

## ON THE VALUE OF PRE-MODERN INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE FOR CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL STUDIES

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### **Abstract:**

This article first briefly raises the question to what extent the Church Fathers remained in continuity with the NT interpretation of the OT. The second and main part of the article highlights some of the main differences between the “modern” approach to sacred texts and the “pre-modern” approach, which the Church Fathers shared with the NT writers. A greater awareness of the differences between the “modern” and the “pre-modern” approach to knowledge and to the interpretation of texts, facilitated by a post-modern perspective, will enable contemporary scholars to understand and appreciate better the early church’s use of the Scriptures. Furthermore, not only study of patristic interpretation of Scripture, but also study of the whole history of biblical interpretation is needed in order to help us become more critically self-aware of the ideological roots of contemporary approaches to Scripture. This may open up new insights into the way forward. True objectivity and universality can only come about through ongoing dialogue with different traditions, different perspectives, and different knowledge systems.

### **1. Introduction**

Since modernity objective, universal, scientific knowledge was seen as the privileged system of knowledge. However, a variety of other systems of knowledge have been called for more recently: religious experience (Otto 1959), existential knowledge (Bultmann), engaged, committed, ethically responsible interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988), *da’at* as opposed to *episteme* (Wittenberg 1996). We recognize that all knowledge is

unavoidably local and dated and must constantly strive towards universality through ongoing dialogue with understanding generated in other places, at other times, in other cultures. All the human and social sciences are rooted, guided, and inspired by ideologies in the sense of “a totality of images, representations and symbols which a particular society creates in order to justify its identity” (Schillebeeckx 1989, 314). Critical reflection is not really meant to remove these sciences from their ideological roots but to reflect critically on these roots in order to make them healthier. This needs to be achieved in the context of community, in dialogue with a great variety of “others”. For biblical studies these “others” include the history of biblical interpretation, including the interpretation of the OT in the NT and patristic exegesis. Furthermore, critical reflection on our ideological roots requires self-examination and conversion.<sup>1</sup>

A study of patristic exegesis may help scholars of the 21st century to understand and appreciate more clearly the aims and ways of reading sacred texts, which guided the NT communities. What pre-modern exegesis aimed at doing principally would, according to modernity, not be considered as exegesis but as theology and preaching. In fact, in modernity interpretation of Scripture became a predominantly ‘historical science’ and its aim has been described as establishing ‘objectively’ what the text originally *meant*, while the task of establishing what the text *means now* was removed from the concerns of exegesis and entrusted to a completely different discipline, *viz* systematic theology (Stendahl 1962). However, the idea of a purely objective historical reconstruction free from interpretative tradition is now, in a post-modern perspective, seen more clearly as an illusion. As Thiselton puts it:

First, interpreting and understanding is related to the principle in Husserl and Heidegger that to interpret is to see it *as* something. But what we see it *as* often depends on a component which is not “given” in the perception of that object, but rooted in what Searle calls “Background” experience and Husserl and Heidegger call “horizon” of interpretation. ... Against Descartes, Gadamer believes that all understanding involves projections which arise out of one’s situation within ongoing patterns of belief and practice (1992, 147).

In the light of this the possibility of an airtight separation of historical reconstruction of the meaning from the search for meaning for us now is

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1 Lonergan (1973, 237-29), for instance, calls for a threefold conversion: intellectual, moral, religious.

radically undermined.<sup>2</sup> Instead, what is needed is an approach to reading which will enable us to let the descriptive task and the hermeneutical task proceed together (Pellegrini 2000, 44-45). These and other insights from hermeneutics have led to a renewed interest in and appreciation of patristic exegesis (Trigg 1988, 51-55). In fact, in a number of respects, post-modernity sides with pre-modernity against modernity. As Thiselton puts it:

Surprisingly the major contrast does not simply lie between pre-modern or “pre-critical” interpretation on the one hand, and modern and post-modern interpretation on the other. In certain respects pre-modern perspectives represent a reversed mirror-image of some post-modernist concerns, where there are both parallels and radical inversions (1992, 143).<sup>3</sup>

The relativizing of the modern paradigm enables us now to come to a more sympathetic understanding of the patristic ways of dealing with Scripture. However, this sympathy should not be seen as the condescending politeness of a superior culture showing an ‘interest’ in strange and irrational, indigenous practices, neither should it be a kind of romantic return to the good old days. However, if we recognize the mode of rationality in patristic interpretation this may be a challenge to expand the rationality of our contemporary approaches to Scripture.

