Introduction

This book is an attempt to reconfigure standard outlines of patristic exegesis of the Bible. This it seeks to effect by presenting not a linear argument or chronological account, but something more like a spider's web. Such a web is made up of strands carefully placed in relation to one another. The radiating segments of the web are analogous to the sections of the book: they represent the major themes, each of which is traced in second-century material and then broadened out by consideration of material from subsequent centuries. These segments, however, are interlinked by connecting threads, issues which keep recurring, and which defy simple organisation. Scattered over the web are dew-drops that highlight issues by providing depth of focus through detailed inspection of particular texts. The hope is that by a combination of panoramas and close-ups, new perspectives may emerge as the complete web is contemplated.

It has been suggested that 'anyone engaged in studies related to the Fathers of the Church has not had readily available any historical outline of patristic exegesis'.[1] The writer of those words, Manlio Simonetti, set out to fill the gap. Certainly, a great deal of the requisite material lies in studies of particular outstanding exegetes or scholarly monographs on the treatment of specific texts. So the translation of Simonetti's work is a useful addition to the introductory literature available in English.[2] It is not my intention

[1] Manlio Simonetti, Preface to *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis*, ET John A. Hughes, with Anders Bergquist and Markus Bockmuehl as editors, and William Horbury as Consultant Editor (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), p. vii.

[2] Other standard literature that students may use as introductions includes: Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (2nd edn, revised and enlarged, London: SCM Press, 1984) (chapters 1–15 originally published in 1963); P. R.

to duplicate such an account. Rather my discussion presupposes acquaintance with earlier work. As indicated, the material is selective, for truly comprehensive coverage of the patristic material would be impossible in a single study. But there is sufficient, I hope, to reconfigure our diagrams of the exegetical process.

Fundamentally, exegesis explicates the meaning of a 'text', usually written but potentially anything in words, potentially even a symbolic artefact without words. This process is always complex, involving usually language and its usage, context, reference, background, genre, authorial intention, reader reception, literary structure and so on. The Fathers were more aware of these complexities than standard accounts suggest. The traditional categories of 'literal', 'typological' and 'allegorical' are quite simply inadequate as descriptive tools, let alone analytical tools. Nor is the Antiochene reaction against Alexandrian allegory correctly described as an appeal to the 'literal' or 'historical' meaning. A more adequate approach needs to be created.

This might be regarded as a specialised patristic matter, but I hope it is also a contribution to biblical studies. Recent developments have challenged the once predominant historico-critical approach to exegesis. Canon criticism, structuralism and literary-critical studies have produced new perspectives and methods. Hermeneutical discussion and liberation theologies have questioned the basis and value of what are increasingly, but erroneously, regarded as the 'traditional' methods. It is in this context that a reassessment of patristic exegesis seems timely, and relevant to the central questions of modern biblical interpretation. In an earlier book,[3] I endeavoured to use patristic material in discussion of these issues. As indicated, I now wish to refine our understanding of what the Church Fathers were doing as they used and interpreted the scriptures.[4]

Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 412–563; J. Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (London: Burns & Oates, 1960); R. M. Grant, *The Letter and the Spirit* (London: SPCK, 1957); G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays in Typology* (London: SCM Press, 1957); K. Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[3] *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990).

[4] The work which appears in this book has generated further papers which bear more directly on these wider issues. My purpose is not to repeat such discussions, but to

The articulation of the range of things that were actually going on in patristic exegesis cannot but illuminate many current exegetical assumptions: for, as Edwin Hatch pointed out a century ago,[5] scriptural commentary is still derived from the practice of commenting on literature which was the basis of ancient education, ancient education being the ancestor of the educational traditions of mediaeval universities and of the classical tradition which predominated throughout Europe until comparatively recently. The art of exegesis was partly taught, partly caught, as pupils read texts with their masters. Scriptural exegetes sought meaning and truth in their texts just as literary exegetes did in classical texts. The loss of that tradition has impoverished awareness of all the things involved, and reinforced preoccupation with but one element – namely the historical reference.

