

FROM ECONOMY TO HYPOTHESIS:

The Development of Christian Interpretation of Scripture in the Second Century A.D.

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Introduction

Jesus himself understood and taught that his life and work embodied the fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures. Though standing squarely in the tradition of Jewish interpretation,¹ Jesus added a new hermeneutical dimension to the *status quo* of his day: he read the Scriptures in light of himself. In his first recorded sermon at Nazareth, Jesus does not open with an extemporaneous monologue, but rather takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and "unrolled the scroll to the place where it was written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...'" (Luke 4:17b-18a), plainly and unequivocally identifying himself as the object of Scripture. In John 5:40, Jesus described the Scriptures as those "which testify about me," and in 5:46 he says that Moses "wrote about me." On the road to Emmaus, Jesus explained to his companions "what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." In other words, "Jesus understood the Old Testament christologically, and it is from him that the church derives its identification with Israel."²

Following this pattern, the New Testament authors likewise approached the interpretation of the OT as a witness to Christ, both in its entirety and in its parts. The hermeneutical practices of Jesus became the primary paradigm for a Christian understanding of the OT and at the same time the hermeneutical key to making Israel's Scriptures their own. C.D.F. Moule maintains that "[a]t the heart of their [the earliest Christians's] biblical interpretation is a christological and christocentric perspective."³ This pattern continues into the second century, but not without

1. See Karlfried Froehlich, ed. and trans., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 8; David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 23–44.

2. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 24.

3. C.F.D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 58, quoted in Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 44.

serious challenges. Nevertheless, in spite of—and to some degree, because of—these challenges, the church’s understanding of how to interpret Scripture *rightly*, including the emerging recognition of the New Testament Scriptures, matured. More specifically, during the second century A.D., the church’s interpretation of Scripture, while maintaining a commitment to christology and christocentricity, developed from an assumed *economy* of the sacred text to an explicit *hypothesis*.⁴ I will demonstrate this by first explaining the concepts of *economy* and *hypothesis* as Irenaeus of Lyons (b. ~140 A.D.) employs them. Then I will show how the Apostolic Fathers operated from the conviction of an *economy* of Scripture, albeit assumed, which eventually faced challenges brought on by hermeneutical confusion and the emergence of heresy. Finally, I will show that the response to these heresies necessitated a response from the church in the form of an authoritative and accredited exegesis⁵ defined according to the rubric of *hypothesis*.

Economy and Hypothesis

Irenaeus, in attempting to explain why certain readings of Scripture were fallacious (and by extension, heretical) and others correct, borrows three concepts from classical rhetorical theory—*hypothesis*, *economy*, and *recapitulation*—and employs them to provide an account of an orthodox reading of Scripture.⁶ Though all three are equally important for understanding Irenaeus’s project, we will focus our attention on the first two. For the ancient Greeks, *economy*

4. The terms “economy” and “hypothesis” are italicized throughout this paper to emphasize their stipulated denotations.

5. I use the terms “hermeneutics” and “exegesis” interchangeably in this paper, though I recognize that in some contexts a distinction should be made between them.

6. John J. O’Keefe and R.R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 34.

(gr. *oikonomia*) meant in its most basic sense the “good order and arrangement of affairs.”⁷ This order could be in reference to a diverse range of things, such as well-run household⁸ or a carefully structured narrative. As it applies to Scripture, it is the structural arrangement of all the various components that produce an image of the whole.⁹ *Economy* implies unity, and thus a failure to recognize the relationship between the various parts of Scripture will lead to a false understanding of its message. Yet, for Irenaeus, *economy* alone is not enough to sustain a proper hermeneutic; it is necessary, but not sufficient. There must also be a hermeneutical key—a *hypothesis*—by which the *economy* of Scripture is discovered and through which it is to be understood. “[T]he correct hypothesis of scripture must express its economy.”¹⁰ A proper hermeneutic sees Christ as the *hypothesis* of Scripture that clarifies its *economy*. This approach is rooted in the apostolic tradition, itself following the hermeneutical practices of Jesus himself, though in a functional, not theoretical, way.

The Apostolic Fathers Assumed an *Economy* of Scripture

Though they did not articulate a theory of *economy*, the Apostolic Fathers¹¹ operated on the assumption that the Scriptures are a unified whole. These Fathers were primarily concerned with the ethical dimensions of church order and Christian living rather than with the theoretical

7. O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 37.

8. A form of this word is employed, for instance, in 1 Timothy 5:14 in reference to Paul’s desire for young widows to marry and manage their households (gr. *oikodespotes*; lit. “house despot”).