## **2. Is there a Radical Difference between Patristic Exegesis and the Interpretation of the OT in the NT?**

The approach of the Greek Fathers has often been seen as completely alien to that of Judaism. What could the approach of a Platonist like Origen have in common with the interpretation found in the NT? What about the chasm between the Jewish cultural world and the Hellenistic one? This led some scholars to construct a view of allegory and typology which made the one the product of the Greek mindset and the other a product of Hebrew thought.

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2 See the criticism of Stendahl’s position in Gilbertson (2003, 20-43); it should be remembered, however, that Stendahl intended to free contemporary Christian life from the “imperialism” of biblical studies. Punt (2001, 135-138) points out how Räsänen’s latest work, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (2000), while trying to defend a clear distinction between the two, nevertheless remains caught up in the problematic.

3 “Both a hermeneutic of trust [pre-modern] and a hermeneutic of suspicion [post-modern] equally recognize, as modernist individualism does not, the importance of the trans-individual frame within which understanding and interpretation operate” (Thiselton 1992, 146).

However, it has been the merit of scholars like Hengel to point out how much and for how long Judaism, even in Jerusalem, had been interacting with Hellenism by the time Jesus came onto the scene. The question about the relationship between Greek and Hebrew approaches to Scripture is also very much discussed in the case of the great interpreter, Philo. In his writings both Jewish and Greek methods of interpretation merge and it is not even easy to sort out neatly what should be attributed to Greek and what to Jewish methods. In any case, Philo was not the first among the Jews to adopt Greek methods of interpretation; we can think here of Aristobulus and the Therapeutae. A similar merging of the two cultures can be found already in the NT. A number of recent studies have pointed out similarities between Philo and certain passages in the NT, particularly 1 and 2 Corinthians,<sup>4</sup> Galatians (Wan 1995), Colossians (Goulder 1995; Sterling 1998), the Gospel of John (Carmichael 1996), and even the Apocalypse (Borgen 1996). There can be no doubt that Clement of Alexandria and Origen were also very deeply indebted to Philo and, through him and others, to Hellenistic Judaism. Together with Hellenistic Judaism, the Fathers found in the Platonic philosophical tradition a very useful ally in order to articulate and communicate their faith in the context of Hellenistic culture. On the other hand, a Church Father steeped as deeply in the Greek tradition as Origen appreciated the richness of the Jewish interpretative traditions and found it necessary to maintain close contact with these traditions.<sup>5</sup>

In matters of substance, the Church Fathers continued the interpretative direction indicated by the NT. Jesus is seen as the key to the interpretation of the Scriptures. With regard to the Law, the commandment of love is seen as the summary of the Law while many other, particularly ritual, commandments are given a spiritual interpretation (e.g. circumcision). These two principles can still be seen very clearly in Augustine. In *De doctrina christiana* he sees the ultimate meaning of Scripture as *caritas*,<sup>6</sup> while in *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, for instance, he focuses on Christ and the Church as that ultimate meaning. Or as he puts it in *De*

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4 Murphy-O'Connor 1988; Sandelin 1995; Sterling 1995; Tronier 1996.

5 As De Lange (1976, 134) concludes: "Origen's reliance on the living Jewish tradition is one of the most distinctive features of his exegesis, and serves to mark him out from all earlier and contemporary Greek Fathers. It is no exaggeration to say that there is not a single aspect of his biblical writings that is not touched by it to a greater or lesser degree".

