

Theology of the Church Fathers

Interpretation of Scripture

Introduction:

In the previous session we explored the Church Fathers' basic understanding of Scripture as the way to know Christ. Scripture was not a proof text or a way to prove oneself right on matters of faith but the central means through which we came to know Jesus. It is the Word of God present among us which proclaims the mystery of Christ and enables us to know the will of God. This foundation is necessary for understanding their interpretations of Scripture. They didn't interpret Scripture for personal gain or to create their own theories on Jesus or God's plan for the world. Their interpretations explained God's plan and brought to light the mysteries presented to us by Jesus.

The Literal Interpretation of Scripture:

All of the Church Fathers have the same starting point for all of their understanding of Scripture and its meaning: the literal. What does the Bible mean? What did the author intend? How does Scripture inform us about God and his action in our world? These questions are central to the literal interpretation of Scripture. In this mode of interpretation, every passage was compared against another; each story was given weight in relation to the larger picture; each parable and source of wisdom illuminated the message. Scripture is one giant story of God's salvation which both interprets and explains itself.

The literal interpretation of Scripture stands as the bedrock for all other interpretative methods. If we cannot understand the basic themes and the message that the author wanted to portray, then everyone other interpretation will miss the mark and become our own personal interpretation. Each author had an intention for writing and each of their writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit. The author of a book spoke under the influence of the Holy Spirit so that we can come to know God and his ways. God speak to us through Scripture; he gives us a sense of his life; he guides us to know him. The literal interpretation is the opportunity to hear the voice of God and know him.

For the Church Fathers, personal interpretations were not allowed. A personal interpretation meant that I interpret Scripture in whichever way best suits me. For the Fathers, the literal interpretation was grounded in God speaking to us about himself. Anything that sounded like a personal interpretation didn't speak accurately about the nature of God. Therefore, they spent great amounts of time and effort combing through Scripture so that every passage they quotes, every story they paraphrased, and every message they received matched and conformed to the entire Bible and story about God. No passage is an outlier; no story outside the basic narrative; no interpretation contradicts the main message.

As you can imagine, this interpretive method took a great amount of time. An interpret couldn't sit down in one moment with one passage and assume that he understood the full meaning of that

text. Instead, it took hours of careful reading and rereading through the various books of the Bible. The earliest Christians were deeply devoted to careful reading of Scripture. The Church Fathers often spent hours reading or would memorize passages to recall which travelling or working on other projects. This focus on Scripture allowed them to see the relationship between all the passages and the interworking between the stories as God's salvation became more visible. Through it the Scriptures became this giant tapestry of the entirety of God's plan revealed in Jesus and made known through the Scriptures.

The Allegorical Method

The truths contained in Scripture cannot be exhausted. Underneath the literal meaning of each passage is a more nuanced current which expands the literal meaning and brings out greater truths. This method is the allegorical method. The allegorical method takes on many forms. The most common form is the Christological approach to Scripture. This approach interprets everything in light of Jesus. Therefore, the snake mounted on a pole in Numbers is a reference to the Crucifixion. The manna that rained down from Heaven is a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. Every passage is a prediction of the life and ministry of Jesus summarizing and further explaining his Paschal Mystery. Another common approach is the ecclesiological method. This method interprets everything in light of the Church or her Sacraments. For instance the arc of Noah's flood is a precursor for the Church. The parting of the Red Sea is a foreshadowing of baptism. Throughout the Scriptures these passages further explain their fulfillment in the Church and the Sacraments.

The allegorical method has one main point: to recognize the plan for salvation in Jesus evident in each passage of Scripture. Whereas the literal interpretation would focus on the author's intent and to use the words and language as clues, the allegorical method takes us a step away from the author's intent to see God's intent in making this passage the Word of God. The allegorical method assumes that the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture who used these passages to further proclaim the mystery of Jesus and to show the foreshadowing and preordained plan of God. These interpretations can be challenging since they assume a great grasp on the life of Jesus and the plan of God for recognizing these patterns and ideas elsewhere in Scripture.

The most popular of these allegorical interpretations is the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden is not just the place of the first humans but also the place of return. The angel who guarded the Garden used a flaming sword so that we could see the beacon summing us home. This beacon is the Holy Spirit, the flame of God's love which draws us back into right relationship; it is the blood of Christ as a red flame which purges of us sin and draws us into God. The tree which Adam and Eve ate from is Jesus who is the fruit of the Tree of the Cross. As we ate from the living tree and died, so did we take a living tree, cut it down, fashion it into an instrument of torture, killed the God of life on it, and then ate from the Tree. In the passage of Adam and Eve in the Garden is the foreshadowing of the great reversal where God takes our sins and failing and makes them the means to our salvation.