9. Irenaeus uses the analogy of a mosaic, discussed below.

10. O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 37.

11. This term designates a group of church leaders and their writings between approximately A.D. 90 and 150.

discussions surrounding methods of interpretation. David S. Dockery designates this approach as “functional hermeneutics.” He asserts that, for these fathers, “meaning was bound up with Scripture’s functional application”; in other words, the Scriptures told the church what to *do*. Even though the Fathers did not exhibit a christological and christocentric hermeneutic as much as even the NT authors,¹² they did instinctively utilize such an approach in making applications from the Scriptures.

For instance, in *1 Clement*, “one of the earliest extant Christian documents outside the New Testament,”¹³ the author applies Scripture christologically. He makes copious references and allusions to the OT¹⁴ as a normative means of understanding the significance of the revelation of Christ. Along with the author of Hebrews, he is particularly fond of three Psalms: 2, 22, and 110, and uses them to explain the salvation wrought in Christ.¹⁵ A striking example of his christological reading appears in 16:1-16 where, in the context of exhorting his readers to pursue a life of humility modeled after Christ’s earthly ministry, he quotes directly Isaiah 53:1-12 and Psalm 22:6-8, remarking that this is what the “Holy Spirit spoke concerning him [Christ] (16:2).”¹⁶

12. See Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 48.

13. Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 36.

14. *1 Clement* uses 166 quotations or allusions from the OT. Cf. Donald A. Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome*, supplement to *Novum Testamentum*, no. 34 (Leiden: Brill, 1973), cited in Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 50.

15. See *1 Clement* 36.

16. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 49. Cf. Heb. 1:1.

In similar fashion, Ignatius, in his *Letter to the Magnesians*, described the OT prophets as “disciples of Christ, who waited for Christ as their teacher, and who Christ raised from the dead when he came”:¹⁷ “For the most godly prophets lived in accordance with Christ Jesus (8:2). [...] [H]ow can we possibly live without him, whom *even the prophets*, who were his *disciples in the Spirit*, were expecting as their teacher? This is why the one for whom they rightly waited *raised them from the dead* when he came (9:2) [emphasis mine].¹⁸ According to O’Keefe and Reno, “[h]owever opaquely, Ignatius expresses the single most defining feature of patristic exegesis: the presumption that knowing the identity of Jesus Christ is the basis for right reading of the sacred writings of the people of Israel.”¹⁹

While maintaining the functional hermeneutic of *I Clement*, Ignatius does take a step beyond it in anticipating the need for something like an authoritative approach to interpreting Scripture. He used Scripture to expose the false beliefs of heretics by establishing the correct meaning of Scripture under the guidance of the bishop. Interestingly, some in the Philadelphian church were not convinced that Ignatius’s view of the bishop was sustained by proper scriptural warrant, for they could not “find it in the archives.” Ignatius’s reply exposes his operating interpretive presupposition: “...for me the ‘archives’ are Jesus Christ, the unalterable archives are his cross and death and resurrection and the faith that comes through him” (8:2).²⁰ In this way,

17. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 49.

18. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 105.

19. O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 28.

20. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 119.

Ignatius is a transitional figure from whom a new paradigm emerges.²¹ We can see in Ignatius the germ of Irenaeus's *hypothesis*, though still inchoate and in need of explication. This will come, but it will take further hermeneutical confusion and controversy to catalyze the need for a fuller account of an accredited strategy, one that allows the reader to discern the true meaning of Scripture in the full light of Jesus Christ.

Hermeneutical Confusion and Heresy

The most basic hermeneutical burden that fell to the Christians of the second century was to demonstrate the unity of the OT and the emerging canon of the NT. In light of Christ and the apostolic witness, how can the OT remain the church's bible?²² This question was with the church from its inception. In fact, the first church council was called to address this issue (Acts 15). From the time of its infancy, the young church wrestled with its relationship to Judaism, a challenge manifested in the form of Jewish Christians known as "Judaizers," who maintained that all the laws and rituals of Judaism were still binding for the Christian. The NT letters *Galatians*, *Colossians*, *1 John*, and *1 Peter*, along with the gospel of *John*, exhibit this struggle. In the second century, the issue of how one should interpret the OT became very acute. By late second century, there were a number of Christian responses to this challenge, two of which became dominant: (1) a typological approach, represented by Tertullian in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, and (2) the allegorical approach of the Alexandrian school, whose figurehead and exemplar was Origen.