6 See *Doctr. chr.* 1.36.40; 1.40.44.

*cathechetizandis rudibus*: all Scripture “proclaims Christ and enjoins love” (4.8). These two distinguish Christian exegesis from its Jewish counterpart and constitute the core characteristics of both NT and Patristic exegesis.

### **3. The Pre-modern Christian Approach to the Scriptures Compared with the Approach of Modernity**

The approach of the Fathers and that of the NT share a common pre-modern outlook. On the other hand, as scholars we have been shaped by modernity even though we have also come to see its limitations. A greater familiarity with the approach of the Church Fathers may enable us to understand and appreciate better what the NT writers were doing when they were having recourse to the Scriptures. We may also discover how some aspects of the pre-modern approach correspond to some currents in more recent approaches. One such aspect is the emphasis on the present readers in the construction of the meaning of a text instead of an exclusive focus on the original writer.

Furthermore, in the pre-modern Christian approach, the meaning of the Scriptures was seen primarily in the context of God’s living relationship to the readers, an approach which is close to that of most ordinary readers in Africa. As this starting point was decisive for the patristic approach to Scripture we will also begin with it.

#### *3.1 Scripture as God’s life giving Word for the reader*

Looking at the interpretation of the Church Fathers, it is clear that they looked at the text of Scripture as a text in which the divine Word was powerfully present, but in a hidden way. The words of Scripture could be looked at as human words, but this human aspect of the Scripture was not the ultimate concern of the Fathers because their aim was theological and spiritual: to hear God’s Word.<sup>7</sup> A crucial issue for us is to understand how they imagined the relationship between this human text and God’s Word. Origen liked to see Scripture as the incarnation of the Word, parallel to the incarnation of the Word in Jesus of Nazareth. The human words of Scripture are pointers to the Word just as symbols point to meanings beyond the literal and just as the humanity of Jesus reveals his divinity. The divine Word to

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7 This is of course also due to the fact that their position in the Church dictated their approach to Scripture, but ultimately the way they understood their task was inspired by the general pre-modern outlook on religious texts.

which the human words point can never be fully grasped by humans and the search is therefore infinite. Furthermore, the move from the human words to the Word involves the whole existence of the reader as a journey of faith and not as a process of merely conceptual articulation.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the Word in Scripture is a power, moving the reader towards a purified service of God and not merely to an accumulation of correct or clear ideas about the service of God.<sup>9</sup>

The sense of such a mysterious depth in Scripture is missing in the modern approach, mainly because its methods are not designed to consider God as the living speaker and the contemporary readers as those who hear this Word in the context of their journey towards God. Modernity reshaped the study of the Scriptures into a historical study, describing in an objective way human texts documenting human insights about God from particular periods in the past. Many contemporary literary approaches continue this move away from the life of the reader by focusing exclusively on the world of the text. Derrida's approach seems only more radical in his assertion that texts simply lead to other texts and not to a "signifié transcendental".

### 3.2 *The mysterious depth of Scripture*

While modernity held the view that a text can have only one meaning, the historical meaning, the Fathers presupposed basically two levels of meaning, the literal and the spiritual meaning.<sup>10</sup> The transition from a literal meaning

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8 As Daly (1984, xiii) puts it: "But just as many who encountered the man Jesus in the flesh did not, because of their lack of faith, encounter the eternal WORD, so too is it with the biblical WORD: many do not see beyond the flesh of the letter or historical meaning; they do not see beyond these externals to the internal reality of the eternal WORD already present and active within themselves, calling and leading their souls to make progress toward perfect unity with the Father who is all in all".

9 "Notice now the difference between the beautiful words of Plato about the highest good and what was said in the prophets about the light of the blessed. And notice that the truth contained in Plato on this subject was of no help towards a purified worship of God, ... but the simple language of the sacred scriptures has produced enthusiasm in those who read it sincerely". (Origen, *Cels.* 6,5).

