s Hermeneutics: The Science of the Divinely Given Signs,” in *Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation: The Latin Fathers*, ed. Tarmo Toom (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 91.

²¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium II*, pp. 113–114.

is precisely why Scripture is considered to be explicating Truth; because it ought to point to God. Augustine of Hippo laments this, writing,

When you follow the letter, you see, you take in their proper literal sense words that are being used metaphorically, and fail to refer what is signified in this proper sense to the signification of something else... This, precisely, is the wretched slavery of the spirit, treating signs as things, and thus being unable to lift up the eyes of the mind above bodily creatures, to drink in the eternal light.²²

If the interpreter reduces the grandeur of God revealed in Scripture to mere historicity, morality, or anything other than Truth itself, they forfeit any reality existing within the Scriptural text. Indeed, in the words of Jerome, “All that we read in the divine books while glistening and shining without, is yet far sweeter within.”²³ Accordingly, Scripture is true; however, this statement is only reliable if Scripture is taken as a sign pointing towards God as opposed to anything else. After all, in the words of George, “The human word (language) is always validated on the basis of its relationship with the eternal divine Word (Logos).”²⁴

2.2 *Scripture as Sign*

The ability - and necessity - of Scripture to point beyond itself constitutes the patristic hermeneutical method. For early Christians, in the words of Frances Young, “Scriptural hermeneutics shaped theology but only insofar as the sacred texts were read

²² Augustine of Hippo, *Teaching Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, 2nd ed., The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/11 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press of the Focolare, 1996), p. 180.

²³ Jerome as quoted in Aline Canellis, “Jerome’s Hermeneutics: How to Exegete the Bible?,” in *Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation: The Latin Fathers*, ed. Tarmo Toom (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 63.

²⁴ K. M. George, “An Oriental Orthodox Approach to Hermeneutics,” p. 209.

as pointing beyond themselves.”²⁵ This approach was first discussed at length by Origen of Alexandria. For example, Origen, in his argument against Marcion, rejects a literal understanding of Scripture and points to the example of St. Paul in searching for Truth within the text.²⁶ Young expounds on Origen’s methodology, “Origen accepted without question the unity of the Bible and found it in the Holy Spirit’s *skopos* (aim) to impart the truth but to conceal it in a narrative dealing with the visible creation so that proper examination of these records would point to spiritual truths.”²⁷ For Origen, if the words of Scripture are not pointing to God, then they point to something completely irrelevant to Christian praxis: “If these words are not to be spiritually understood, are they not mere tales? If they conceal no hidden mystery, are they not unworthy of God?”²⁸ Above all, Origen considers the literal reading of Scripture to be a cause for incorrect beliefs. Origen writes, “The reason, in all the cases mentioned, for the false beliefs and impious or ignorant assumptions about God appears to be nothing else than Scripture not being understood according to its spiritual sense, but taken as regarding the bare

²⁵ Frances Young, “Divine Discourse: Scripture in the Economy of Revelation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 71.

²⁶ Origen of Alexandria, *Origen: On First Principles*, trans. John Behr, vol. 2, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 503; See also Anthony Meredith, “The Language of God and Human Language,” in *Contra Eunomium II*, ed. Lenka Karfíková, Scot Douglass, and Johannes Zachhuber, Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language 82 (Boston, MA: Brill Publishers, 2007), pp. 252–253.

²⁷ Frances Young, “Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis: The Ancient Period,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), p. 335.

²⁸ Origen of Alexandria, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, Ancient Christian Writers 26 (Westminster, London: The Newman Press, 1957), p. 270.

letter.”²⁹ Origen was not alone in Alexandria with this perspective. Similarly, according to Young, for Clement, “the truth of Scripture also came through a veil, and the key to unlock the hidden mysteries was Christ.”³⁰ This position was also taken up by Gregory of Nyssa in his discourses against Eunomius. Gregory writes, “Sometimes the Scripture, to clarify the meaning of the subject under discussion, presents its account of intellectual matters in a somewhat physical way.”³¹ This outlook on Scriptural hermeneutics, however, was not exclusively to the Greek-speaking world. Augustine, writing in Latin, had a very similar outlook on Scriptural interpretation:

