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HOLY SCRIPTURE THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CHURCH FATHERS¹

Abstract

Patristic exegesis followed certain hermeneutical rules different from the modern principles of scientific interpretation of the Scripture. The main feature was christocentrism: Jesus Christ was the first hermeneutical key to understand the Bible. The second principle is the unity of the Scripture: the Old Testament is read and interpreted in the light of the New Testament. The third characteristic is the twofold way of reading the Word of God: literal and spiritual; both are complementary and need each other to achieve the full comprehension of the biblical message. The fourth is typology and symbolism: each literary motif of the Scripture (person, thing, event, etc.) can be a carrier of many meanings useful for spiritual purposes, exceeding the historical context. A special attention is attributed also to the tradition of the Church, the Eucharistic perspective and the fact that Church Fathers and ancient Rabbis interpreted and explained the Old Testament in the contexts of their communities of faith, independently but sometimes following similar intuitions.

Keywords

Bible, Scripture, exegesis, interpretation, Church Fathers, tradition, christocentrism, hermeneutics, spirituality.

The main feature of the Patristic exegesis is its **christocentrism**. It means that Christ is the center, and the key to understanding the Bible. Every verse of the Holy Scriptures speaks of Him or leads to Him – sometimes in a very veiled

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and indirect way, but it is He who gives to the Word of God its deepest sense. Let us take an example: the first verse of the book of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). At the first glance this verse speaks of the creation and reveals the truth that everything comes from God. But the Fathers read this verse in connection with Rev 22:13, where Jesus says: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” and in connection with the words of the hymn in Col 1:15ff: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in Him all things were created”. In the light of these two references, we see the deepest meaning of Gen 1:1: God has created heaven and earth in Jesus Christ, in Him all creation gets its meaning and importance.

In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us: “Through all the words of the sacred Scripture, God speaks only one single Word” (CCC 102), that is the Word of whom St. John says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn. 1,1).

The second characteristic that emerges from the christocentric approach to the Scripture, is its **unity**. The Fathers of the Church stressed the fact that in spite of the many authors and different epochs that the Bible was written, it constitutes one book because it was inspired by the same Holy Spirit and witnesses one story of salvation, one plan of God for His people. In a special way it is important to underline the unity between the Old and New Testaments, according to the words of St. Augustine: “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New”.

Some Fathers of the Church use the following image, taken from the account of the conquest of the Promised Land. The Israelite explorers “came to the valley of Eshcol, and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them” (Num 13,23). The two scouts represent the authors of the Old and New Testament. They both go in the same direction and they bring a single cluster of grapes to the people of God. This cluster of grapes represents Jesus Christ, who was cut down for our sins and gave his life on the cross – this is the meaning of the branch and the pole in the verse quoted above. The first of the two men, namely the one representing the Old Testament, does not see the cluster of grapes, it is hidden behind his back, because Jesus was not yet born, yet he is carrying Him too. The second one, representing the New Testament, has Jesus in front of his eyes, since he gives open witness of Him.

The example we just presented, introduces us to the third characteristic of the Fathers’ understanding of the Sacred Scripture: the presence of the two main

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senses in the biblical text – **the literal and the spiritual sense**. The literal sense of the episode mentioned above is that Moses sent two spies to get information on the condition of the land that was about to be attacked. The spiritual sense focuses our mind on the History of Salvation, the mystery of Christ, the Holy Scripture and its unity. Though they are diverse, these two senses do not exclude one another. On the contrary, they necessitate each other and they are complementary. St. Thomas Aquinas said: “All senses of Sacred Scripture” – especially the spiritual one – “are based on the literal”.

Taking the cue from an illustration of Jesus, St. Jerome explained the relationship between the literal and spiritual sense of the Bible, “Every one who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock” (Mt 7, 24). The rock is of course Jesus Christ himself, but for St. Jerome it is also the historical, literal sense of the Word of God. Any valid spiritual interpretation of the Sacred Scripture must be built on that rock that is unchangeable as the biblical text remains unaltered. But from time to time that historical sense brings scarce spiritual profit for the soul. What does it mean for me, in my life, in the life of the Church, that Moses sent spies to Eshcol three thousand years ago? In this case it is the figurative interpretation that gives spiritual nourishment. Therefore, as we read the Bible in a spiritual way – says St. Jerome – we build a house on the rock. Each one of us will build a different house, because the histories of our lives are different and yet it will be that house of the actualized interpretation of the Word of God that will allow us to dwell on the rock and will give us the shelter to resist the storms, rains and floods. Using the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church we can say that the rock is “what the human authors truly wanted to affirm” and the house is “what God wanted to reveal to us by their words” (CCC 109)

