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978-1-107-06655-7 - Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation: The Latin Fathers

Edited by Tarmo Toom

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction**Tarmo Toom*

This volume provides an assessment of Latin patristic hermeneutical theories and it consists of chapters on a few selected ancient authors who have explicitly reflected on interpretative matters at least somewhere in their works. After some serious consideration, it seemed wiser to invite a team of international experts to write learned essays on particular figures, rather than to imagine that a single scholar can appraise all authors equally well.

There is a modern distinction between hermeneutics, which refers to general principles of the art of interpretation, and exegesis, which refers to the actual application of these principles to particular texts.¹ Such compartmentalization of theoretical and practical approaches tends to make sense to most modern persons. However, this fine and, no doubt, at times rather helpful distinction may be somewhat misleading when it is applied to the art of interpretation of Scripture during the first few centuries. Namely, patristic authors never postulated an abstract, full-blown hermeneutical theory that was envisaged in isolation from the actual practice of interpreting the Word of God.² Neither was patristic biblical exegesis ever a mere procedural affair, some sort of “neutral” application of techniques and theory to scriptural texts, without a simultaneous concern for

¹ A. C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 4.

² A prime example would be Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*, in which books 2 and 3 discuss a hermeneutical/semiotic theory and book 4 addresses the communication of that which the theory has helped to discover in Scripture. See J. A. Andrews, *Hermeneutics and the Church: In Dialogue with Augustine*, *Reading the Scriptures* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 23–5, 143–52.

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the interpreter's spiritual benefit.³ "For Christian interpreters the Bible was . . . a book which had been read and expounded in the Christian liturgy, used for introduction, edification, and prayer. Its interpretation could not be divorced from its use."⁴ Therefore, the fundamental symbiosis of theory and practice in patristic biblical interpretation should never be obscured by this modern, convenient distinction between hermeneutics and exegesis.

Put differently, any attempt to investigate patristic hermeneutical theory has to face the problem of how to understand the word "theory." The modern use of this word can indeed have the overtones of something abstract, conceptual, and, depending on one's view, even impractical. In antiquity, there were several theories about *theōria*. While the Platonic trajectory emphasized the relation between *theōros'* mental gaze at the forms and the consequent informed *praxis*,⁵ the Aristotelian trajectory resolutely severed *theōria*, the "seeing" of something divine, from *praxis* and perceived it as a supreme activity of the highest intrinsic value in itself.⁶ The Stagirite contended that *theōria* constituted "the only activity that is loved for its own sake: it produces no result beyond the actual act of contemplation (*para to*

³ For example, in *Moralia in Iob*, Gregory the Great employed an Origenist hermeneutical theory for the higher purposes of moral edification and spiritual transformation – for which the text was meant in the first place. See Brendan Lupton's Chapter 8 in this volume.

⁴ R. L. Wilken, "Cyril of Alexandria," in C. Kannengiesser (ed.), *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, The Bible in Ancient Christianity (Leiden: Brill, 2004), vol. II, 840–69, at 851. In the early fifth century and in his thorough commentary, Augustine contended that Scripture was "expressed in a way designed to nourish our devout hearts" (*Gen. litt.* 1.20.40). For a particular example, see D. Brakke, "Reading the New Testament and Transforming the Self in Evagrius of Pontus," in H.-U. Weidemann (ed.), *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity*, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus* 101 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 284–99.

⁵ Plato, *Rep.* V–VII (449a–541b); cf. A. W. Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 72–138, esp. 82 and 127–38.

⁶ Aristotle, *NE* X.7–9 (1177b1–1179b33); *Pol.* VII.3 (1325b16–21); cf. T. Jürgasch, *Theoria versus Praxis? Zur Entwicklung eines Prinzipienwissens im Bereich der Praxis in Antike und Spätantike* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 158–66, 189–94; Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, 187–252. Cicero mentions the debate between the ancient hardcore pragmatists and theoreticians in his *Letter to Atticus* 36 (II.16).

theōrēsai).⁷ Plotinus reinforced the idea that the purely intellectual *theōria* was the ultimate single goal, which had to leave behind the inferior and multiple *praxis*.⁸ If this trend of thought is followed and if *theōria* is purged from its original theological–religious content⁹ (that is, if theory is understood as an abstract, generalizing experiment of rational thought, a sort of shuffling of hypothetical notions), then there is no such thing as patristic hermeneutical theory. As mentioned earlier, none of the patristic authors addressed hermeneutical issues merely for the sake of leisurely abstract reflection or speculation. On the contrary, theory was always in the service of practice, be it interpretation of Scripture or virtuous living. Thus, as this volume focuses on the patristic hermeneutical theory, the word “theory” should be understood in a Platonic rather than an Aristotelian/Plotinian sense.