But when from the same words of scripture not just one, but two or more meanings may be extracted, even if you cannot tell which of them the writer intended, there is no risk if they can all be shown from other places of the holy scriptures to correspond with the truth. However, those who are engaged in searching the divine utterances must make every effort to arrive at the intention of the author through whom the Holy Spirit produced that portion of scripture. But as I say, there is nothing risky about it, whether they do get at this, or whether they carve out another meaning from those words which does not clash with right faith, and is supported by any other passage of the divine utterances. That author, in fact, possibly even saw this very meaning in the same words which we wish to understand; and certainly the Spirit of God who produced these texts through him foresaw without a shadow of doubt that it would occur to some reader or listener; or rather he actually provided that it should occur to them, because it is upheld by the truth. How, after all, could the divine scriptures make more abundant and generous provision, than by ensuring that the same words could be understood in several ways,

²⁹ Origen of Alexandria, *Origen: On First Principles*, 2:489, p. 491.

³⁰ Frances Young, “Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis: The Ancient Period,” p. 336.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium II*, p. 107.

which are underwritten by other no less divine testimonies?³²

Augustine's approach is only made possible when perceiving Scripture as a sign pointing to God. Since God is inexhaustible, so also is it possible to unendingly search Scripture for further intimacy with Truth. However, if the words of Scripture were to point to themselves, or anything other than God, then this would not be possible; the words would present what they contain, and then Scriptures would be exhausted. However, it is because of his hermeneutical approach that Augustine is able to recognize many interpretations of every one aspect of Scripture. Furthermore, this approach to Scriptural hermeneutics persists also among Syriac-speaking Christians. For example, in the words of Brock, "Ephrem says emphatically on a number of occasions that it is wrong to read the Bible in a literal way, for this will lead to all sorts of misconceptions."³³ In his hymns on paradise, Ephrem explicates that if the words of Scripture were taken to be literal, it would deny God's great self-emptying to reveal Himself in human words:

Paradise can only be described in terrestrial terms, but it is essential to realize that these terms are purely metaphorical; to understand them in a literal sense is to abuse God's great condescension in revealing to us, through Scripture, something of Paradise's beauty and wonders.³⁴

In this way did many of the early Christian thinkers approach Scripture; that it is a sign intended to reveal God.

2.3 *The Need for a Sign*

The necessity of a sign - such as Scripture - to point to God points to the apophatic approach to patristic theology. Scripture is, thus, a form of divine condescension. God emptied Himself to be

³² Augustine of Hippo, *Teaching Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana*, p. 194.

³³ Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, p. 56.

³⁴ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock, Popular Patristic Series 10 (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1990), p. 153.

pointed to through signs - signs that are incomplete, in of themselves. In the words of Ephrem the Syrian,

If someone concentrates his attention solely on the metaphors used of God's majesty, he abuses and misrepresents that majesty and thus errs by means of those metaphors with which God clothed Himself for his benefit, and he is ungrateful to that Grace which stooped low to the level of his childishness; although it has nothing in common with him, yet Grace clothed itself in his likeness in order to bring him to the likeness of itself.³⁵

As Young writes, for Ephrem, "God clothes the divine self in names drawn from human experience... Without putting on these names, it would not have been possible for God to speak with us humans."³⁶ In this way, Scripture becomes a sign through which God communicates with humans. It is God being spoken of in a language, so to speak, that humans can understand. As Ephrem puts it,

Let us understand: if he had not put on the names of these very things, he would have been unable to speak with our humanity. With [what is ours], he drew near to us. He put on our names, to put on us his way of life. He borrowed and put on our form, and like a father with children, he spoke with our childishness.³⁷

In short, Scriptures can be considered to be true in that they reveal God - who is Truth. In His condescension, God, through signs, a language which they are able to identify with, reveals Himself to humanity.

³⁵ Ibid., 156.

³⁶ Frances Young, "Divine Discourse: Scripture in the Economy of Revelation," p. 85.

³⁷ Ephrem the Syrian, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Faith*, trans. Jeffrey T. Wicks, The Fathers of the Church 130 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), p. 192.