10 The Fathers generally understood the literal sense in a very limiting way. For instance, in dealing with statements like that of Jesus, "I am the light of the world," they would say that only the metaphorical meaning makes sense; this statement therefore has no literal meaning (Daly 1984, 104, note 1). Thomas Aquinas clarified the issue by including the metaphorical sense in the literal sense if that was the meaning directly intended by the author (Brown & Schneiders 1990, 71-79)

to another meaning in metaphorical speech and in the understanding of symbols was used to understand how human words about human realities could be understood as expressions of divine realities. Origen, for instance, speaks about the difference between seeing and understanding in considering the washing of the feet by Jesus in John 13:5:

Those who were present indeed ‘saw,’ but only what was done, not why it was done. For it was an image of that other washing of the feet in which the WORD of God washed the feet of the disciples (*Hom. Isa.* 6.3; = von Balthasar 1984, nr 214).

The literal story becomes an image of the story of God with the reader. Similarly, the literal laws become instructions for the life of the reader. Moving from the literal to the spiritual, true meaning of the text makes special demands on the reader and requires divine gifts, of which the Spirit was the origin and giver. Already in later OT texts we can see how texts were believed to have a mysterious depth. For instance, there was a tendency to see these texts as divine oracles (very popular in the Greco-Roman world) which had to be interpreted in ways similar to divination. The phenomenon of charismatic exegesis points in the same direction (Decock 1993, 276-280).

### *3.3 The importance of the historical meaning is relativized in various degrees*

While modernity was decisively focused on the historical sense of the text and valued this sense exclusively, the Fathers saw the exclusive focus on the literal meaning as a gross misunderstanding. This becomes more intelligible if we bear in mind that the focus of the Fathers is on the meaning of the text in the present as God’s Word for the readers. Therefore, the obligation of circumcision, for instance, has to be interpreted in a new way because the literal meaning did not make sense for a community which had come to the decision that circumcision was not demanded of Gentile converts (Acts 15).<sup>11</sup> This issue was not resolved by exploring the original meaning of the

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11 The clear distinction made by some authors like S. Pellegrini (2000) between interpretation of texts and use of texts is helpful. We can limit the interpretation of texts to the articulation of the world of the text, while the re-construction of the world behind the text and the construction of the world in front of the text must be considered as use of texts. The focus of the Church Fathers as well as of the NT writers was on the use of the

texts on circumcision, but by reading the texts in the context of the community's missionary experience. The literal meaning was de-absolutized and was forced into a dialogue with contemporary experience by means of allegorization. The allegorical meaning originated in that tension between "dem als 'real' dargestellten Inhalt antiker Texte und der zeitgenössischen Auffassung der Realität" (Pellegrini 2000, 15). This can be seen very clearly in the patristic interpretation of texts which, in the eyes of the Fathers, could not be accepted (particular images of God, particular moral norms). Therefore, they made use of various frames to indicate the relationship between the literal sense and the spiritual sense, and the inferior status of the literal sense: among those frames we can mention that of the relationship of body and spirit, or flesh and soul, or earth and heaven,<sup>12</sup> visible and invisible, temporal and eternal.<sup>13</sup> The literal meaning was even compared to the old temple, which must be destroyed, and the spiritual meaning to the new temple to be built.<sup>14</sup>

However, the relationship between the body and the spirit, between the literal and the allegorical sense, was seen in a variety of ways. In his earlier writings Augustine, reflecting on the sign and the reality to which the sign is pointing, saw the sign as a "diaphanous and obsolescent pointer".<sup>15</sup> In later writings, and certainly from *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* (398) onwards, Augustine understands the signs by means of the model of the incarnation. The spiritual reality, Christ and the Church, manifest themselves *in* the signs and are already effective in these signs. From a juxtaposition of sign and reality we have moved to a conjunction of the two.<sup>16</sup> Augustine eventually

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texts, the construction of the world in front of the text, and not merely on the world of the text.