An affirmation of the firm interconnection between patristic hermeneutical theory and exegetical practice enables this introduction to proceed with an explanation of the relatively narrow focus of the given volume. The lead is taken from Cassiodorus, who indeed discriminated between *introductores*, treatises that provided introductory information and general hermeneutical rules for interpreting Scripture, and *expositores*, treatises that actually exegeted Scripture.¹⁰ Nuancing this further, one can differentiate between four interrelated and heavily overlapping, yet not completely identical, phenomena:

1. Patristic exegetical writings (e.g., commentaries);
2. Patristic expository homilies;¹¹

⁷ Aristotle, *NE* X.7 (1177b1).

⁸ Plotinus, *Enn.* III.8.4–6; I. Craemer-Ruegenberg, “Überlegungen zu Plotins Begriff von ‘theoria,’” in E. Jain and R. Margreiter (eds.), *Probleme philosophischer Mystik: Festschrift für Karl Albert zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 1991), 175–85; A. Linguisti, “Plotinus and Porphyry on the Contemplative Life,” in T. Bénatouil and M. Bonazzi (eds.), *Theoria, Praxis and the Contemplative Life after Plato and Aristotle*, *Philosophia Antiqua* 131 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 183–97, at 186–90.

⁹ Plato, *Rep.* VI.19–20 (508e–509c); VII.18 (540a); Aristotle, *Metaph.* I.2.8 and 14 (982b9–10 and 983a6–11); XI.7.8 (1064a 36–8); Plotinus, *Enn.* I.6.8–9.

¹⁰ Cassiodorus, *Inst.* I.10.1–2.

¹¹ Origen, for example, contrasted his commentaries as *exponendi scripturas* to his homilies as *aedificandi ecclesiam* (*Hom. Lev.* 7.1.1).

3. Patristic hermeneutical theory deduced from actual exegetical practice; that is, a theory deduced from both the commentaries and expository homilies;
4. Patristic hermeneutical theory as such to the extent it, or its elements, were explicated by various authors.

Ideally, while addressing the topic of patristic biblical interpretation as such, all four should be taken into consideration. This volume, however, purposely limits itself to point number four – to the contribution of those Latin patristic authors who have said something substantial about hermeneutics vis-à-vis those who interpreted Scripture and occasionally said something about what they were doing. In other words, the four points are made not for artificially separating things that belong together, but for setting closer parameters for determining the limited scope of this volume. At the end of the day, it is a question of choosing one aspect of the aforementioned phenomena on which to focus. At least for the editor of this volume, it seems entirely legitimate to focus on these precious few texts (chapters or sections) where Latin patristic authors actually discussed hermeneutics, while acknowledging that ultimately, patristic hermeneutical theory (4) cannot be cut off from exegetical practice (3), which is found in commentaries and homilies (1 and 2).¹² Although “many works of orthodox and ecclesiastical authors came to us, each of them showing their interpretation (*hermēneia*) of divine Scriptures,”¹³ very few of them provided theoretical analysis.

There is another aspect to restricting the chapters to the more theoretical discussions of the patristic authors that needs to be addressed. To get a “total picture” of someone’s hermeneutics obviously takes

¹² Ancient commentaries, and especially their prologues, often included remarks on various interpretative topics, such as textual criticism and explanation of words and grammar, as well as observations on style and the subject matter discussed in a particular text (see Aline Canellis’ Chapter 3 in this volume). Further special cases were paraphrases which conveyed the supposed meaning of a text in different wordings. (For example, Augustine had originally attached a paraphrase to the Psalms 15–32.) However, such paraphrases restated what the text said rather than discussed how meaning(s) were constituted.