And how are we to build a house of spiritual interpretation of the Bible on the rock of Christ? The main methods that the Fathers used were **typology and symbolism**. This is the fourth aspect that we would like to speak about. Typology means that certain persons or events of the Old Testament foreshadowed persons or events of the New Testament. For example, Jonah is a type of Christ, because as Jonah was three days in the womb of a fish, Jesus was three days in the tomb before His resurrection. Symbolism on the other hand, allows us to connect things, persons or situations described in Bible with our life. As Christmas is already near, let us take as the example of the three gifts the wise men offered to the child Jesus. According to Mt 2, 11 they were gold, frankincense and myrrh. In the literal meaning they are precious gifts that certainly would come useful to the Holy Family; but as we come to adore the Child Jesus, let us see them as symbols of what we should offer to him. The Fathers give us countless suggestions of what these gifts could mean for us and for the Church. According

to St. Augustine, we offer gold to Jesus as we welcome Him as King, we offer frankincense to acknowledge His Divinity, and myrrh, his death on the cross for us. St. Bede instead says the Church offers gold to mean the discernment of the will of God in the present moment, frankincense meaning good deeds, and myrrh martyrdom. According to Rabanus Maurus, gold symbolizes the wisdom of the Church, frankincense our prayer, and myrrh our mortification. In this way we can affirm, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church that “not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs” (117).

But how can we recognize whether we read these signs in a correct way or not? Here comes the fifth characteristic of the Patristic approach to Scripture – the attention the Fathers paid to **the living Tradition of the Church**. They interpreted the Bible not in a private way but – using the words of St. Thomas Aquinas – “according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church”. And how are we to discover that spiritual meaning? In the Song of Songs, the Bridegroom that represents Christ, says to the Bride, that is the Church, “If You do not know, O fairest among women, follow the tracks of the flock and pasture your kids beside the shepherd’s tents” (Ct 1,8). This verse gives us two indications to find the right way to discover the suitable spiritual meaning of Scripture: the tracks of the flock and the shepherds’ tents. The tracks of the flock symbolize the interpretative tradition of the Church, the hundreds of commentaries, sermons and other writings that former popes, bishops, saints and spiritual authors transmitted to us as a spiritual heritage of the biblical interpretation. The shepherds’ tents symbolize the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church at the present moment. These two indications were and are essential as we seek the spiritual meaning of the Bible.

There is a special place where the Word of God becomes our spiritual food and drink. The Fathers stressed an intimate relation between the reading of the Bible and the **Eucharist**. It is in the context of the Eucharistic Celebration that the Lord acts through the Scripture with a special power. St. Jerome makes this comparison – as we receive in our hands the Body of Christ in the Eucharist with care and pay attention not to let any particle fall on the ground, in the same way let us receive the Word of God. Similarly, the feeding of the crowds with five loaves of bread and two fishes or the miracle of the manna on the desert were interpreted in the Fathers’ tradition either in connection with the Eucharist or in connection with the proclamation of the Word of God. This is why the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “The Church never ceases to present to the faithful the bread of life, taken from the one table of God’s Word and Christ’s Body” (103).

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And the final characteristic, especially present in the writings of Origen and St. Jerome, is the sensitivity they have to a tradition of Biblical interpretation parallel to the Christian one, namely the **Rabbinical interpretation** of Scripture. Though the spiritual leaders of the post-biblical Israel did not accept Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, nevertheless they consider the Hebrew books of the Old Testament as Word of God and have formed a rich interpretative tradition contained in the Targumim, Midrashim and Talmudim. Many recent documents of the Magisterium underline the importance of the Jewish and Rabbinical interpretation. For example the last document suggests that we should follow the Jewish tradition – present also in the early church – not to pronounce the Holy Name of God.

This relationship between the Fathers of the Church and the ancient Rabbis can be shown in the interpretation given to Psalm one: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on His law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:1-2). The Fathers of the Church and the ancient Rabbis both meditated on the Torah – the law of the Lord – both avoided the counsel of the wicked, the way of sinners, and the seat of scoffers. The difference is that the Fathers interpreted the Word of God in the light of Jesus Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, during the day. The ancient Rabbis, still waiting for the coming of the Messiah, were reading the same Scripture by night, illuminated by the Star of David.

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