3 The Λόγος of God

It is no coincidence that Scripture is referred to as the word of God, mirroring the Second Person of the Trinity, “the very Logos and very Truth”³⁸ (cf. Jn. 1:1). This familiarity of epithets between the divine Word and the written word did not go unnoticed by early Christians. For the patristic authors, in the words of Frances Young, “the Word Incarnate and Word Inscribed are mutually dependent, reinforcing one another.”³⁹ Furthermore, it is from this relationship that Scripture is said to be true as the Word of God *is* Truth (cf. Jn. 14:6). For this reason, Scripture, continues Frances, is “only intelligible in the light of Christ.”⁴⁰

3.1 *The Word Incarnate*

In a broad sense, early Christian thinkers took a more ontological approach to soteriology. For them, sin separated man from God - from true Being - causing a fall away into death (cf. Gen. 3:3; Is. 59:2).⁴¹ For them, the incarnation bridged this chasm between God and man, bringing humanity back into Being.⁴² This theo-

³⁸ Origen of Alexandria, “Exhortation to Martyrdom,” in *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origen*, ed. Henry Chadwick and J. E. L. Oulton, vol. 2, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 399.

³⁹ Frances Young, “Divine Discourse: Scripture in the Economy of Revelation,” p. 71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ See for example Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God: Books VIII-XVI*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan, The Fathers of the Church 14 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), pp. 316–318; Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, trans. David R. Maxwell, vol. 1 (InterVarsity Press, 2013), p. 309; Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius (Book 2.13),” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. C. Ogle and H. A. Wilson, vol. 5, 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), pp. 126–127.

⁴² See for example Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr, Popular Patristic Series 44A (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2012), p. 167; Gregory of Nyssa, *A Handbook for Catechists: Catechetical*

logy pervaded much of Christian praxis, including the Church's liturgical expression: "He made [humanity] one with His Divinity without mingling, without confusion, and without alteration."⁴³ In this same way does Scripture function for early Church thinkers. Scripture, being the written word, brings divine *Truth* and human words into relation. The union of the human and divine natures in the one person of Christ gives Scripture a more profound nuance within the Christian hermeneutical framework. Scripture is no longer strictly divine speech, neither is it strictly human. Rather, through Scripture, being the word of God, in the words of Fr. Georges Florovsky, "we hear... not only the voice of God, but also the voice of man."⁴⁴ Thus, Scripture culminates as, continues Florovsky, "the Word of God in human idiom."⁴⁵

3.2 Divine Truth in Human Words

The apparent impossibility of a union between human and divine natures led to a plethora of early Christians contesting the idea or suggesting alterations to the doctrine for the sake of outward coherence. This led to many Christological ideas that were later condemned as heresies such as Docetism, Arianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism, to name a few. However, this very same danger is present in Scriptural hermeneutics. There is always a danger in forfeiting the humanity or divinity of Scripture, or the union of the two. Gregory of Nyssa expresses the humanity of Scripture as a veil covering the Truth, through which man is able to contemplate God:

Such a boon as [the inspiration of Scripture], however, is not within any man's reach to lay hold of, but the Divine intention lies hid under the body of the Scripture, as it were under a

Discourse, trans. Ignatius Green, Popular Patristic Series 60 (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2019), p. 149.

⁴³ "The Confession" in the *Liturgy of St. Basil of Caesarea* in the Coptic rite.

⁴⁴ Georges Florovsky, "Revelation and Interpretation," in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, vol. 1, The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky (Belmont, MA: Nordland Pub. Co., 1972), p. 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

veil, some legislative enactment or some historical narrative being cast over the truths that are contemplated by the mind.⁴⁶

With this ability to recognize the human participation in the presence of Scripture, being able to identify Truth with God, it becomes acceptable to forfeit any other form of truth within Scripture. Everything in Scripture becomes for the sake of pointing to God, and nothing else. This allows early Christians to dive further into Scripture by accepting rhetoric in the form of allegory and anthropomorphism. Gregory of Nazianzus writes to this, “Some things mentioned in the Bible are not factual; some factual things are not mentioned; some nonfactual things receive no mention there; some things are both factual and mentioned.”⁴⁷ It is important to note that when he uses the word “factual,” he is referring to historical reality.⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa paints this communication of the divine with the human using rhetoric as God speaking in the language of humanity:

So although some words familiar to us are in the divine scripture spoken personally by God, we should be aware that the Holy Spirit communicates with us in our own terms, just as in the story in Acts we learn that each person heard the teaching in his own native language, understanding the meaning of what was said in words he recognized [Acts 2:6].⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius (Book 7.1),” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. C. Ogle and H. A. Wilson, vol. 5, 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), p. 192.

