

# Patristic Exegesis: The Myth of the Alexandrian–Antiochene Schools of Interpretation

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***Abstract:** The notion that there existed a distinction between so-called “Alexandrian” and “Antiochene” exegesis in the ancient church has become a common assumption among theologians. The typical belief is that Alexandria promoted an allegorical reading of Scripture, whereas Antioch endorsed a literal approach. However, church historians have long since recognized that this distinction is neither wholly accurate nor helpful to understanding ancient Christian hermeneutics. Indeed, neither school of interpretation sanctioned the practice of just one exegetical method. Rather, both Alexandrian and Antiochene theologians were expedient hermeneuts, meaning they utilized whichever exegetical practice (allegory, typology, literal, historical) that would supply them with their desired theology or interpretive conclusion. The difference between Alexandria and Antioch was not exegetical; it was theological. In other words, it was their respective theological paradigms that dictated their exegetical practices, allowing them to utilize whichever hermeneutical method was most expedient for their theological purposes. Ultimately, neither Alexandrian nor Antiochene exegetes possessed a greater respect for the biblical text over the other, nor did they adhere to modern-day historical-grammatical hermeneutics as theologians would like to believe.*

***Keywords:** Hermeneutics, Alexandria, Antioch, Exegesis, Allegory, Literal, Typology, Schools of Interpretation*

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## Introduction

SINCE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, theological discussion of patristic exegetical practices has created an unnecessary bifurcation between Alexandrian and Antiochene hermeneutics, characterizing the former as mere allegorical and the latter as substantially literal.<sup>1</sup> However, patristic scholars consider this

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<sup>1</sup> Readers ought to understand the terms “Alexandrian” and “Antiochene” as cultural and theological designations for the different patristic fathers that reflect, but do not necessarily depend on, geographical regions.

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dichotomy to be an oversimplification of ancient biblical interpretations.<sup>2</sup> The standard contrast mistakenly presents allegorical and literal hermeneutics as separate methodologies. Instead of viewing ancient exegesis as a disparity between different schools of thought, theologians ought to recognize that the different modes of interpretation (allegory, typology, literal, historical) merely supplied the fathers with multiple interpretative options. The division between “Alexandrian” and “Antiochene” schools is a modern artificial construct that may have little relevance to fully understanding ancient patristic exegesis.<sup>3</sup>

However inadequate this construct may be, the standard partition continues to pervade theological literature because there were still nuanced differences between these two cultural centers of early Christianity. Their minor variances not only exemplified particular emphases when interpreting Scripture, but they also resulted in clashing theological convictions that prompted intense disputes and condemnations. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine the differences and similarities between Alexandrian and Antiochene hermeneutics in order to compare and contrast their exegetical practices. The article will first offer a brief history of how the Alexandrian and Antiochene approaches originally developed before detailing the disagreements that distinguished their schools of thought. The research will then end with a summary of the correspondences between the two systems. Ultimately, the typical bifurcation between Alexandrian and Antiochene hermeneutics does not fully account for the trivial distinctions and crucial similarities between their hermeneutics. Instead, readers should recognize that their greatest discrepancy was theological, not exegetical. In other words, it was their respective theological paradigms that dictated their exegetical practices, allowing them to utilize whichever hermeneutical method was most expedient for their theological purposes. In the end, neither Alexandrian nor Antiochene exegetes possessed a greater respect for the biblical text over the other, nor did they adhere to modern-day historical-grammatical hermeneutics.

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<sup>2</sup> This point is especially evident in Alexis Torrance, “Barsanuphius, John, and Dorotheos on Scripture: Voices from the Desert in Sixth-Century Gaza,” in *What is the Bible? The Patristic Doctrine of Scripture*, ed. Matthew Baker and Mark Mourachian (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 67–81, esp. 68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17mcsbk.9>.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Fairbairn, “Patristic Exegesis and Theology: The Cart and the Horse,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 1–2, 14–16.

