

On the Interpretation of the Holy Bible, Part Three

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The Christian Church has historically known two major schools of interpretation: the Antiochian School, which focused on the historical dimension and its implications, and the Alexandrian School, which followed allegory and symbolism.

The Antiochian reading is concerned with the text in its historical context—when and where it was written—and its place among other texts through comparative study. The Antiochian School was influenced by Aristotelian and Semitic thought, so its interpretation of Scripture was based on the historicity of the texts and their literal meaning. This school was represented by figures such as Diodore of Tarsus (+394), Theodore of Mopsuestia (+428), Theodoret of Cyrrhus (+c.460), and St. John Chrysostom (+407). All of them emphasized the necessity of respecting the historical framework in which the texts arose—without denying that the Old Testament includes many types and foreshadowings of Christ and the events of salvation. They adopted the literal approach to interpretation to understand what the text is actually saying.

Semitic thought contributed to the formation of this Antiochian approach. Semitic thought is known for its avoidance of excessive theorizing and for approaching the human person as a single entity. Therefore, Antiochian theology took on an incarnational character, emphasizing the human being whom Christ came to save. St. John Chrysostom stressed the moral aspect of Scripture in his exegetical sermons.

As for the Alexandrian School, represented by great Church teachers such as Clement of Alexandria (+216) and Origen (+254), it gave the text an allegorical and symbolic dimension. Its teachers were influenced by Platonic philosophy and Egyptian inclination toward contemplation and transcendence from matter, which led them to seek meanings beyond the literal and to search for deeper symbolic interpretations.

For example, if we consider the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Antiochian School focuses on understanding the relationship between Samaritans and Jews so

that the reader may grasp the significance of the Samaritan's act. In contrast, the Alexandrian School interprets the parable in a purely spiritual manner—seeing, for instance, the Good Samaritan as an image of the compassionate Christ, and the two coins he gave to the innkeeper as symbols of the Old and New Testaments.

The two schools complement each other. The Alexandrian symbology and allegory may lean toward excessive contemplation and impose meanings on the text that do not exist. The Antiochian School balances this by focusing on the text and its reality, thereby protecting interpretation from symbolic extremes. Similarly, the Alexandrian meditative and allegorical reading enriches the Antiochian approach, protecting it from becoming overly intellectual and detached from spiritual reading.

There is also linguistic interpretation. This type of exegesis begins with reading texts in their original language and understanding the meanings of words in their historical context. This allows the interpretation to remain faithful to the intention of the original author. For example, when St. John the Baptist calls the crowd around him “brood of vipers,” we understand from the religious background he is invoking that he means “children of sin,” since the serpent is a figure of the tempter in Old Testament tradition. And when we read “he knew her not until she had given birth to her firstborn son” (Matthew 1:25) in the Greek, we understand automatically that Joseph did not know her even until the time the Gospel of Matthew was written—both Mary and Joseph had already reposed in the Lord by then. This is because the verb “knew her” appears in the Greek in the perfect past continuous tense, a form that does not exist in Arabic.

How does the Church determine the validity of an interpretation? By its acceptance in the mind of the Church and its consistency with the doctrine. If any interpretation contradicts the faith, the Church rejects it as a personal interpretation. It is worth noting that the Orthodox Church strongly emphasizes that what was written in the Holy Spirit can only be understood through the Holy Spirit. Thus, it turns to the interpretations of the Holy Fathers. Here, it is important to distinguish between a saint and a saint who is a teacher (Father). The Church Fathers are her scholars who attained holiness, and thus their knowledge was made obedient to the Holy Spirit. In this way, they preserved sound interpretation for us.

Of course, the matter is not that simple, but this is the fine thread that governs correct interpretation and allows for a diversity of interpretations that align with right-minded faith.

There is an ongoing debate that will endure as long as the Church, as the people of God, strives to be filled with the Holy Spirit. In addition to that, there are exegetical questions and challenges regarding certain biblical passages which the Fathers faced in their time and offered their insights; for example, the two genealogies of Jesus found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and other comparative texts. But after the discovery of ancient Eastern texts starting in the late 18th century, the Church began to face new questions it had never faced before, such as similarities between Babylonian and Assyrian mythologies and the Genesis creation narrative, or questions posed by modern science regarding the origin and timeline of life, ever-changing scientific theories, and so on.

While the faithful are spiritually nourished by the Word of God, the Church was compelled to respond to these challenges and to provide a contemporary approach that considers the current questions and engages them. This has led to new scientific and critical approaches that continue to provoke debate, controversy, and sometimes even spiritual violence.

Believers remain inspired by traditional interpretations in their personal spiritual lives. They read Scripture as the Word of God directed to them personally, drawing from it “newness and eternity” to build their spiritual lives and strengthen their relationship with God. At the same time, the more educated among them must be open to dialogue with the world in which they live, so they may use its language and style in continuing the mission of the Gospel for the salvation of the world in which we live; and to understand Scripture more deeply in light of the available sciences.

Olivier Clément says, "To wish to talk about Christ today without knowing what these others [the Church Fathers and the great theologians] knew seems to me futile. But to know what the others knew without having met Christ is not to progress very far either" (The Other Sun, page 161).