The Anagogical or Moral Method

Both the literal and the allegorical interpretative methods are rather external to the person. Scripture was more than a text to study or a means through which we come to know the truths about God. Scripture is also instruction for Christian living. The Church Fathers recognized the moralizing elements of the stories, teachings, and laws of the Bible. Hence, the moral method. This method takes from the literal and allegorical interpretative methods to create a pathway or code of conduct for Christian living. This method is different from the literal method. In the literal method, we could take passages like the legal code of Leviticus or the 10 Commandments and apply the laws directly to our lives. The moral method went beyond the laws into the core meaning behind the passage of Scripture as they relate to the following of the moral law.

Here is an example:

In the parable of the house built on rock or sand, the literal meaning of this passage is that our faith must be built solidly of the words of Jesus. The allegorical meaning is the rock of Christ. Jesus is the rock through which faith is solidly set and cannot be moved. The mortal interpretation is about sloth. A person who is lazy in listening to Jesus' words will not act upon them and therefore will have their faith ruined.

The anagogical interpretative method is slightly different from the moral method. Whereas the moral method focuses on moral law and the way a person ought to live, the anagogical method expands that view to anything necessary for Christian life. The Church Fathers understood the Scriptures as a method through which a person came to understand the Christian life and the way to follow Jesus most faithfully. St. Anthony of the Desert is a prime example. After hearing the Gospel that you should sell all you have and follow him, he sold everything that he had and went off into the desert to live a life close to Jesus. Jesus teaches us through the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the foundation through which we live Christian lives. This is the anagogical interpretation.

As you can imagine, this interpretive method has many pit falls. As is immensely common today, people jump to this method as a way to promote their form of Christianity or their ideas of how we live in imitation of Jesus. Some people develop completely alternative Gospel messages based on this interpretation including that the Kingdom of God is meant to be in this life, God wants us to be prosperous and happy, my church is the right way, and faith alone is sufficient. Without a proper grounding in both the literal meaning of Scripture and its understanding in light of tradition and faith, the moral interpretation becomes a personal interpretation. We understand Scripture in light of what we want it to say instead of listening attentively to it. These pit falls were also common in the early church leading to many heresies and challenges. Remember: the anagogical/moral method only works when it is grounded in the literal and allegorical methods.

Conclusion:

The interpretative methods used by the Church Fathers are prime examples of the depth and inexhaustibility of Scripture. Through their careful read and prayerful study of Scripture, they were able to bring out the truths and nuances of Scripture leading to a beautiful tapestry that shows God's plan for our salvation. Their careful read of Scripture is an excellent example to us of both methodically and spiritually how we ought to approach this most valuable book.

St. Pope Gregory the Great

Following the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 and the restructuring of Rome under the Church, the powerful families of Rome held together both the nation and the city. In the midst of one of these powerful families a man is born who rose to power far quicker than anyone would have expected. Gordianus was a prominent and powerful senator in the city of Rome. His family has ruled the city for centuries and were well-known for their care for the people including the poor. He and his wife Silvia would regularly invite to their home the poor and hungry of the city and feed them, usually on at least a weekly basis. Into this charitable, faithful, and powerful family Gregory was born around 540.

From a young age Gregory showed remarkable skills. He was intelligent, faithful, and virtuous. Yet, his early life was marked by many struggles. At around two years old, a plague struck Rome which will be the worst plague in human history until the 14th century. Over a third of the population of Rome died. In 546, the Ostrogoths invaded Rome, but didn't completely sack the city. He survived all these issues and was sent to study rhetoric and law so that he could follow in his father's footsteps.

Following his studies, he began a life in politics. By the age of 33, he was elected the Prefect of Rome. The order of power is as follows: emperor, governor, prefect. Therefore Gregory was the third highest official of Rome. During his reign as prefect, the city of Rome was hit by a devastating flood. Namely the sewers and waterways couldn't handle the amount of rainwater which caused immense flooding and rampant disease. The emperor and the governor both fled the city fearing for their lives leaving Gregory to resolve the issue. Like always, he got right to work. He organized the people of the city to repair the damaged waterways, reengineered them to prevent further floods, distributed food and medicine to the people, and basically rebuilt the city. Following this catastrophe, he resigned as prefect.