## History of the Alexandrian School

Traditionally, writers have identified the Alexandrian school as possessing Platonic philosophical presuppositions and having originated from the allegorical work of Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25 BCE–40 CE).<sup>4</sup> History of the Alexandrian school's allegorism partly begins with the Hellenistic education system (*paideia*), which emphasized the study of classical literature, especially the myths of Homer (ninth/eighth century BCE) and other Greek legends. Embarrassed by the behavior of the Greek gods, Hellenistic studies prompted pagans to reinterpret these fables according to Platonic and Stoic assumptions about reality, reimagining the legends as allegories that contained deeper philosophical truths.<sup>5</sup> Because of the entrenchment of Hellenistic thought in Alexandria at the time, Jewish and Christian exegetes wanted to make their sacred texts more respectable to educated Hellenists, who were proficient at discovering deeper levels of meaning in religious stories. Thus, early allegorization began for apologetic purposes, allowing Jewish and Christian exegetes, such as Philo and Irenæus (ca. 130–200 CE), to proselytize local Alexandrian Greeks. This was in addition to the growing Gnostic threat to Christianity, which emphasized a disjunction between the Old and New Testaments. Alexandrian allegory allowed proto-orthodox Christians to demonstrate a unity between the two Testaments by expounding on the veiled christological and ecclesiastical meanings embedded in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than have a concern for politics or the legal system, Alexandria had almost always centered on metaphysical speculations; and although allegorism was prevalent among pagan authors as far back as the sixth century BCE, Philo is the oldest extant Jewish writer to have utilized allegorical interpretations.<sup>7</sup> Hence, this Alexandrian background encouraged later

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<sup>4</sup> Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 2.

<sup>5</sup> Donald A. Russell and David Konstan, eds., trans., *Heraclitus: Homeric Problems*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 14 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), xi–xxx; Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis*, trans. John A. Hughes (New York: T&T Clark, 1994), 2–7.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 141–42.

<sup>7</sup> See also, Darren M. Slade, "Hagioprepēs: The Rationalizing of Saintly Sin and Atrocities," in *Sacred Troubling Topics in Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an*, ed. Roberta Sabbath (Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2020), *forthcoming*.

Christian exegetes to adopt a philosophical leaning in their own practices.<sup>8</sup> Philo's exegesis employed extensive allegories to the Hebrew Scriptures in order to demonstrate the affinities between Jewish theology and pagan philosophy, allowing him to present Judaism in less barbaric imagery by alleviating Scripture's more primitive and anthropomorphic portrayals of deity.<sup>9</sup> This Platonic understanding of the world often led Alexandrians to develop more abstract interpretations that focused on philosophical discussions. In contrast to the Antiochenes, who would focus on the historical details of God's actions, the tendency to philosophize Scripture became especially evident when Alexandrians attempted to discern the nature of Christ through messianic symbols in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the second century CE, a Christian catechetical school arose in Alexandria under the leadership of Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215) and Origen (ca. 185–254), both of whom became a significant influence on Christian hermeneutics and theology in the region. Thereafter, Alexandrian fathers followed the example of Philo and Irenæus in prioritizing spiritual interpretations in order to make Scripture more reputable among intellectual Hellenists. However, subsequent debates with Gnostic teachers propelled the catechetical school to refine their exegetical approach by enhancing their interpretations with Jewish typology, as well as Philo's cosmological and anthropological deductions from the Hebrew Scriptures. Because of the influence of Platonism, Philo, and Gnosticism, the Alexandrian tradition could now solidify its figural and metaphorical approach to Scripture, giving greater emphasis to philosophical and abstract interpretations.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, traditional Jewish approaches to Scripture also helped devise the Alexandrian system, which formulated rabbinical rules (*middôt*) for integrating sacred texts, oral traditions, and contemporary applications into their exegesis. Practices such as paronomasia, *nōtrikon*, and gematria indicate that ancient hermeneuts believed there were veiled mysteries behind the literal

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas H. Olbricht, "Greek Rhetoric and the Allegorical Rhetoric of Philo and Clement of Alexandria," in "Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible," ed. Stanley E. Porter and Dennis L. Stamps, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* 195 (2002): 29–31.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, 137–38.