⁴⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, p. 133.

⁴⁸ This way of hermeneutics continued on later into Christian history with the example of Isaac the Syrian Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian*, 2nd ed. (Brookline, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), p. 129; Isaac of Nineveh, *On Ascetical Life*, trans. Mark Hansbury, Popular Patristic Series 11 (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1989), p. 29.

⁴⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium II*, p. 112.

For this reason, for Origen, in the words of Stephen and Martin Westerholm, “the words of Scripture, like the human flesh of the Savior, are merely the external clothing of the eternal Word, bringing that Word within the realm of human experience.”⁵⁰ Thus, in a way, the incarnation is perpetuated through history by God taking on human speech for the sake of pointing to the divine.

3.3 Divine Infinity and Condescension

Throughout patristic - and the broader Christian - theology God is inexhaustible. For this reason, the incarnation is considered to be divine condescension - the invisible one was made visible (cf. Col. 1:15). For this reason, for early Christians, in the words of Young, “the very notion of God’s Word transcended what could be said, let alone written or recorded, in human language; both Scripture and incarnation bespeak divine condescension.”⁵¹ In this line of thought, Irenaeus posits that it is impossible to exhaust all that is contained in Scripture. Scripture, expositing about God, who is inexhaustible, cannot be possibly comprehended by human effort but must always be approached through revelation:

We, inasmuch as we are inferior to, and later in existence than, the Word of God and His Spirit, are on that very account destitute of the knowledge of His mysteries. And there is no cause for wonder if this is the case with us as respects things spiritual and heavenly, and such as require to be made known to us by revelation, since many even of those things which lie at our very feet (I mean such as belong to this world, which we handle, and see, and are in close contact with) transcend

⁵⁰ Stephen Westerholm, Martin Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices From the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), p. 73.

⁵¹ Frances Young, “Divine Discourse: Scripture in the Economy of Revelation,” p. 71.

our knowledge, so that even these we must leave to God. For it is fitting that He should excel all [in knowledge].⁵² Irenaeus pushes this idea to an eschatological plane, where God eternally reveals Himself to man (cf. Jn. 17:3), such that “in that which is to come, so that God should for ever teach, and man should for ever learn the things taught him by God?”⁵³ For this reason, For Origen, in the words of Westerholm, “The truth of Scripture is necessarily conditioned by the capacity of human beings to receive it.”⁵⁴ As Origen puts it,

As ‘in the Last Days’ [Acts 2:17], the Word of God, which was clothed with the flesh of Mary, proceeded into this world. What was seen in him was one thing; what was understood was something else. For the sight of his flesh was open for all to see, but the knowledge of his divinity was given to the few, even the elect. So also when the Word of God was brought to humans through the Prophets and the Lawgiver, it was not brought without proper clothing. For just as there it was covered with the veil of flesh [2 Cor. 3:14], so here with the veil of the letter, so that indeed the letter is seen as flesh but the spiritual sense hiding within is perceived as divinity.⁵⁵

Again, this is echoed by Ephrem the Syrian who writes, “The Great One has put on Needy names out of love for you.”⁵⁶ As Lewis Ayres demonstrates, early Christian thinkers did not limit Scriptural interpretation to a strict single meaning. Rather, the fathers and mothers of the Church would identify a multiplicity

⁵² Irenaeus of Lyons, “Against the Heresies (Book 2.28),” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), p. 220.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁵⁴ Westerholm and Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices From the History of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 76.

⁵⁵ Origen of Alexandria, *Homilies on Leviticus 1-16*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley, *The Fathers of the Church* 83 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), p. 29.