21. "As has generally been the case in theology, a paradigm shift brings something new while maintaining much of what has preceded it." Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 54.

22. Dockery, 55.

A further challenge came in the form of *gnosticism*, “one of the most serious spiritual threats the Christian Church has ever faced.”²³ Gnosticism is complex and esoteric, and we must not think of it as a monolithic or consistent approach to the question of religious truth, but rather a movement about “mood[s] and attitude[s] toward the world and its origin.”²⁴ There is a great variety under the umbrella term “gnosticism”; yet, the religious movement it designates can be “characterized by an intuitive knowledge of the origin, essence, and ultimate destiny of the spiritual nature of human beings.”²⁵ The root problem it created was confusion about identity in the church, since gnostics claimed that they, not the church, were true Christians and had the correct interpretation of Scripture, and thus a monopoly on “true knowledge.”

In relation to our immediate investigation, one dominant figure emerges from the gnostic landscape in the second century, posing new hermeneutical challenges to the church: Marcion (b. 85 A.D.). Marcion’s was an exegesis of reduction. Because of his presuppositions regarding the dualistic nature of the divine (an evil *creator* god vs. a benevolent *redeeming* god), he dispensed with the OT Scriptures, and looked only to ten Pauline epistles (what he called “the Apostle”) and portions of the gospel of Luke (“the Gospel”) as acceptable for Christian use. This was his attempt to purge what he understood to be “Jewish contamination”²⁶ in the Scriptures, a relic of the works of the evil creator god. Because of this, Tertullian described Marcion as “the Pontic

23. Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: The Age of the Early Church Fathers*, vol. 1 (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 101.

24. Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 88. Cf. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power*, 101.

25. Ferguson, *Church History*, 88.

26. Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 11.

mouse who has gnawed the Gospels to pieces.”²⁷ In addition to the problems already posed by Judaizers, Marcion’s view added a second front to the church’s battle for the correct interpretation of Scripture.²⁸ Not only did the church need to demonstrate the continuity between the OT and NT, it also needed to demonstrate a *right* reading of Paul and the gospels. As we have already shown, these conflicts were primarily exegetical in nature. How would the church respond?

Authoritative Exegesis: *Hypothesis* and the Rule of Faith

By the late second century, the church had to respond to the spectrum of challenges bookended by the Judiazers on one end and the Gnostics on the other. This theological situation became the crucible in which the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy in the early church was forged. Irenaeus, known by some as the “father of theology,” was the most important voice for the church in responding to these issues. His contribution consisted of a holistic reading of Scripture controlled by a *hypothesis* that explained how the “diverse layers of biblical material reflect a divine dispensation or *economy* that is summed up or recapitulated in Jesus Christ.”²⁹ His notion of *hypothesis* controls the reading of Scripture by providing the proper rubric through

27. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.1, quoted in Ferguson, *Church History*, 86.

28. “It has been suggested that Marcion was perhaps a greater danger to the church than any of the other early heretics. In many ways, answering Marcion’s challenge created for the church a different set of problems of similar magnitude.” Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 59. Dockery goes on to quote Froehlich: The Jewish Scriptures in their Christian understanding “had proved to be a most effective apologetic and missionary tool. At the end of the controversy stood a normative Christian canon in two parts. But the decision against Marcion also had a disturbing consequence. By making the Jewish Scriptures resolutely a Christian book the Old Testament, which had only one legitimate continuation: the New Testament, the emerging Christian movement defined itself once more in the sharpest antithesis to the Jewish community. In fact, the tighter the grip of Christians on the Jewish Scriptures, the deeper the estrangement from the community of the living Jews.” Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 10–11.

29. O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 119.

which to understand how the many individual pieces of the “mosaic”³⁰ fit together, allowing one to see the whole in light of its parts, and the parts in light of the whole.