<sup>10</sup> Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 3, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 32–35. See also, Jonathan M. Knight, "Alexandria, Alexandrian Christianity," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 36–37.

words of Scripture.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the Apostle Paul's own exegetical practices appear to demonstrate a purposeful spiritualization of the biblical texts by reinterpreting the literal-historical sense of *torah* as a symbolic type of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10:1–11). Paul's use of allegory in Galatians 4:24 also gave the Alexandrians a precedent and a justification for applying allegory to more than just one passage in the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Overall, the New Testament displays an exegetical tradition that treats the Hebrew Scriptures as exhibiting shadows of the truth, which readers can discern only esoterically in light of Christ's advent (cf. Heb. 8:5; 10:1). The standard allegorical method soon became the practice of extracting deeper spiritual meanings (types, allegories, symbols) from the smallest details found in Scripture, such as numbers, Hebrew name etymologies, animals, plants, metals, and body parts.<sup>14</sup>

### History of the Antiochene School

Standard reconstructions of the Antiochene system suggest that their exegesis arose out of direct opposition to the Alexandrian school, flourishing later in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>15</sup> However, this historical interpretation is mostly inaccurate. The Antiochenes did not react against Origenist allegorism because of a hermeneutical devotion to literalism. Instead, it was the rhetorical schools of Antioch that propelled their exegetes to discern meaning through different critical, rhetorical, philological, and historical studies that paralleled pagan expositions in the region.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Alexandria, there was no formal *didaskaleion* (scholastic institute) in Antioch to rival the theological claims of

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<sup>12</sup> Karlfried Froehlich, ed., trans., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church, Sources of Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 3–5.

<sup>13</sup> Christine E. Wood, "Anamnesis and Allegory in Ambrose's *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis*," *Letter & Spirit: The Bible and the Church Fathers, The Liturgical Context of Patristic Exegesis* 7 (2011): 62. For details on the Alexandrian and Antiochene interpretation of Paul's use of allegory in Galatians, as well as their differences in emphases, see Juan Antonio Gil-Tamayo, "'Todo Esto Tiene Un Sentido Alegorical' (Ga 4,24). La Exegesis Antioquena de Galatas 4,21–31," *Scripta Theologica* 40, no. 1 (2008): 35–63.

<sup>14</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 38–39, 45–47; cf. p. 78. See also, Richard Valantasis, "Adam's Body: Uncovering Esoteric Traditions in the Apocryphon of John and Origen's Dialogue with Heraclides," *Second Century* 7, no. 3 (1989): 150–62.

<sup>15</sup> Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 2.

<sup>16</sup> For details, see Frances M. Young, "The Rhetorical Schools and Their Influence on Patristic Exegesis," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, Pbk. ed., ed. Rowan Williams (1989; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 182–99, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511555350.012>.

the Eastern fathers. Instead, the Antiochenes shared a common theology that united them as a distinct group separate from the Alexandrians. Scholars suggest that Antioch's theological methodology and hermeneutical doctrine first began with the heretical priest, Lucian of Antioch (d. 312). Church historian Jerome (ca. 345–420) reported that Lucian exhibited a strict attention to the surface meaning of Scripture when he created the “Lucian Recension,” a prominent revision of the Septuagint that sought closer fidelity to the Hebrew language. However, he was not the first to utilize an overly literal approach to the Bible. Literalist and typological interpretations, as a hermeneutical discipline, were in Asiatic exegesis centuries before Lucian.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, the Antiochene school also produced the greatest number of heterodox theologians. Arius (d. 336), who was a disciple of Lucian, adopted a staunchly literal approach to the Bible, which ultimately resulted in his form of subordinationism. The heretic Marcion (second century) also utilized literal interpretations in order to combat the proto-orthodox tradition of uniting the Old and New Testaments. Later, Antiochene hermeneutics became associated with the Nestorian heresy, making the exegetical school subject to suspicion for several generations, even resulting in the church banning many Antiochene theologians from the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century. Likewise, many churches outside of Antioch condemned Paul of Samosata (third century CE), Diodore of Tarsus (fl. ca. 375), and Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428), all major proponents of literal hermeneutics. The reason for this condemnation was because the church at large believed Antiochene exegesis created a “Jewish” interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. In other words, the exegetical practices from Antioch were not sufficiently christological in their interpretation of the Old Testament, oftentimes resulting in heterodox theologies.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 19–26, 59–60, 67, 122–23.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen D. Ryan, “Psalm 22 in Syriac Tradition,” *Letter & Spirit: The Bible and the Church Fathers, The Liturgical Context of Patristic Exegesis* 7 (2011): 168; Scott Newman, “The Scandal of Reason—Part I: A Response to Post-Modern Evangelicalism,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 1, no. 3 (December 1997): 262; Allen C. Myers, ed., “Interpretation, Biblical,” in *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 527; Fairbairn, “Patristic Exegesis,” 3, 14–15.