The results of the Fathers' exegetical methods have often been dismissed because of their so-called disregard of history. Indeed, the standard English account of Origen's exegesis[6] virtually organises the material around the view that Origen never really understood the Bible because he sat too loosely to history. Since that book was written, the shift in biblical studies has helped us to recognise that concern about 'history' has a very modern ring. The Fathers would condemn much modern exegesis for its exclusive focus on the 'earthly', and its lack of concern with the 'heavenly' dimension of the text. A reassessment of their assumption that the Bible has a 'spiritual meaning' is necessary, as is a review of the procedures whereby they unravelled the symbols discerned in the text. Debate is needed about potential criteria for distinguishing justifiable and unjustifiable 'allegory'. This is important not only for patristic interpretation but also for modern hermeneutics. Without a form of allegory that at least allows for analogy, the biblical text can only be an object of archaeological interest. Recent trends suggest that there is considerable dissatisfaction with the limitations

contribute to current debates indirectly by providing further insight into the exegetical processes we can trace in the early Church. See: 'Allegory and the Ethics of Reading', in Francis Watson (ed.), *The Open Text* (London: SCM 1993), pp. 103–20; 'Typology', in Stanley E. Porter, Paul Joyce and David E.Orton (eds.), *Crossing the Boundaries. Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder* (Leiden: Brill 1994), pp. 29–48; 'Interpretative Genres and the Inevitability of Pluralism', *JSNT* 59 (1995), pp. 93–110.

[5] *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1957, reprinted by arrangement with Williams & Norgate, London).

[6] By R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (London: SCM, 1959).

of historico-critical research precisely because it yields no hermeneutic.

We may not always find the conclusions of patristic exegesis satisfactory or plausible, but this is more often than not because of a different estimate of what seems problematic, or of what constitutes a valid cross-reference. From the Fathers' methods and their endeavour we might learn much. The fundamental exegetical question is: what does it mean? The answer may be obvious, or it may be arrived at by rational enquiry about word usage, about signification and metaphor, about syntax, about reference and about truth. There is no escape from that complexity.

Nowadays, the principal vehicle of exegesis remains the commentary, while the primary locus of interpretation is still in fact the pulpit. The origin of both homily and commentary lies in the patristic period, and a reassessment of the influences that produced these forms could illuminate the relationship between them. To what extent does the interpretative genre shape the interpretation offered and the interests of the interpreter, creating conventions which predetermine the approach to and perception of the text and its meaning? The Bible functioned in many genres in the patristic period. Much work is also required on the interrelationship between biblical material and theological thinking, the understanding of one undoubtedly affecting the other. The modern divorce between biblical exegesis and systematic theology, or indeed between biblical exegesis and *praxis*, would have been unthinkable in the days of the Fathers. The question of meaning was deeply affected by the issue of truth, by what was conceptually possible given the limitations of religious language, and by what was the perceived reference outside the text. To deplore the influence of Greek philosophy or contrast the Hellenic and Hebraic approaches, as scholars have done in this century, is to do less than justice to the fascinating cultural interpenetration which took place as the Bible became the literary foundation of a new 'totalising discourse'.[7]

This book is not intended, then, as a review of the very considerable amount of recent specialist study of patristic exegesis, but rather has a twofold aim: (1) to challenge accepted generalisations, so, hopefully, alerting a wider theological readership to the pitfalls

[7] Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire. The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1991).

of uncritical acceptance of summary accounts, and (2) to work with certain key texts and authors to provide living examples of the exegetical process, its principles, underlying assumptions and practice. In the process, light will be shed on the crucial function of the Bible in the formation of Christian culture.