⁵⁶ Ephrem the Syrian, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Faith*, p. 186.

of nuances for Scripture. This approach to Scriptural interpretation, according to Ayres, is a result of their perception of Scripture as “speaking about realities that are beyond comprehension.”⁵⁷ In short, in the same way that the divine Word was incarnate and took on flesh, so also does the inscribed word of God take on human expression. Furthermore, in the same way that Christ did not forfeit His divinity, rather, He united it with humanity to bridge the chasm between Being and non-being, Scripture works as a sign bridging human speech with divine reality. As such, the words of Scripture ought to point to divinity, but should not be considered to be true in isolation; in the same way that man in isolation from God falls into non-being.

4 The Τέλος of Scripture

Bridging the gulf between Being and non-being, Scripture places Truth as its τέλος. For early Christians, in the words of Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos, “the challenge is not merely to interpret the written text but to comprehend and actualize God’s purposes and gifts to which the text bears testimony.”⁵⁸ As such, this search for Truth is not some abstract effort, but it becomes highly personal, affecting the praxis of Christian life.

4.1 One Τέλος to Scripture

Being God Himself, the τέλος of Scripture is not fragmented; rather, it is strictly one. As such, all the gleanings that are found in Scripture ought to be in conformity with its hypothesis. In the words of Westerholm, for Irenaeus, “in order to understand any part of Scripture, one must have a grasp of its overall message:

⁵⁷ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 32–33.

⁵⁸ Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective*, vol. 1 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004), p. 104.

to use the term Irenaeus borrowed from the rhetoricians, one must be familiar with Scripture's 'hypothesis,' the gist or thrust of its argument as a whole."⁵⁹ Irenaeus resembles Scripture to a mosaic where every part contributes to painting the grandeur of the image. Irenaeus critiques the Gnostic approach to Scripture in that they disassemble this grand mosaic and reorder all the pieces to paint an image that is foreign to Scripture.⁶⁰ As Stylianopoulos puts it, "The Church fathers taught, and modern scholarship has confirmed, that readers should be attentive to the *σχοπός*, the comprehensive aim or purpose of Scripture, so that its parts can be seen in terms of the whole and the whole in terms of its parts."⁶¹ As such, an indispensable principle of patristic hermeneutics is that the Truth found within Scripture must be conforming to Truth as revealed within the grander scope of the ecclesial experience. In this way Scriptural interpretation takes a cyclical pattern; one must be familiar with God to be able to identify Truth within Scripture, that Scripture which will then be pointing to God.

4.2 Christ as Τέλος

Within the patristic framework of hermeneutics, the τέλος of Scripture is Christ. In the words of Stylianopoulos, "As the fulfillment of the Old Testament and the fullness of historical revelation, Christ is the aim and main subject (*σχοπός*) of Scripture and, therefore, the beginning, center, and end of biblical interpretation."⁶² This idea of interpreting Christ as the aim of Scripture is found very early in Christian Scriptural interpretation.

⁵⁹ Westerholm and Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices From the History of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 63.

⁶⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, "Against the Heresies (Book 1.8)," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), pp. 31–32.

⁶¹ Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective*, 1:33.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1:105.

Irenaeus of Lyons writes, “If any one, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling... For Christ is the treasure which was hid in the field, [Matthew 13:44] that is, in this world; but the treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ.”⁶³ In fact, for Irenaeus, without Christ, in the words of Behr, “the words of scripture are engimatic and ambiguous—myth!”⁶⁴ According to Frances Young, for Origen, “There may be a multiplicity of words and many books, but they all have the aim or intent which accords with the one Word. Holy Scripture is one book, written about Christ, for Christ is written of in the Pentateuch, the prophets, the Psalms, indeed in all the Scriptures.”⁶⁵ Christ, being the aim of Scripture, pervades throughout both the Old and New Covenants, uniting them together as the end of Scripture. Cyril of Jerusalem expounds on this, “For there is One God of the two Testaments, who foretold in the Old Testament the Christ who appeared in the New, and who, through the preparatory school of the Law and the Prophets, led us to Christ.”⁶⁶

Cyril of Alexandria also furthers this point by insisting that throughout all of Scripture, the *σχολιός* remains Christ. He explicitly separates historical and literal interpretations of Scripture from its aim, and insists that only Christ fulfills the Truth pointed to by Scripture:

It is the intent of inspired Scripture to indicate to us the mystery of Christ through innumerable objects. Someone might compare it to a magnificent and illustrious city that does not

⁶³ Irenaeus of Lyons, “Against the Heresies (Book 4.26),” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), p. 461.

