

# Reading Scripture with the Fathers

The great theologians of the early church are known to us precisely as that: theologians. We tend to picture them as ancient academics, poring over candle-lit dusty tomes in the library, debating the intricacies of arcane terminology, and so on. Apart from being a slightly unrealistic idea of what theologians do (!) the portrait is missing something important. The likes of Gregory Nazianzus, Athanasius, and Augustine were *pastors*.

Many of the fathers are rightly known for battling heresy or making definitive contributions to the development of Christian doctrine, but for most of them, the vast majority of their time was given to pastoring. Week by week, they cared for and shepherded their flocks in all the same complexity of life we experience today. Week by week, they opened the scriptures and preached. Delving into their sermons, evangelistic writings, or biblical commentaries shows us how creeds and councils weren't abstract matters for these men, but went hand-in-hand with their pastoral ministry of opening scripture. Alongside 'the unassumed is the unhealed' or *homoousios*, appreciating the way they read the Bible, saw its witness to Christ, and preached accordingly has much to offer us today.

## Christ the theme of scripture

In the second century, in the context of the increasingly hostile Roman empire, the church's best theology was done by its evangelists and apologists. Often thinking on their feet in response to challenges from Jewish or pagan critiques, these men were the first to begin piecing together the structure of Christian doctrine. Given that they lived so soon after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it's striking just how Christ-centred their reading of all scripture is.

Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* is an account of an evangelistic conversation he had with a Jewish man, Trypho. It came to be written down as a tract to persuade the Jewish people of the day that Jesus was their longed-for Messiah. In the conversation, Justin limits himself purely to the Hebrew scriptures, but sees in them a depth of revelation of Christ that might surprise us today. His argument is that God the Son is revealed in the Old Testament as the Lord of Israel and that his coming incarnation is constantly foreshadowed and promised there. The One who met with Abraham outside his tent in Genesis 18 was 'sent... by Another who remains ever in the supercelestial places, invisible to all men,'<sup>[1]</sup> and yet, because of Genesis 19:24, clearly 'is both God and Lord, and ministers to Him who is in the heavens.'<sup>[2]</sup> Here, as in many other Old Testament passages, he sees the Father and Son working in concert. The change of name given to Hoshea son of Nun, who became Joshua (or Jesus), reveals the name of God: the one who would lead his people into the promised land and rest.<sup>[3]</sup> Because Justin isn't leaning on the New Testament, he doesn't reference John 1:18 or Colossians 1:15 which speak of an invisible and unseen God revealed by his 'image' who is 'at the Father's side' – but the reader can see immediately that his key to understanding scripture rightly is the person of Jesus Christ.

Later, Irenaeus' account of the Bible's overarching narrative was something like an early 'Bible overview.' Like Justin, his purpose was evangelistic: he was seeking to draw those in the grip of the Gnostic heresy to the truth of the gospel. The Gnostics told a story of the fall from paradise of a semi-divine being that ended up producing the physical creation, which they thought to be pretty rotten. They held out hope that human spirits could rise up again, throwing off the prison of the body and the constraints of the material world through *gnosis*—inside knowledge possessed by a select few.

Irenaeus, on the other hand, turned to scripture to understand the story of salvation. In the Bible, he also saw a story of creation, fall, and salvation. Instead of *gnosis*, it was centred on the person of Jesus, who revealed God's purpose and destiny for humanity, and secured it for us by his work on earth. Humanity was created (and created good!) in Christ's image to know him eternally, but was plunged into death by Adam's sin. When Christ came, taking to himself that very humanity and answering Adam, the gate was opened to new life, salvation, and glory. As he saw it, Adam in the garden (Eden) had brought death to all by disobediendly eating from a tree. But in another garden—Gethsemane—Jesus had determined obediently to go to another tree on Calvary to undo all that Adam had done. The fall of creation in was thus 'recapitulated' or transformed in the uplift of redemption, and humanity finally entered into God's original plan for it: sharing his own glory in union with Christ. This is a history of salvation and a biblical theology that is to, from, and for Jesus.<sup>[4]</sup>

Patristics scholar John McGuckin summarises all this well, speaking of the wider tradition of interpretation among the fathers.

'The patristic writers... regard the text as a continuous narrative of the Logos himself. It was the Word who spoke through all the prophets, the Word who inspired the psalms, the Word who appeared to Abraham, Moses, and Jacob, and so on. In every instance the text (be it Old or New Testament) relates to the Logos' revelation of God, whether in the life of the Trinity or the earthly economy of salvation... This thoroughgoing christocentricity, and the different understanding of historical reality, marks off their exegesis from contemporary interpreters...'<sup>[5]</sup>

For the fathers, scripture was a single book, written by a single author, with a single theme.

## Who is Jesus?

The theological convictions behind the early church's reading of scripture were perhaps best shown when, later in church history, a group of theologians began to contradict the consensus reading of the Bible that Justin and Irenaeus represented.