12 Origen, *Hom. Lev. 5,1* = von Balthasar 1984, nr 213.

13 Origen, *Hom. Num. 23,1* = von Balthasar 1984, nr 248.

14 Origen, *Comm. ser. Matt 31* = von Balthasar 1984, nr 247.

15 Cameron 1999, 96. "Spiritual interpretation is possible because a likeness (similitudo!) exists between the *sensory* images conveyed by verbal signs in Scripture, and the truth of either the *intelligible* world or salvation history. (italics mine). But likeness only juxtaposes sign and reality; understanding remains incommensurate with expression, coming not from the sign *per se* but from enlightenment by God, who readies the soul by co-opting its capacity to be moved by likenesses" (Cameron 1999, 77-78).

16 "...Christ was now understood to have been present within the sign both to denote and to communicate his power" (Cameron 1999, 96). "*Caritas* is the end of Scripture from the anagogic perspective, and Christ is the end of Scripture from the dramatic" (Cameron 1999, 97).

reached a position which Origen had articulated before: Scripture embodies the power of the Word and every word of Scripture is important in this incarnation (Shin 1999).

Under the influence of modernity Christian interpreters began to see the historical meaning as the only meaning (ever since the School of Antioch there had been currents to attribute more weight to the literal meaning). Modernity brought with it a burning concern for certainty in knowledge, and reason was seen as the human capacity to reach that certainty. The Enlightenment saw itself as the great liberation of humanity from traditions and superstitions by means of reason. This sense of liberation often took on eschatological connotations in the sense that the perfection of human knowledge was being achieved.<sup>17</sup> For Christians caught up in this spirit of modernity Scripture was seen as the infallible Word, in the modern sense of the word, leading to an absolutizing of the only acceptable sense of Scripture, the literal sense, which now became the historical sense. One can see how fundamentalism in its various forms finds here a breeding ground. This was very much in contrast to the traditional Christian understanding that our knowledge remains very imperfect and even our prophesying remains very imperfect (1 Cor 13). Furthermore, the truth of Scripture was not seen as at the disposal of *abstract reason* by simply exploring the historical sense but had to be searched for continuously by means of *a life according to reason in obedience to God*. This last point will be developed below under 3.6.

### 3.4 *Scripture as God's Word for the readers in the here and now*

The aim of interpreting Scripture for the Fathers and the NT writers was very different from that of modernity. Schüssler Fiorenza put it very sharply some time ago in commenting on the use of the OT by the writer of the

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17 Barr (2000, 149-150) defends the historical critical method against the accusation of Childs (and others) that it is "unaware of its own time-conditioned quality". I would agree with Childs, however, that in as far as the practitioners of the historical critical method were shaped by rationalism there was certainly a tendency to see the judgments of reason as universal. Post-modernity has highlighted the limitations of this universality by pointing out how our judgments are always done within a particular culture and language and have their roots in the subconscious which comes to us in feelings and images. Furthermore, while the great practitioners of the historical critical method had a sense of history, they tended to see themselves as representing the quasi-eschatological stage of humanity, which could look down on the various pre-critical cultures with their pre-critical methods of textual interpretation.

Apocalypse: “He does not interpret the OT but uses its words, images, phrases, and patterns as a language arsenal in order to make his own theological statement or express his own prophetic vision” (1985, 135). If we limit the activity of interpretation to an exploration of the world of the text then we must agree that indeed John is not ‘interpreting’ Scripture.<sup>18</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza’s statement implies that John’s perspective as reader takes priority over that of the original writer. Furthermore, it also implies the criterion of usefulness and emphasizes the creativity of the approach. We can say that John’s aim is not merely ‘interpreting’ the text (exploring the world of the text) but to construct its meaning in such a way that it will be useful to those for whom he writes. Such an emphasis on usefulness can also be found in the NT in texts like 2 Tim 3:16. This text expresses an understanding of Scripture, which was common to Jews and Christians generally, i.e. that Scripture was read because it was “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”. How can texts become useful in a new context? This is, of course, similar to the issue dealt with in contemporary hermeneutics: How can we move from ‘the world of the text’ to the life of the community? In the biblical tradition this was done at first by re-telling and re-writing the stories, the laws, the promises. The Scriptures themselves are the product of this process of re-interpretation, actualization, inner-biblical interpretation, or *re-lecture* (Decock 1993, 270-76; Grech 2002). In the process of this kind of ‘interpretation’ “words, images, phrases, and patterns” from the Scriptures are re-read, re-interpreted, contemporized, actualized. The Scriptures as a ‘language arsenal’ can be seen also as a storehouse of divine wisdom which has developed over the years and from which the scribe trained for the kingdom is able to draw to provide what is useful in the present (compare Matt 13:52).<sup>19</sup>