## Alexandrian/Antiochene Differences Alexandrian Allegories

The height of Alexandrian hermeneutics appeared between the end of the second century and the first half of the third century CE, moderately beginning with the works of Clement of Alexandria, who viewed Scripture as the written voice of God himself (*Protr.* 9:82, 84). Clement believed that God invested Scripture with divine mysteries that were not available to the average auditor. Hence, he declared that while there was an immediate mundane meaning from the surface text available to many, divine wisdom inherently possessed a deeper spiritual meaning available only to a select few. This explains why Christ taught in parables, which for Clement justified his use of allegory (cf. *Strom.* 6.15).<sup>19</sup> Conjecturing that the entirety of Scripture contained both enigmas and veiled symbols, Clement followed Philo in unreservedly allegorizing the Hebrew Bible by combining aspects from Hellenistic cosmology, soteriology, philosophy, and ethics.<sup>20</sup> For the Alexandrians, however, almost everything had a symbolic reference to the eschatological hope found in Christ; and because God is the Author of all truth, Alexandrians believed that any biblical text could elucidate any truth claim so long as it was applicable to their situation and cohered with clear biblical principles.<sup>21</sup>

According to Origen, the Bible was more than a mere book inspired by the Holy Spirit. Instead, its sacred text was almost identical to the incarnate Word of God, which encapsulated the presence of Christ as a fixed manifestation of the divine in written form (cf. *Cels.* 6.77; *Comm. ser. Matt.* 27). Like Clement, Origen also believed that the literal sense of the text possessed a spiritual meaning that most interpreters could not immediately grasp (*Princ.* 1; *Praef.* 8). Only spiritually “perfected” (cf. *Hom. Num.* 17.4) readers would be able to derive a deeper understanding from the plain sense of Scripture (*Hom. Exod.* 1.1). Origen’s systematic development of allegorism allowed him to create a threefold division of the Bible that corresponded to trichotomism: the surface text (body) was its simple meaning, the moral sense (soul) was its progressive meaning, and the mystical sense (spirit) was its perfected meaning (*Princ.* 4.2.4). Thus, while the literal connotation had remained applicable, the purpose of interpretation was to uncover Scripture’s

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<sup>19</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 35–36.

<sup>20</sup> Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 15–16.

<sup>21</sup> Wood, “Anamnesis and Allegory,” 62.

deeper spiritual truths. Otherwise, according to Origen, exegetes would merely employ the same legalistic mistakes as either the Jews, who interpreted the law in an overly literal manner, or the Gnostics, who understood the Bible's anthropomorphic imagery in a woodenly literalistic fashion (cf. *Princ.* 4.1.16).<sup>22</sup>