¹³ Eusebius, *HE* 5.27.1.

more than assessing his/her theoretical deliberations.¹⁴ Various historical and ecclesial contexts, audiences, the interpreter's own education, skills, and spiritual life – all this should be included in a reconstructed and purportedly complete account of someone's biblical hermeneutics. This, however, would require a monograph, rather than an chapter, on each author. Consequently and because of the relatively narrow focus of this volume, readers will not find here lengthy analyses of historical contexts, rhetorical situations, and portraits of patristic authors. Neither will they find in-depth assessments of source-critical and linguistic issues, articulated theologies of Scripture, and descriptions of actual exegetical practices. Inevitably, such important topics have to be researched in order to provide an informed account of a given author's understanding of hermeneutics. Yet once again, in this collection of chapters, these topics are not investigated for their own sakes. After all, studying a topic contextually does not mean that a given monograph or chapter has to use most of its textual space for discussing the reconstructed contexts. Analogically, writing on someone's hermeneutical theory obviously presupposes one's knowledge of this person's education, context, theology of Scripture, and exegetical writings, as well as other related topics, but it does not necessarily require a full-length elaboration on these matters.

Perhaps many would also like the introduction of this volume to address the topic of relevance of a hermeneutical theory – although the very need of addressing such a topic itself may betray a modern, embedded pragmatist/utilitarian perspective and theory phobia. Nevertheless, what is gained by a study of interpretative assumptions, principles, and procedures? It was in the prologue of *De doctrina Christiana* where Augustine discussed the necessity of a hermeneutical theory for interpreting Scripture, as well as the naïveté of those who imagined that God's Word was clear and

¹⁴ Since patristic authors usually discussed only a few elements of a hermeneutical theory proper, and did so according to their particular concerns, to reconstruct a more or less complete theory from their sporadic insights remains unfeasible.

accessible without any methodological reflections.¹⁵ The situation Augustine faced was the following:¹⁶ there were some people in the church who had almost no clue as to what the bishop wanted to achieve with his treatise on biblical hermeneutics; others, in turn, did not have enough skill to use his sophisticated *praecepta*.¹⁷ There really was not much Augustine could do for those two groups of people. Still others, “the third group of fault-finders,” declared that “nobody needs these rules (*ista praecepta*),¹⁸ but that it was simply a divine gift (*divino munere*) which made possible the praiseworthy opening up of the obscurities of this sacred literature.”¹⁹ Perhaps they wanted to be “just spiritual” and get everything, including understanding of texts, directly from the Lord, without the mediation of signs, methods, hermeneutical theories, human teachers, and “secular” education.²⁰ Augustine’s argument

¹⁵ Origen, too, had pointed out that “[t]he ignorant . . . have this worst fault of all: they consider those who have devoted themselves to the word and teaching as vain and useless. They prefer their own ignorance (which they call ‘spiritual simplicity’) to the study and labors of the learned” (*Hom. Ps.* 36).

¹⁶ Cicero explained that *insinuatio* – a rhetorical method for securing the good will of the audience – was used “when the spirit of the audience was hostile” (*Inv.* 1.17.23).

¹⁷ Augustine, *doc. Chr.* Prol. 2. Augustine was deeply embedded in the rhetorical tradition that taught him at times rather complicated steps of *interpretatio scripti* (Cicero, *Inv.* 2.40.116–2.51.154; cf. Pseudo-Augustine, *Rhet.* 11). These consisted of four main hermeneutical *topoi*: (1) definition (*definitio, vis verbis*), that is, what exactly a text said; (2) the possible discrepancy between the written words and writer’s intention (*scriptum versus voluntas*); (3) ambiguity (*ambiguitas*), that is, how to disambiguate ambiguous statements; and (4) contradiction (*ex contrariis legibus*), that is, how to solve the perceived contradictions in the texts that belonged together (K. Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and Its Humanist Reception*, Yale Studies in Hermeneutics [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997], 8). Especially Augustine’s sophisticated semiotic theory could have been just a bit too much for sincere but simple students of the Bible.

¹⁸ Already a pragmatist Isocrates thought that theoreticians were “prattling and splitting hairs, since none of these things is useful (*chrēsimon*) either in private or in public life” (*Antidosis* 261–2, cited in Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, 21).

¹⁹ Augustine, *doc. Chr.* Prol. 4; cf. 4.16.33.

²⁰ *Doc. Chr.* 4.16. Mayer suggested that Augustine’s opponents substituted the preposition *per* (“through”) in *res per signa* with the preposition *sine* (“without”) – *res sine*

was “with Christians, who congratulated themselves on knowledge of Holy Scriptures gained without any human guidance (*sine duce homine*),”²¹ with Christians who believed that it was possible to be dependent only on divine illumination.²² He pointed out that it was, in fact, the apostle Philip, another human being, who helped an Ethiopian eunuch to understand the obscure passage of prophet Isaiah.²³ He also wondered, cleverly, why his opponents still lectured and wrote, if understanding came only through divine illumination. Why were his opponents “so eager to explain it to others,” if Scripture was understood only through Christ’s inward teaching?²⁴ Convinced of the importance of a hermeneutical theory, Augustine explained that his *praecepta* were like an alphabet which one had to know before he/she could interpret Scripture adequately.²⁵ Thus, believing that he had provided a “sufficient answer (*convenienter responsum*)” to his critics, Augustine proceeded with the writing of his textbook on hermeneutics.