Important among this group of challengers was Theodore of Mopsuestia (c.350–428), who is sometimes referred to as 'the Interpreter.' Going quite dramatically against the flow, Theodore argued that the Old and New Testaments were separate bodies of literature from different sources: one Jewish and one Christian. For example, Theodore said that the Psalms ought not to be understood in a Messianic way, but should generally be understood as relating to the various kings of Israel. He believed only a handful of the Psalms had any Christological interpretation.<sup>[6]</sup> Justin and Irenaeus would have looked at Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 and tried to follow his lead in reading the Psalms primarily in the light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Theodore would have encouraged you instead to leaf through the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles to place the Psalms somewhere in the history of Israel and her kings. Jesus, clearly, was not the central theme of the Bible in Theodore's mind.

Theodore and his friends are sometimes slightly misleadingly called the 'Antiochene School' of patristic theology, which suggests a rather grand sounding and esteemed scholarly institution (usually played off against the rival 'Alexandrian School'). In fact there were only really three men who could meaningfully be bundled together in this way with a consistent approach to biblical interpretation and theology: Theodore and his teacher, Diodore of Tarsus, along with Theodore's most famous student, Nestorius.<sup>[7]</sup>

What's vital for us to note is that their non-Messianic approach the Bible sprang from their theology of the person of Christ. It went like this: Jesus was just a man. He wasn't even born when the Psalmist was writing, so the Psalms can't be *about* him. Theodore believed the Lord was divine—Theodore wasn't an Arian—but he argued that we ought to distinguish carefully between Jesus the man and God the Son. The two were united in appearing as one person because God the Son had 'assumed' the man Jesus, forming a kind of partnership or co-operation.

In seeming to divide Christ into two persons, Theodore's theology also began to pull apart the biblical picture of salvation. Jesus of Nazareth, empowered by God the Son, became not the Saviour, but a uniquely grace-filled example of the true Christian life to be copied. A trailblazer we could follow.<sup>[8]</sup> This Christology, known as 'Nestorianism' (because Theodore's pupil popularised it) was roundly rejected by the church and condemned over successive councils. The orthodox bishops and pastors saw that Diodore, Theodore, and Nestorius had a picture of Jesus that had begun to poison both their understanding of salvation, and of scripture. If Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, was anything other than God himself come down to save us, he could never be the central theme of the whole Bible and its story of redemption. It was all intertwined.

## One Christ, one Bible

The razor sharp Cyril of Alexandria (376–444) led the charge in dealing with Nestorianism. Cyril wanted to be clear that unless Jesus was none other than God the Son himself, personally our flesh and blood, then there was no salvation for us. All Cyril's ammunition here came from his long years preaching, pastoring, and writing biblical commentaries as Alexandria's Archbishop. Leafing through his commentaries on Isaiah, John, or the Pentateuch, you quickly spot that the deep foundations of his arguments against Nestorianism. He read scripture as one book, all held together in Jesus the God-Man, and believed it must be read that way deliberately.

'Although the discourse of the holy prophets is always obscure, it is full of hidden thoughts ready to deliver to us the premonition of divine mysteries. Christ, in fact, himself is the fulfilment of the Law and the prophets, as the Scripture says. Those who want to clarify such traces and the obscure of thought need to apply themselves with the eye of the mind and keen understanding both the precision of the facts and a development of a spiritual interpretation.'<sup>[9]</sup>

If, as Theodore and Nestorius thought, Jesus the man only shows up part-way through history to announce something entirely new in the story of redemption, he's hardly relevant to the Old Testament and not truly the theme of all scripture. But if Jesus is the God of creation, Israel, and the prophets enfleshed, revealing himself and redeeming us, then the whole of scripture cannot but revolve around him.

## Christ in all the scriptures

Gnostics and Nestorians will fail to enjoy the true gospel because they scatter apart the man

Jesus, the story of the Bible, and the revelation of God. But if we go with Justin, Irenaeus, and Cyril we'll see the whole Bible sparkling with the grand sweep of God's gracious redemption in Jesus. Law, prophets, and writings won't be just historical curiosities, but bursting with the promise of the Messiah. Gospels, histories, and epistles won't be morality lessons or philosophical treatises, but a life-giving window on the life of God himself.

We began thinking about the church fathers as pastors and we'll finish on the same note.

How will we go about opening the Bible with a friend who doesn't yet believe? How will we give scriptural comfort to a church member who is terminally ill? How do we sustain ourselves daily with the word of God?

The answer is to look for Jesus in all the scriptures.

## Endnotes

[1] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 56.

[2] *Dial.*, 56.

[3] *Dial.*, 75.

[4] See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3.

[5] John McGuckin, *St Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy*, p. 190.

[6] Probably Psalms 2, 6, 16, 68, and (perhaps) 54. See, for example, J. Behr, *The Case Against Diodore and Theodore*, p. 35; Dudley Tyng 'Theodore of Mopsuestia as an Interpreter of the Old Testament', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 50 (1931): 298–303.

[7] Donald Fairbairn, 'Patristic Exegesis and Theology: The Cart and the Horse', *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 69 (2007): 1–19.

[8] Charles Gore famously remarked that the Nestorian Christ was a fitting Saviour for the Pelagian man.

[9] Cyril of Alexandria, Introduction to *Commentary on Isaiah*, translated by Robert Charles Hill.



## Daniel Hames

Daniel Hames is Associate Director at Union and lectures in systematic and historical theology.

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