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18 Pellegrini (2000, 67-69), following Eco, emphasizes the importance of distinguishing clearly between interpretation and use. Interpretation is the semantic actualization of that which the text (as strategy) by means of the collaboration of the Model-Reader intends to express. Use of the text is everything else: for the sake of historical reconstruction of events, or as basis for archeological or political, conclusions.

19 This process is illustrated in Acts 15. The requirement of the Law imposing circumcision is interpreted by the church trusting that in doing so they were recognizing the work of the Spirit in the church. They also discover how the words of the prophets agree with this decision. According to Prosper Grech (2002, 234), “The bible requires a higher factor from those who read it with the eyes of faith as the word of God. This is the Spirit of God the ever present revealer of truth through the vicissitudes of history. If we can speak of

### 3.5 *Understanding Scripture is not merely for information but ultimately for transformation*

For Origen, the Scriptures as the incarnation of the Logos are effective for the salvation of the readers. Origen thinks of the effects of Scripture not only in terms of knowledge but also in terms of healing and cleansing: "...so the Word has the power of every ointment and he is the most cleansing power of any purifying agent. For the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword". (*Hom. Jer. 2.2* = Smith 1998, 25). Origen "means more than the power of certain teachings to persuade people of their truthfulness; rather, he intends the power of such teaching to persuade its hearers and to change their way of life and become adherents and dedicated followers of the truth" (Torjesen 1985, 17).

The same emphasis on the process of conversion as the real purpose of reading the Scriptures can be found in various ways in Augustine.<sup>20</sup>

Christ's work is not finally to teach us something-knowledge is not enough-in fact, it 'puffeth up' (1 Cor 8:1). Christ's accomplishment is to rework our affection, that is, to create in us a new character, described again with 1 Corinthians (13:8, 13), as "faith, hope, and charity" (Cavadini 1995, 167).

In *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.7.9-11, Augustine situates the role of Scripture among the seven stages of progress of the Christian beginning with fear of the Lord and coming to a climax in wisdom. The first two stages, fear of the Lord and piety (respect for the authority of Scripture), lead to the third stage called knowledge, i.e., to what Scripture teaches us. For Augustine, Scripture teaches nothing "but that God is to be loved on God's account, and one's neighbor on God's account".<sup>21</sup> Scripture guides us along the way amid the disorder of our attachments.

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salvation history in Oscar Cullmann's sense, to exclude the work of the Spirit is to deprive it of its soul and driving power. Reinterpretation is the language 'God's Spirit speaks to the churches' (Rev 2:7)".

20 On the images of healing to understand the effects of Scripture, see Cavadini 1995, 173, note 7.

21 See Burns 1995, 186-89.

### 3.6 *The moral and religious quality of the readers affects the level of their understanding*

While modernity does not take the moral and religious quality of the interpreters into account but only their objectivity and their conceptual ability<sup>22</sup>, the former were of decisive importance for the Fathers. As “only like understands like” a reader who is becoming God-like will understand the things of God. Becoming attuned to God required first of all development of moral quality which made union with God possible. Moral quality and union with God are not just the pre-requisites for understanding, they are part and parcel of understanding itself. A text from Origen (Prologue to *Comm. Cant.* = von Balthasar 1984, 104) illustrates this:

According to the teaching of the most wise Solomon, whoever “wishes to have wisdom” must begin with moral knowledge and understand the meaning of the words: “If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will supply it for you” (Sir 1:26).