The allegorical methodology of Alexandrian fathers such as Irenæus, Clement, and Origen often took on a “vertical” dimension, allowing interpreters to view earthly realities within the biblical text as a form and likeness of celestial actualities (Iren. *Haer.* 4.19.1; Orig. *Princ.* 4.1–3). Because sensible phenomena reflected intelligible *noumena*, exegetes could feasibly progress from a base level of meaning to a greater level of spiritual perception.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Clement of Alexandria interpreted Solomon's Temple as representing the entire universe (*Strom.* 5.6) while Bede the Venerable (ca. 672/673–735) understood its entryway as the beginning of a spiritual life positioned toward God when entering the church. In similar fashion, Origen allegorized the dwelling tents of Israelites in the wilderness as representing the believer's ceaseless pursuit of divine knowledge (*Hom. Num.* 17.4).<sup>24</sup> This vertical allegorization derived principally from Alexandria's anagogical expositions where *anagōgē*, the ascent of the soul from a carnal to a spiritual reality, became their primary soteriological emphasis, thereby justifying the discernment of deeper spiritual truths in the text.<sup>25</sup>

For the Alexandrian exegetes, the meaning and application of God's sacred writings are infinite (cf. Orig. *Comm. Matt.* 14.6). Because God repeatedly communicated through biblical symbols, which were exemplified especially in Christ's use of parables, an allegorical-symbolic approach to Scripture was inevitable.<sup>26</sup> Simply stated, it was the Alexandrians' high view of Scripture as the authoritative and divinely inspired depository of sacred and

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<sup>22</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 41–43; Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 17; Wood, “Anamnesis and Allegory,” 62; Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, 142–55. Cf. J. A. McGuckin, “The Exegetical Metaphysics of Origen of Alexandria,” in *What is the Bible? The Patristic Doctrine of Scripture*, ed. Matthew Baker and Mark Mourachian (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 3–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17mcsbk.5>.

<sup>23</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 22, 42, 44; Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 44–47.

<sup>24</sup> Marco Conti and Gianluca Pilara, eds., *1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 5:41. See also, Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 38, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 17–18; Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 46n10.

<sup>26</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 35–36, 43.



mysterious wisdom that encouraged the allegorical practice. The Hellenistic understanding of divine inspiration, exemplified best in Philo, presupposed a direct intervention and influence on the biblical writers. Because God directly produced holy writ, the Bible must therefore possess deeper spiritual truths throughout its pages (*hyponoia*). Thus, Origen concluded that Asiatic forms of literalism were naïve in their anthropological approach to hermeneutics. Because the Bible is divinely inspired, it must have a spiritual disposition and character imbedded within its pages. To suggest otherwise would be an affront to the divine nature of Scripture.<sup>27</sup> Of course, some interpreters used this spiritual approach to mask their disapproval of the plain sense of the biblical texts, believing that some of the actions and descriptions of Yahweh were unworthy of deity. Known as *defectus litterae*, this hermeneutical tactic applied by ancient Jews (e.g. Philo) and Christians (e.g. Origen) attempted to alleviate the more disreputable passages in the Bible by seeking deeper symbolic meanings within its words.<sup>28</sup> For Origen in particular, the divine *Logos* must have inserted these embarrassing “stumbling blocks” into Scripture to prompt exegetes to uncover more commendable meanings (cf. *Princ.* 4.2.9).<sup>29</sup>

### Antiochene *Theōria*

In contrast to the predominantly allegorical interpretation of Scripture, the Antiochene school of hermeneutics sometimes rejected what they believed were overly symbolic, often disproportionately spiritual discernments of the Bible. For the Antiochene exegetes, interpreters such as Origen abused the allegorical method by devising arbitrary and self-serving theologies from Hebrew etymologies. According to the Antiochene exegetes, their approach was what best exemplified the New Testament’s use of typology while Alexandrian hermeneutics were symptomatically unrestrained.<sup>30</sup>

Borrowing from Plato’s term *theōria*, many Antiochenes, especially Diodore of Tarsus, understood their approach to Scripture as fundamentally different from allegory.<sup>31</sup> Their notion of *theōria* exemplified a higher,

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<sup>27</sup> Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 5–6, 16–17.

<sup>28</sup> See esp. Slade, “*Hagioprepēs*,” *forthcoming*.