PART I

Exegesis and the unity of the scriptures

The unity of the scriptures is recognised to have been a 'dogma' among the Fathers. The effect of this on exegesis, however, has not previously been discussed. Yet exegesis cannot but reflect fundamental hermeneutical principles which derive from the larger process of reception and appropriation. This is evident as soon as one articulates the interaction between understanding particular sentences or passages and discerning the perceived overarching plan, plot or argument of a literary work. The one affects the other: if the one modifies or confirms the other, then we may speak not of a hermeneutical circle, but rather a hermeneutical spiral as the whole and parts are brought into meaningful coherence.

Part I shows how the dogma was formed by considering how second-century readers received and read the scriptures; and then how exegesis was slanted by the assumption that the scriptures formed a unity.

CHAPTER 1

Reception and appropriation

I

By 'reception and appropriation' I mean the exegetical process whereby readers make the text their own.

According to scholarly tradition, 'reception' of the biblical material in the early Church has been studied through the search for allusion and quotation. Debate has centred on the question whether such material evidences oral tradition or knowledge of particular documents, especially in relation to the reception of Christian-authored texts.[1] If knowledge of particular documents is claimed, then the issue of the status accorded to them becomes important, and so, in the case of Christian-authored documents, the process of reception is associated with the formation of the canon in most modern scholarship. The assumption has been that the canonical process was one in which Christian-authored documents were gradually lifted to the same inspired status as the inherited Jewish ones. The reception and appropriation of the Jewish scriptures has usually been taken for granted. True, questions have been raised about which scriptures, and to what extent they were mediated through memory or testimony-books. But the assumption

[1] E.g. Helmut Koester is especially associated with the view that in the Apostolic Fathers knowledge of specific New Testament documents is not proven, rather form-critical analysis discovers the deposit of oral tradition: *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den Apostolischen Vätern* (TU 65, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957). Other scholars, however, have persisted in arguing for knowledge of this or that canonical text on the basis of apparent allusion: the continuing vitality of this opposing view is indicated by the theme of the Leuven Colloquium of 1986, papers edited by J.-M. Sévrin and published in 1989 under the title *The New Testament in Early Christianity* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), and also the recent English translation of Massaux's classic thesis of 1950, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, and Leuven: Peeters, 1990).

that Christians inherited a canon to which they then added their own literature meant that there was nothing surprising in Origen's adoption of the Jewish traditions that every jot and tittle mattered, or that inspired texts could be interpreted by means of other inspired texts. Thus, the unity and inerrancy of the Bible, however problematic for modern scholars, have been taken to be, for the early Church, unsurprising dogmas.

Meanwhile, however, reader-response theory has posed other questions about reception and appropriation.[2] We are now alerted to the fact that the way in which texts are read determines their meaning, for a text 'says' nothing until the reader 'realises' the black-and-white patterns on the page. Reader expectation invests a text with coherence, so prior assumptions about the nature of a text and how it is to be read will deeply affect what is found in the process of reading and interpreting. Our mental and physical attitudes are different depending on whether we are curled up in a corner of the settee with a novel, or standing for the Gospel lection in church.

Of course, in the early Church there were not many post-Kantian autonomous selves with freedom to select and criticise, to adopt a hermeneutic of retrieval or a hermeneutic of suspicion as suited them. But attention to reader-reception issues does suggest that, while literary allusion and canon formation may tell us much, they too often presume a literary environment and a reading culture which may be entirely anachronistic. Paper, printing and copyright belonged to the future. Insufficient attention has been paid to the cultural and social – indeed practical – realities of 'reading' in the ancient world. Reception of texts must have been affected by the character and format of books, the kind of people who used them, and the mechanics of book production, as well as their composition, publication and distribution, not to mention the extent of literacy, especially in the social circles amongst which Christianity spread.

[2] Some of the classic discussions of reader-reception theory can be found in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: a Reader* (London: Longman, 1988). Reader-response theories are associated particularly with the literary-critical work of Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish. Their effect on biblical and theological studies may be followed up through, e.g., Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible. The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Mark G. Brett, 'The Future of Reader Criticisms?', in Francis Watson (ed.), *The Open Text*; and Werner Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking* (ET Thomas J. Wilson, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988).