The passage ends with an explanation of the threefold reference to God as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, in which Origen explains the three basic stages of religious development:

For “Abraham” means moral philosophy through obedience. ... “Isaac” stands for natural philosophy since he dug wells and searched into the depths of things [and finds that all this is vanity]. But “Jacob” stands for internal vision, for he is called “Israel” because of his contemplation of divine things and because he gazed upon the “gate of heaven” and the “house of God” and the routes of “the angels”, the ladder extending from earth “to heaven” (cf. Gen 28:12,17).

It was probably this kind of tradition which enabled Augustine to develop a deeper insight in the functioning of signs than his philosophical predecessors. Contemporary semiotics recognizes how Augustine seems to have been the first to point out that the movement from sign to signified is not a simple dyadic process but that it is mediated by the person of the reader (Pellegrini 2000, 22-27). Augustine struggled with the issue of how we come to understand ambiguous figurative expressions. He reflected that “it is more truly said that ‘the sign is known in the thing’ than ‘the thing is

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22 The insight that all our thinking is rooted in, and guided by, ideology was absent in modernity; pre-modern thinking was clearly aware that human understanding is affected by the moral quality of the person and their relationship to God.

learned from a given sign.’ ” (*Mag.* 11.38). Drawing again on Christian tradition he resolved the problem of learning the meaning of the sign from the thing by proposing a twofold answer: the starting point must lie in what the church has always taught<sup>23</sup> or must come from the inner guidance of Christ (*verbum cordis*).<sup>24</sup> Clearly, Augustine’s aim was not simply to retrieve an “original” meaning intended by a human author of the past but ultimately to hear what God is saying to the reader now.

### *3.7 The task of interpretation is arduous and never exhaustive*

Augustine interpreted the punishment of Gen 3:17-19 as referring to the difficulties people would encounter in the interpretation of Scripture:

The interpreter laboring over this text of Genesis, beset with inconsistencies which bedevil a full literal interpretation, attempts a figurative understanding. Suddenly the text becomes a mirror: she sees herself in the text, condemned to puzzle over a hard and apparently barren text which abounds in questions and problems, eating her spiritual bread by sweat of her mental brow. Thus her pride is broken, her fall bewailed, and her hope enkindled as she is fed and sustained by the spirit of knowledge in her quest for Wisdom (Burns 1995, 189).

This struggle is the necessary means for fallen human beings ruled by pride and caught up in inordinate loves in order to be healed. This struggle is attributed to the hidden ways in which God’s truth comes to us in a twofold manner:

For the person who struggles along the way, however, the truth must be enfleshed not only in the humanity of Christ but also in the allegories of Scripture, presented in sensible forms which will break pride and inspire love (Burns 1995, 189).

## **4. Concluding Reflections**

The historical critical method has contributed enormously to the development of our study of the Scriptures. It has provided us with an illuminating insight into the whole process by which the Scriptures came

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23 See *Doctr. chr.* 3:10.14: “And here, quite simply, is the one and only method: anything in the divine writings that cannot be referred either to good, honest morals or to truth of faith, is said figuratively”. Here we see Augustine’s hermeneutics of trust at work, but also his awareness of the trans-individual frame of understanding; see note 3.