Agreeing with Augustine’s arguments for the importance of an interpretative *praecepta*, it remains to be said that although this volume contends that hermeneutical theory matters, it nowhere contends that theory is the only thing that matters.

signa (C. P. Mayer, “‘Res per signa’: Der Grundgedanke des Prologs in Augustins Schrift *De doctrina christiana* und das Problem seiner Datierung,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 20 [1974], 100–12, at 104). Arguably, the presence of such people was one of the reasons for Augustine to insert an elaborate discussion about the usefulness of “secular” knowledge for interpreting Scripture in *doc. Chr.* 2.17.27–42.63.

²¹ *Doc. Chr.* Prol. 5.

²² Augustine himself taught the importance of illumination of the Inner Teacher and remained true to his Platonic epistemology (Ps 36:9; Mt 23:10; Augustine, *civ. Dei.* 8.9; *en. Ps.* 118[17].3; *Jo. ev. tr.* 26.7; *mag.* 11.38–12.40, 13.46). His opponents, however, evidently radicalized his teaching on illumination by making it absolutely exclusive of human teachings and theories.

²³ *Doc. Chr.* Prol. 7. ²⁴ *Doc. Chr.* Prol. 8.

²⁵ Augustine understood his hermeneutical *praecepta* as a critical–theoretical reflection on the practice of biblical interpretation. Theoretical considerations were supposed to lead to a better-informed practice. This was already the claim Socrates had made in Plato’s *Rep.* VII.18 (540a) – after having gazed at the good itself, a *theōros* had a better idea of what exactly to implement in the society.

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Last, but not least, there are some editorial reasons for limiting this volume to Latin patristic authors only, such as the length of the book and the fact that it enables a restricted yet sufficiently comprehensive selection of representatives of at least one of the Christian geographic/cultural/linguistic areas of late antiquity. Another reason for opting for Latin authors only is their relevance for hermeneutical theory in the medieval western church. All the authors considered in this volume were known, read, and cited in the Middle Ages.²⁶ The envisioned readership of this volume (in English), too, is, in one way or another, the heir of this particular culture.

Exclusive consideration of Latin authors does not mean, however, that there ever existed something like a “pure” Latin trajectory of hermeneutical theory.²⁷ The inclusion of Junillus and Jerome, for example, should make it sufficiently clear that both Syriac and Greek hermeneutical trajectories were accommodated by Latin authors. After all, and as von Balthasar has said, “There is no thinker in the Church who is so invisibly all-present as Origen.”²⁸ This is definitely true about Latin biblical hermeneutics, especially after Rufinus and Jerome made Origen’s commentaries available for Latin speakers.²⁹ Once again, to limit the volume to Latin authors

²⁶ H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l’écriture*, Théologie 41, 42, 59 (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64), and B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1964). Although not focusing on exegesis, helpful volumes are also I. Backus (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), vol. I, as well as R. E. McNally, *The Bible in the Middle Ages* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985 [original: Westminster: Newman Press, 1953]), 37–46.

²⁷ It has been argued that, starting with Tyconius’ *Regula*, a certain rule-centered or legalistic approach to hermeneutics was characteristic of Latin authors, but this argument tends to evaporate in a closer look at the comparative material.

²⁸ H. U. von Balthasar, *Origen, Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings*, trans. R. J. Daly (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 2.

²⁹ J. Irmscher, “Origenes latinus: gli scritti esegetici de origene nella traduzione Latina,” in *L’esegesi dei padri latini: dalle origini a Gregorio Magno, XXVIII Incontro di studiosi dell’antichità cristiana, Roma, 6–8 maggio 1999*, Studia ephemeridis Augustinianum 68 (Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2000), vol. I, 49–55; C. Jacob, “The Reception of the Origenist Tradition in Latin

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does not mean to deny the influences and insights from the authors writing in other languages, but does mean that the selected authors wrote exclusively in Latin.