⁶⁴ John Behr, “Reading the Scriptures Anew,” *Pro Ecclesia* 29, no. 3 (2020): p. 271.

⁶⁵ Frances Young, “Divine Discourse: Scripture in the Economy of Revelation,” p. 83.

⁶⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *St. Cyril of Jerusalem: Works*, 1:135.

have just one image of its king, but very many, set up everywhere and visible to all. Observe how Scripture does not fail to fulfill this purpose in any single account, but it is present in all. Even if the literal record should seem to contain something inappropriate, this in no way prevents such a purpose being achieved, and what is present in it may be suitably unfolded. For it is not the purpose of Scripture to bring accusations against the lives of the saints. Not at all. Rather, it is to portray to us the knowledge of this mystery, that the message spoken concerning it may be both clear and true, unable to be censured in any way, as though it were perverting the truth.⁶⁷ For Cyril, the literal account of Scripture paints a shadow of Christ. Cyril perceives the value of the text of Scripture to be pointing to Christ. However, anything read in any other way misuses the text, seeking something which was not intended to be there:

Now we shall first present the literal events in a helpful way, making them suitably clear. Then, refashioning the narrative by bringing it out of type and shadow, we shall explain it with reference to the mystery of Christ, having him as the goal, since it is true that Christ is the end of the law and the prophets.⁶⁸

This same perspective was similarly apparent in the Latin-speaking world. Augustine shares a very similar approach to that of Cyril of Alexandria, distinguishing between historical accuracy and the literalism of the text from the τέλος of Scripture, being Christ. For Augustine, relating all events accurately “would add up, not to prophetic foresight, but merely to historical accuracy,”⁶⁹ which, for him, is of no significant importance. Augustine writes,

We investigate these hidden meanings of divine Scripture as best we can, some finding symbols with more, others with

⁶⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch*, trans. Nicholas P. Lunn, vol. 1 (Catholic University of America Press, 2019), p. 291.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:52.

⁶⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God: Books VIII-XVI*, p. 489.

less success. However, what is certain to all men of faith is, first, that these things were not done and recorded without some prefiguring of what was to come and, second, that they are to be referred only to Christ and His Church... The purpose of the writer of these Holy Scriptures (or, rather, of the Spirit of God working through him) is to mention those matters which make not merely a record of the past but a prophecy of the future, in so far as this is related to the City of God.⁷⁰ Similarly, Ephrem the Syrian views Christ as the Truth revealed by Scripture, and the hypothesis of Scripture by Whom gleanings ought to be measured. In the words of Brock, "For Ephrem, Christ himself represents the hermeneutical key to the biblical text."⁷¹ However, for Ephrem, this Christocentric reading of Scripture is, nonetheless, necessarily Trinitarian. Ephrem writes, "The Books⁷² are set up like a mirror: the one whose eye is clear sees there an image of truth.⁷³ Placed there is the image of the Father. Depicted there is the image of the Son, and the Holy Spirit."⁷⁴ The reader is moved by the Holy Spirit to be able to recognize Christ within Scripture (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3), who, being "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15 RSV), reveals the Father. In this way, the Christocentric experience of Scripture is, in fact, Trinitarian. In this way, since Christ is the key through which Scripture is to be interpreted, the text of Scripture cannot possibly be read in isolation from Him. After all, the gospel is not received from man, but it comes "through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:12 RSV). The text always ought to point to Christ, and Christ always ought to be the canon that permits different Scriptural interpretations. In the words of George, "In the Orthodox perspective, a

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Sebastian Brock, "St. Ephrem the Syrian on Reading Scripture," *The Downside Review* 125, no. 438 (January 1, 2007), p. 48.