<sup>29</sup> McGuckin, “The Exegetical Metaphysics of Origen,” 14–16; Myers, “Interpretation,” 526.

<sup>30</sup> Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 19–20.

<sup>31</sup> See for example, Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 79–94. Interestingly, the term “*theōria*” is not prominent in the apostolic fathers but still appears to be a guiding principle among the early Antiochenes (Walter Kaiser, “Psalm 72: An Historical and Messianic Current

anagogical sense that refused to nullify the biblical text's historical referents. Like the Alexandrians, Antioch believed that the interpretation of Scripture should lead Christian readers toward greater spiritual truths. However, while the Alexandrians emphasized philosophical traditions and spiritual realities, Antioch also stressed the rhetorical and rational analysis of Scripture, as well. Thus, for them, *theōria* became a mediating position between Jewish legalistic literalism and overly pagan allegory. Nevertheless, this approach was not simply a reformulation of Jewish typology. Rather, *theōria* meant that certain biblical passages were genuinely prophetic, referring simultaneously to both their original historical context and to subsequent future events all the way through to the final resurrection.<sup>32</sup>

Origen's allegorical methodology differed from Antiochene *theōria* because it sometimes allowed him to minimize or reject the historical details of Scripture altogether. While Origen believed the majority of Scripture had a literal sense that was applicable to Christian life, he also believed that not all biblical passages required an historical referent since every portion of Scripture had at least a deeper spiritual meaning. This emphasis on spiritualism contrasted with the hermeneutical methodology of the Antiochenes, who stressed the historical aspects of Scripture and demanded that exegetes attain their interpretations from the historical details.<sup>33</sup> The essential distinction within Antiochene exegesis was its stress on the ancient concept of *historia*, which, unlike modern historiography, focused on the chronological succession of God's redemptive actions in the past. For *theōria-historia*, the structured order of salvation history took priority in the hermeneutical endeavor. Thus, exegetes such as Theodore of Mopsuestia insisted on identifying and analyzing the salvific-historical context underlying much of the Bible.<sup>34</sup>

According to the Antiochenes, the concept of *theōria* best characterized the deeper meaning of Scripture by avoiding the potential abuses of allegory

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Example of Antiochene Hermeneutical *Theoria*," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 2 [June 2009]: 257–70).

<sup>32</sup> Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 20–21.

<sup>33</sup> Bradley Nassif, "John Chrysostom on the Nature of Revelation and Task of Exegesis," in *What is the Bible? The Patristic Doctrine of Scripture*, ed. Matthew Baker and Mark Mourachian (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17mcsbk.8>; Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Bradley C. Gregory, "'The Sennacherib Error' in Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on the Twelve Prophets: Light from the History of Interpretation," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 213–14. See also, Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 95–103.

found in the Alexandrians. The Antiochene preference for the historical context ensured that Antioch's exegetes would not diminish or neglect the plain sense of the biblical text. This form of "literalism" meant that, unlike the allegorists, Antiochenes did not believe every passage of Scripture possessed a deeper spiritual meaning.<sup>35</sup> This is why Theodore repeatedly challenged allegorists by insisting that simple matters, such as numbers, do not have any symbolic meaning outside their plain sense. With a bit of irony, his "literal" approach also meant that, in opposition to the Alexandrians, he opposed interpreting figurative language with strict literalness and understood metaphorical expressions as emblematic representations of a concrete reality, though he preferred never to allegorize these same figures of speech. When treating Paul's use of *ἀλληγορούμενα* (*allēgoroumena*) in Galatians 4:24, Theodore argued that Paul was actually referring to the Antiochene concept of *theōria*. For him, the scriptural term "allegory" had a much broader meaning that conformed more to typology than Alexandrian *hyponoia*.<sup>36</sup> Here, the Antiochene tradition was determined to emphasize the historical and rational context of Scripture, thereby forcing them to emphasize the surface details of the text.<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly, the Antiochenes felt that Alexandria failed precisely because it either diminished the historical details, over philosophized the texts, or created overtly esoteric and capricious interpretations. Nonetheless, the Antiochene concept of *theōria* was not equivalent to modern-day "literal" hermeneutics. Indeed, *theōria* was still "spiritual" in the sense of approaching Scripture's historical details with a christological teleology.<sup>38</sup> Both the Antiochenes and the Alexandrians accentuated mystical interpretations of the Hebrew Bible because of its supposed foreshadowing of Christ. The difference was actually a matter of emphasis for the two schools. Antiochenes focused especially on messianic prophecies in the Jewish texts while Alexandrians accentuated the symbolic prefiguration of Christ in events and people.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Nassif, "John Chrysostom," 57–58.