Yet we leave the physical reality of ancient books to specialists in textual criticism. They may at least supply us with some information.[3]

It is evident that upper-class literati had private libraries, enjoyed what we might describe as country-house literary weekends, patronised the equivalent of literary societies and reading circles, composed literary works which they read to one another, and communicated with one another in highly wrought literary letters, often intended for collection and circulation as literary works themselves. For such people what we now call 'intertextuality' was an important feature of literature, one text achieving its status by its allusive and mimetic relationship with others that had the status of classics.

There was a book-trade to serve the needs of such readers, and possessing classics written in gold letter was one way of conspicuous consumption. In the absence of printing, however, book production could not be effectively controlled, and just as people now pirate tapes or computer software, private individuals had their own private copies made and distributed, whether of their own work or that of others. Interpolation, incision and plagiarism were commonplace hazards. The author's control over his text was perceived as a problem, and some philosophers, like Aristotle, vested their deposit in an authorised community or school in order to protect it.

Reader reception was universally through the oral medium, and reading even in private was aloud. Consequently, as George Kennedy has stressed,[4] texts were received in a linear way, the overall thrust becoming evident as the structure unfolded in succession.

[3] C. H. Roberts, 'The Codex', in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 (1954), pp. 169–204; (with T. C. Skeat), *The Birth of the Codex* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1983); 'Books in the Greco-Roman World and in the New Testament', in Ackroyd and Evans (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 48–66; and 'The Writing and Dissemination of Literature in the Classical World', in David Daiches (ed.), *Literature and Western Civilisation*, vol. 1 (London: Aldus, 1972); to Roberts I am indebted for the specific items of information underlying the outline that follows here. But now see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

[4] E.g. in *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 5–6. Cf. George Kennedy's other works on rhetoric, such as *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill and London: University of California Press, 1980); and *Greek Rhetoric under Christian Emperors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Exordium, narrative, proof and peroration provided a recapitulative framework which carried the listener to conviction by reminder and variation. Reference back depended upon memory, reference forward upon expectation, or known classic outcome. As the roll gradually unwound, so a narrative or argument moved towards its climax or ending.

In such circles, all real books were written on papyrus rolls. Notes and drafts would be made on wax tablets, and in the West these cumbersome aids, often linked with thongs into the kind of thing we call a book, were already being replaced by parchment notebooks in New Testament times. From this would emerge the codex, but it was never used at this early date for a real book. To have 'pocket-editions' in codex form is recommended as a novelty by Martial at the end of the first century, and he stresses their convenience for travel and for saving space in the library. But his endorsement did not produce a consumer switch. As Roberts put it, 'the fashionable author or discriminating bibliophile would not favour a format that suggested the lecture room or the counting house'.[5]

For that is where the codex format belonged. In the grammatical and rhetorical schools, pupils made their notes and drafts on tablets, in the world of business, accounts and other notes were similarly inscribed, as were the *aides-mémoire* of lawyers and doctors. When Paul is represented in 2 Timothy 4.13 as asking Timothy to bring the books, especially the notebooks, a distinction is made between rolls and parchment folders, using the Latin loan-word *membranas*, one of a number of indications that it was the practical Romans who introduced this more convenient substitute for linked tablets. The codex belonged to the day-to-day world, where a basic level of literacy was probably more widespread than in any period prior to the twentieth century.[6] The roll belonged to the world of the ancient revered classics which shaped a sophisticated high-class literary culture, which in turn filtered down to the urban masses through theatre and public oratory.

In the schools, pupils would make jottings in notebooks, but they would learn to read the classics from papyrus rolls. Rhetorical education encouraged reading aloud as practice for declamation,

[5] Roberts, 'The Codex', p. 178.
[6] Though see William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).