⁷² Sebastian Brock translates this to "Scriptures" see *ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷³ Brock also translates this to "Divine Reality" see *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Ephrem the Syrian, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Faith*, p. 332.

hermeneutic of the written word must always be integrally associated with an experimental appropriation of the Word incarnate, crucified, and risen.”⁷⁵

5 Conclusion

To conclude, since God *is* Being, all Truth necessarily relates to Him. In this way, Scripture is related to God, in that the truth of Scripture is real as it points to God. In this way, the word inscribed is related to the Word incarnate. It becomes a point that unites humanity with divinity, breaking down “the middle wall”⁷⁶ between them (cf. Eph. 2:14). As such, the very τέλος of Scripture becomes Christ, to Whom all truth points and by Whom it is measured. In the words of Behr, “The gospel is preached as a mystery, hidden throughout the ages in the writings of Scripture, but now apocalyptically revealed”⁷⁷—revealed through Christ. However, one more question of Scriptural hermeneutics remains: how must this interpretative process manifest in Christian praxis?

Fr. John McGuckin gives an answer: “The ancients, especially the Christian Fathers, never failed to argue that true interpretation demands a *symphonia* of understanding between the discourses brought into association: that ‘like can only be known by like.’”⁷⁸ As one is more and more likened to Christ—as they come into a more and more intimate union with Him—they begin to *know*

⁷⁵ K. M. George, “An Oriental Orthodox Approach to Hermeneutics,” p. 207.

⁷⁶ The “Prayer of Reconciliation to the Son” in the *Liturgy of St. Gregory of Nazianzus* in the Coptic rite.

⁷⁷ John Behr, “Lifting the Veil: Reading Scripture in the Orthodox Tradition,” p. 74.

⁷⁸ John Anthony McGuckin, “Recent Biblical Hermeneutics in Patristic Perspective: The Tradition of Orthodoxy,” in *Sacred Text and Interpretation*, ed. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), p. 307.

and recognize Him in Scripture. This is expressed by Athanasius of Alexandria who writes,

But in addition to the study and true knowledge of the scriptures, there is needed a good life and a pure soul and the virtue which is according to Christ, so that the mind, guided by it, may be able to attain and comprehend what it desires, as far as it is possible for human nature to learn about the God Word.⁷⁹

As Tarmo Toom puts it, for Augustine, “one cannot recognize a sign as a sign of something unless one knows what this something is... What provides the true knowledge of things is the mental ‘seeing,’ the interior enlightenment by Christ. Christ as light enables the mind’s ‘eye’ to have the intellectual vision of truth.”⁸⁰ In other words, knowledge of God is necessarily phenomenological - it requires one to experience what is to be known. In this way, Scripture is self-aware of the epistemological framework that it requires, as is written in Luke, “Then [Christ] opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Lk. 24:45 RSV). It is precisely through Christ’s self-revelation that the words⁸¹ of Scripture manifest the reality which they attempt to contain. This very active approach to Scriptural interpretation finds itself in many early Christian thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria. For Clement, in the words of Young, “the truth of Scripture comes through a veil and we need an interpreter and guide. For Clement, then, becoming worthy to receive through faith the revelation that comes through the Scriptures interpreted by the Incarnate Word is the only way to know what is unknowable.”⁸² As such, any “meaning,” in the words of Behr, “resides in the person of whom the text speaks, and our task is to come to know this person by

⁷⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, p. 173.

⁸⁰ Tarmo Toom, “Augustine’s Hermeneutics: The Science of the Divinely Given Signs,” p. 89.

⁸¹ Or for Augustine, the “signs.”

⁸² Francis Young, “Divine Discourse: Scripture in the Economy of Revelation,” p. 80.

understanding how the text speaks of him.”⁸³ Scripture is not teleologically fulfilled in the letter, but rather in the encounter of the reader with Christ: “You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me” (Jn. 5:39 RSV). Perhaps this is the culmination of patristic Scriptural hermeneutics. That it is only possible to know the Truth of Scripture - it is only possible to come to know God - through one’s active participation in an intimate relationship with Him.

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⁸³ John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death*, p. 50.

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