<sup>36</sup> For a Jewish perspective on Paul's use of Scripture, see Charles David Isbell, "Saul the Sadducee? A Rabbinical Thought Experiment," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 85–119, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no2.01>.

<sup>37</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 67, 72; Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 8. For a defense of the Antiochene interpretation of Galatians, see Robert J. Kepple, "An Analysis of Antiochene Exegesis of Galatians 4:24–26," *Westminster Theological Journal* 39, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 239–49.

<sup>38</sup> Nassif, "John Chrysostom," 63; Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 22; Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 9.

<sup>39</sup> Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 8.

### Alexandrian/Antiochene Similarities

Notwithstanding these minute differences and exegetical disputes, both schools of Christian thought agreed on most hermeneutical concepts. For instance, both Alexandria and Antioch approved of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures only in light of the incarnation. In reaction to the Gnostic tendency to disassociate the Old Testament from the New, Clement emphasized the unity and cohesion of the entire Bible in his exegetical practices (*Strom.* 2.6.29; 4.21.134).<sup>40</sup> While the same exercise was not true for all Antiochenes, such as Theodore who emphasized a disjunction between the two Testaments, others followed the Alexandrian model of uniting the entire Bible. Theodoret of Cyrus (ca. 393–460) viewed the Jewish texts as typologically forecasting the advent of Christ, thereby allowing him to use both Testaments as an aggregate whole with which to interpret Scripture. This unified understanding derived out of a belief that God divinely inspired the Bible as an authoritative discourse to humanity, which provided the needed rationale for interpreting all of the Bible as a single book with consistent themes and intentions.<sup>41</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, many theologians have associated the Antiochene stress on salvation history with christological typology, specifically contrasting this technique against Alexandrian allegory. For these theologians, Antioch's typology attempted to relate and unify the entirety of Scripture by reinterpreting persons and events in the Old Testament as anticipatory prefigurements of persons and events in the New Testament. These theologians have argued that Antiochene typology, unlike the Alexandrians, refused to discard the literal-historical details of Scripture.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, these stark contrasts are simply incorrect. Frequently, Alexandrian allegorizations demonstrated that their approach to the Hebrew Bible was oftentimes synonymous with Antiochene typology.<sup>43</sup> In fact, both the Alexandrians and the Antiochenes possessed a high esteem for the literal sense of Scripture.

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<sup>40</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 35, 39.

<sup>41</sup> Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 7, 12–13.

<sup>42</sup> For an example of this dichotomy, see Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, A Companion to Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 165.

<sup>43</sup> See for example, Olbricht, "Greek Rhetoric," 36–47 and Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 32–35, 67–68.

For the Alexandrian theologian Clement, an interpreter's spiritual and intellectual acumen determined which level of meaning they could receive. A more direct, literal level was still available for those less initiated to higher interpretive practices, whereas a deeper understanding availed itself to the hermeneutically gifted (*Paed.* 3.12.97; *Strom.* 6.15). The Alexandrian father Origen also treated the Hebrew Scriptures as an historical document first before extrapolating a christological-messianic meaning behind the text, placing more emphasis on the literal meaning of Scripture than any other father before him (cf. *Princ.* 4.1.3; 4.2.6; 4.3.4). This indicates that both schools accepted a literal interpretation of Scripture, though the Alexandrians understood the plain sense to be of a lower, more prosaic quality. Interestingly, Clement insisted that interpreters should not change any meaning from the surface text. For him, an allegorical understanding merely supplied further insights into the majesty of God so long as it remained consistent with other biblical teachings (*Strom.* 7.16.96). This was also the practice of Origen, who combatted Gnostic allegory by demanding that all spiritual interpretations remain connected to the surface text. In fact, it was Origen's respect for the literal sense that propelled later exegetes, such as Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 263–340), to adopt Asiatic literalism as the preferred hermeneutical method (*Princ.* 4.2.9; 4.3.4).<sup>44</sup>