Years before this event, Gregory's father had died. Although his family had many lands and were quite wealthy, Gregory donated a chunk of their estate in Sicily to build a monastery. His mother, Silvia, lived near the monastery and maintained the family lands preferring to live a life of simplicity and prayer instead of public, political life. Upon his retirement, he moved to these monastery grounds and became a monk. Many of his friends came to plead with him to return to his political office, but he refused. They tried to convince his mom who also was unyielding to respond to their pleas. Defeated, they allowed Gregory and his five friends to begin their lives as monks.

Gregory's life as a monk were the happiest of his life. The simple life of pray, quiet, and study gave him a freedom and joy he felt nowhere else. During these 20 years in the monastery, he wrote many of his most famous works including the *Morlia* or the *Morals of the Book of Job*, his commentaries on Scripture, and many lectures to the monks. He was even asked to give some of these lectures to the pope and to leading church officials. Although many in Rome say the potential of Gregory, he refused any offer which would take him away from the monastery.

Rome was not in good condition. Having lost their emperor to Constantinople and now ragtag bunch of politicians controlled the city, many of its major issues went unresolved. With the

Vandals on the border of Rome and food running in short supply, Pope Pelagius II needed help. He appeal to Gregory for his assistance in convincing the emperor to aid Rome. Gregory was immensely reluctant to leave the monastery but with the needs being dire he agreed to become the papal emissary to Constantinople. Gregory left for Constantinople with the hopes that his political abilities would appeal to the emperor and aid Rome. He spent three years trying to convince the emperor with no avail. Finally, Pope Pelagius allowed him to return to his monastery.

Unfortunately, his stay was short lived. Upon the death of Pope Pelagius, the church realized she needed a pope who had the skills and abilities to both care for Rome and the church. By unanimous acclaim, they choose Gregory. Gregory heard about the election when a mob of people showed up at the monastery doors threatening to break down the doors if he didn't accept his appointment. He refused. His brother monks pleaded with him for their safety that he accept this appointment. Finally, he agreed to speak with the people. Gregory planned to refuse the appointment and force them to choose someone else. When he saw their hopeful faces, he couldn't refuse them and instead accepted the appointment as the Bishop of Rome.

Gregory was elected and appointed in 590 now about 50 years old. He was sickly and struggled with basic daily living. Have suffering with bowel issues, a weak constitution, and a frail body, he still agreed to take on the task of leading the Church. Like in every other situation of his life, he got to work. He organized the church and the city, began rebuilding to prevent greater disasters, created a peace agreement with the Vandals which saved the city of Rome, standardized the liturgy, and led the church to a golden age.

The 14 years as pope he recalls were some of his worst years. Whereas in the monastery he had time for quiet and prayer, as pope he had to listen to people and make small talk most of the day. Gregory is known for three major innovations during his reign as pope. First, Gregorian Chant. Although he didn't invent it, it got named after him. This form of chant takes a simple line of music and sets it to Scriptural or faith themes. It was easy to use and memorize, required no instrumentation, and was widely accepted as church music. Second, the reform of the liturgy. He standardized the structure of the liturgy across the western world moving the Our Father to after the Eucharistic Prayer and the Penitential Act to the beginning of the Mass. Now the Church had one form of the liturgy. Third, 3rd Class Relics. A nobleman approached him one day asking for a relic of a saint. Gregory took a knife, cut off a piece of cloth, touched it to the relic of a saint, and then handed it to the nobleman. The nobleman responded, "this isn't a relic of a saint." Gregory responded, "Yes, it is." Then he took a knife, stabbed the cloth, and blood poured out. The image of this event hangs over his tomb in St. Peter's Basilica.

Pope Gregory is one of two people to be given the title great. He was acclaimed a saint upon his death in 604.

The *Moralia* or Moral Reflections on the Book of Job

St. Gregory's greatest work is the *Moralia*. This 2000-page commentary on the book of Job stands as one of the most significant works of biblical scholarship of the early church. The book is very easy to read and approachable to almost anyone. Yet, the book has a few elements to note for anyone who wishes to venture into its depth. The commentary was originally part of a series given to the monks on the moral life, hence the name. It describes Job as the perfect and moral character through who we can understand the moral life and live good lives in the world. The book is divided into subchapters which do not follow the normal chapter heading we anticipate. Instead, Gregory takes a methodological and systematic approach through the Book of Job. For each verse or group of verses, Gregory writes three chapters. The first chapter is the literal meaning of the passage, the second is the allegorical meaning, and the third is the moral meaning. His systematic approach guides the reader both to understand the three approaches but also to understand the way they apply to biblical texts.