For Irenaeus, one discovers the *hypothesis* by following the *regula fidei* (traditionally called the “rule of faith”). This rule is never categorically defined by Irenaeus, and so the specifics remain elusive. According to O’Keefe and Reno, “It is a fluid array of doctrines, some involving specific claims about the nature of God in relation to both creation and salvation, and some articulating a narrative scheme that outlines the divine economy.”³¹ Nevertheless, it is clear that the *hypothesis* that controls the church’s hermeneutic is derived from this rule.³² For Irenaeus, the rule is intrinsic to Scripture, for it “articulates the divine order” already present in the text itself; it “describes the actual architecture of the Bible.”³³ At the same time, there is an extrinsic quality to the rule that recognizes a dependence on the integrity and fidelity of the apostolic witness. This witness is “preserved in the canonical books and taught by the authority of those bishops who are successors to the apostles.”³⁴

This dual nature of the rule—being at the same time both intrinsic and extrinsic to Scripture—works itself out on both levels: discovering the rule intrinsically in Scripture requires accepting the extrinsic authority of the church. Effectively, this enacts a hermeneutical circle: “church tradition was created by the interpretation of Scripture and the interpretation of Scripture

30. Discussed below.

31. O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 120.

32. The rule is perhaps best expressed by the church’s belief “in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit...” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.10.

33. O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 120.

34. O’Keefe and Reno, 23.

was then governed by the church's tradition in the rule of faith."³⁵ In so doing, the rule "maximizes the ability of the interpreter to offer a cogent reading of Scripture taken as a whole"³⁶ that is consistent with the apostolic faith, and is therefore authentic and accurate. Christians alone posses in Christ the hermeneutical key that unlocks the divine *economy* of Scripture, "but this key must be handled by reliable interpreters,"³⁷ that is, by those standing under the apostolic tradition. Such is Irenaeus's contribution to the expanding notion of orthodoxy in the late second century. Froehlich sums it up well: "Sound scriptural interpretation is the function of a church which must have not only tradition but the right tradition. Only such interpretation can be called true gnosis."³⁸

By implication, those who do not follow the rule, and thus do not identify the correct *hypothesis* through which to interpret Scripture, are misguided (heretical). This is why Irenaeus could say that the law "resembles a fable when read by the Jews at the present time; for they do not have the explanation of it all, namely the coming of the Son of God as man. But when read by Christians, it is indeed a treasure hidden in the field, but revealed and explained by the cross of Christ."³⁹ Similarly, Irenaeus charges the Valentinians⁴⁰ with failing to follow the rule and ascertain the correct *hypothesis*. Using the analogy of a mosaic, he says that their interpretations read "as if someone destroyed the figure of a man in the authentic portrait of a king, carefully

35. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 69.

36. O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 121.

37. Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, 14.

38. Froehlich, 69.

39. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.26.1, in Froehlich, 44.

40. Another brand of Gnosticism.

created by a skillful artist out of precious stones, and rearranged the stones to make the image of a dog or fox, declaring that his badly composed image is that good image of the king made by the skillful artist.”⁴¹ The distortion of the image allows the church to recognize heresy for what it is. We see in Irenaeus’s rule the outer boundaries of orthodoxy becoming less opaque and more clearly delineated.

Conclusion

In his book *How to Read a Book*, Mortimer J. Adler says, “The problem of reading the Holy Book—if you have faith that it is the Word of God—is the most difficult problem in the whole world of reading.”⁴² The truth of this assertion seems to bear out as we consider the hermeneutical developments in the second century. The church has always understood that the difference between an accurate understanding of Scripture and an erroneous one can be the difference between life and death. So what is the right way to interpret Scripture? This has been a perennial issue in the history of the church. The recognition by the Apostolic Fathers of the unity and *economy* of Scripture was a solid starting point, but it led to the possibility of hermeneutical confusion, evidenced most clearly by the Judaizing and Gnostic heresies of the second century. This generated the need for an authoritative and accredited approach to Scripture, which came in part from Irenaeus’s notion of *hypothesis* and the rule of faith. This addition “expanded the hermeneutical paradigm by providing the presuppositions through which scripture should be

41. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.8.1, quoted in O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 35.

42. Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940), 288, cited in Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 17.

read.”⁴³ Yet, as helpful and important as this study of the development from *economy* to *hypothesis* is for our understanding of the church’s approach to Scripture, it falls short of addressing the moral predisposition of the interpreter, a dimension of hermeneutics that was so important to the church fathers. They believed that “good interpretation is most likely to flow from a good person.”⁴⁴ This should give pause to the modern reader of Scripture working from a more “scientific” approach to meaning, and cause him to reckon with its hermeneutical implications. Right spiritual posture precedes right scriptural understanding. “Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build up the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all.”⁴⁵

43. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 72.

44. O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 23.

45. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.40.

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