24 See *Mag.* 11:36-38.

about. However, this has shown us precisely how the Scriptures “in their origins” did not support the idea of “fixing” the meaning of the texts by tying them down to their origins. The whole dynamism of the process was rather to actualize the meaning of the texts and even to re-shape the texts themselves so that they could speak to new contexts. The text of Isaiah, for instance, was continually re-read and re-worked in the light of new contexts. Something similar can be said about the words and deeds of Jesus. In the process of working out new coherences<sup>25</sup> in new contexts the texts were reshaped. The NT writers were faced with texts of the Scriptures which were well advanced in the process of stabilization, but they also continued the process of re-reading, and at times re-shaping, the texts in their attempts to bring about a new coherence of the text in their own context. The new context was that of Christian communities who believed that God had acted decisively in Jesus of Nazareth and to whom the Scriptures were witnessing. While the historical critical method aimed at establishing a clear object of study, the original historical meaning, with time it appeared that the text had been in flux for a relatively long period before reaching its present fixed state. While the text was being fixed, the meaning of the text was understood as remaining open to every situation. Both from a hermeneutical and a historical point of view it makes more sense to keep in mind the whole trajectory, from the origins of the text to its present interpretations, rather than to limit ourselves to the oldest form or the final form of the text. Such an approach should not limit itself to the process of production, transformation and stabilization of the texts but should include the whole history of understanding the texts.<sup>26</sup> While the ‘universal’ reason of the Enlightenment considered its own rationality as the only true one, and all other modes of rationality as inferior or irrational, now reason is seen as diverse and in flux, shaped by different cultures, by different epochs within a culture, or by different different traditions, different interests. While the Enlightenment approach tended to suppress all “other” interpretations as without value,<sup>27</sup> now we are invited de-absolutize our present interpretations

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25 On meaning as a postulate and as coherence, see Pellegrini (2000, 72-75).

26 Understanding a text is a creative task of *bringing about coherence* by means of the process of reading. This coherence is not *in* the text, it is a process which gets shaped in the reader during the reading and is the end result of this reading (see Pellegrini 2000, 75).

27 On the imperialism of the Enlightenment view of history, see Moltmann (1989, 321): “Isn’t history, pictured as progress, always at the same time an instrument of imperialism—the imperialism of the one society, one class, and the one, present generation, an

and value earlier, or other, interpretations as potentially instructive, as the only way to move towards genuine universality and objectivity.

The historical critical method had a very different perception of interpretation from the NT writers and the Fathers, due to the entirely different horizons of understanding, and particularly due to a different perception of the nature of human understanding itself. Within the pre-modern horizon reason is seen as the human ability to be receptive to God and to all reality. Understanding requires therefore the transformation of the knowing subject. Within the modern horizon reason is not so much receptive but actively constitutes the object of thought.<sup>28</sup> Understanding leads then to a concern for the transformation of the known objects. Several scholars have pointed to the inadequacy of the Enlightenment knowledge system for theology and the need for different systems.<sup>29</sup> A truly comprehensive knowledge of the Scriptures, reflecting on—among many other issues—the use of the Scriptures in the NT, the patristic use, the rise of the historical critical approach and the recent challenges against its imperialism,<sup>30</sup> may awaken a critical but creative appreciation for past approaches and so enable us to develop more appropriate ones for the present (see Moltmann 1989, 329-330).

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instrument used to suppress all the others and take possession of them?” ... “Historical criticism may certainly demolish the absolutist claims of the forces of tradition, but it apparently has difficulty in abolishing the absolutism of the present” (1989, 328).

- 28 For pre-modernity “[k]nowledge was regarded as the self-disclosure of the real. For the great philosophers of the seventeenth century, though, the acquisition of knowledge occurred in an act, whereby the mind itself framed the object of thought within rules set up by the human mind. In other words, an object now came to be considered as constituted more by the mind than received from outside the mind. This shift towards a new method of knowing opened the way to the remarkable achievements of modern science. Eventually it came to be adopted for investigating the life of the mind itself, as if that were part of the objective universe. Here lies the beginning of rationalism as an ideology (Dupré 2004, 7). On Origen as a representative of pre-modern interpretation and Bultmann as a critic of modernity, see Decock (2003, 114-119).
- 29 See recently Wittenberg (1996), who contrasts *episteme* and *da’at*. Schüssler Fiorenza (1988) called for an ethically committed approach. Bultmann was concerned about the distinction between objective knowledge and existential understanding.
- 30 Stendhal (2000) comments on his 1962 distinction between the purely descriptive task of biblical theology and the task of systematic theology as an attempt to determine what the meaning is for us now: “While I was feeling that I was helping in the task of unmasking all kinds of Western male and racial imperialisms I now must ask to what extent the very method I championed was in itself so wedded to Western culture that it was actually part of the post-colonial problematic” (2000, 65). See also Punt (2001, 140-142).

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