In *Inst.* 1.10.1, Cassiodorus introduces the hermeneutical works of Tyconius and Augustine, as well as Adrian's *Isagōgē in sacras scripturas*,³⁰ Eucherius' *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae*, and Junillus' *Instituta regularia divinae legis*. This list, with the exception of Adrianus and Eucherius (see the following), includes basically all there is to read in the Latin patristic literature about Scripture as such and the theory of biblical interpretation. That is, these are the specific extant Latin hermeneutical/exegetical treatises (*introduc-tores*) known to us.³¹ To the aforementioned list, this volume adds Jerome and Cassian, Cassiodorus himself, and Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville, both of whom lived about half a century later than Cassiodorus. Including and excluding authors was definitely one of the toughest editorial challenges in conceptualizing this volume. The choices made are likely to remain controversial. Therefore, a brief explanation of omissions.

Many readers are probably surprised not to find Tertullian, who has to "be considered supreme,"³² in the selected, celebrated company of Latin patristic hermeneuts. After all, he stands in the very beginning of the Latin exegetical tradition and, as such, he is undoubtedly a foundational figure. To mention just one example, in *Adversus Hermogenem*, Tertullian contended that if Hermogenes

Exegesis," in M. Sæbø et al. (eds.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*. Vol. 1: *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (until 1300)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 682–700.

³⁰ Adrian's *Isagōgē in sacras scripturas* is written in Greek and therefore omitted from the collection of essays dedicated to Latin fathers. It was translated into Latin only in the seventeenth century by Aloysius Lollinus. A new critical text, translation, and assessment will be available in P. W. Martens, *Adrian's "Introduction to the Divine Scriptures": An Antiochene Handbook for Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³¹ One may want to add the Latin translations of two introductions to Scripture, one attributed to Athanasius (*PG* 28.283–438) and the other to Chrysostom (*PG* 56:313–86).

³² Vincent of Lérins, *Comm.* 18.

got his doctrine wrong (e.g., believing the preexistence of matter), he also got his biblical interpretations wrong. In other words, if Hermogenes' theological convictions were inadequate, he inevitably misread the creation accounts in Genesis.³³ The correct interpretation³⁴ had to presuppose the *regula fidei*³⁵ and apply the principle *scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres* to the investigation of the particular passages.³⁶ Nonetheless, apart from occasional, scanty remarks on certain hermeneutical principles, Tertullian did not provide any sustained discussions of theoretical issues of interpretation. The fact that he constantly cited and interpreted Scripture against the exclusively allegorical exegesis of his opponents, as well as employed certain key interpretative devices in his numerous works,³⁷ does not yet qualify him into the company of those authors who actually did elaborate on hermeneutics.

Likewise, Cyprian's anti-Jewish *Testimonia ad Quirinum*, which lists certain intrabiblical correspondences and was perhaps intended as a resource for preachers, comes short of a hermeneutical treatise. In his extant exegetical treatises and letters, like Tertullian, Cyprian quoted, paraphrased, and alluded to Scripture. He even mentioned

³³ Tertullian, *adv. Herm.* 19–34.

³⁴ The word “correct” does not mean that patristic authors imagined there to be one stable and exclusive meaning of a text. Rather, it meant that the possible multiple interpretations should always match with the two criteria stated in this very sentence.

³⁵ Tertullian, *adv. Herm.* 1 and 33; cf. *Praescr.* 12–14 and 19.

³⁶ Tertullian, *adv. Herm.* 32 and 34.

³⁷ G. D. Dunn, “Tertullian's Scriptural Exegesis in *de praescriptione haereticorum*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14/2 (2006), 141–55; H. Karpp, *Schrift und Geist bei Tertullian*, Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie 47 (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1955), 21–4; O. Kuss, “Zur Hermeneutik Tertullians,” in J. Ernst (ed.), *Schriftauslegung. Beiträge zur Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments und im Neuen Testament* (Munich: F. Schöningh, 1972), 55–87; T. P. O'Malley, *Tertullian and the Bible: Language-Imagery-Exegesis*, *Latinitas Christianorum Primavera* 21 (Nijmegen: Dekker & van de Vegt, 1967), 117–72; J. Speigl, “Tertullian als Exeget,” in G. Schöllgen and C. Scholte (eds.), *Stimuli: Exegese und ihre Hermeneutik in Antike und Christentum. Festschrift für Ernst Dassmann* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1996), 161–76, esp. 171–3; J. H. Waszink, “Tertullian's Principles and Methods of Exegesis,” in W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken (eds.), *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant*, *Théologie historique* 53 (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1979), 17–31.