Alexis Torrance, therefore, remarks that it is “pernicious” to “claim that patristic exegetes who employed spiritual methods of interpretation necessarily dismissed the literal, historical sense by the same token.”<sup>45</sup> Though Theodore of Mopsuestia vigorously opposed Origen's interpretations, both remained fervently devoted to the literal sense of the text. They also believed that there were deeper meanings behind the literal sense even to the point of prioritizing the spiritual meaning over the literal.<sup>46</sup> Recognizing the importance of spiritual levels in the text indicates that it is a false dichotomy to present the Alexandrians and Antiochenes as being opposed to each other in exegetical method. The expository intent for both regions demonstrated that their different approaches were more complimentary than incompatible. Thus, the patristic exegetical practice as a whole, regardless of whether a particular exegete was from Alexandria or Antioch, is more properly termed “spiritual” than

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<sup>44</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 36–37, 41, 43–44.

<sup>45</sup> Torrance, “Barsanuphius, John, and Dorotheos,” 68n3.

<sup>46</sup> Fairbairn, “Patristic Exegesis,” 8. See also, Bradley Nassif, “The ‘Spiritual Exegesis’ of Scripture: The School of Antioch Revisited,” *Anglican Theological Review* 75, no. 4 (1993): 437–70.

“allegorical” or “literal.”<sup>47</sup> This spiritual understanding derives from their common hermeneutical beliefs about the Bible. For all the church fathers, Scripture communicated divine wisdom and, therefore, possessed multiple depths of meaning, including a literal and a spiritual level. As Charles Kannengiesser explains, the patristic fathers all shared a common belief in the polysemic nature of the sacred and divine texts. “Beyond their different languages and cultures, or their local school traditions, Greek or Syriac or Latin alike ... was the shared ‘spiritual sense,’ at once rooted in scripture itself, and in a millennium-old trend of poetic imagination.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite charges of haphazard allegorizations, both hermeneutical schools followed precise and systematized criteria for interpretation. For instance, Origen was one of the first to codify hermeneutics as a methodological science (*Princ.* 4.2.9; 4.3.4–5). Like the Antiochenes, Origen not only recognized the potential arbitrariness of allegories, but he also attempted to establish procedural methods to prevent exegetes from total capriciousness by insisting that spiritual interpretations connect to the literary context, as well as find confirmation from other biblical passages (cf. *Comm. Jo.* 2.14, 21; 6.60; 13.10, 17, 60).<sup>49</sup> These practices align with the Antiochene rhetorical schools, which insisted that exegetes utilize textual, philological, historical, and biblical studies to discern a text’s meaning.<sup>50</sup>

In similar fashion, the Antiochenes did not consistently or universally practice a “literal” interpretation of Scripture. The exegetes of Antioch agreed with the Alexandrians that the plain sense was not the only meaning embedded in Scripture. As Diodore of Tarsus demonstrated in his examination of Genesis, oftentimes historical details (e.g. Cain and Abel) presented deeper spiritual truths that related to Christianity (e.g. Jewish antagonism toward the church). Thus, while emphasizing the literal nature of the text, Antioch sometimes engaged in allegorical and typological interpretations that resembled the Alexandrians.<sup>51</sup> In fact, there were times when Antiochenes, such as Eustathius of Antioch (ca. 270–336), allegorized a passage that Alexandrians, such as

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<sup>47</sup> See Rodolph Yanney, “Spiritual Interpretation of Scripture in the School of Alexandria,” *Coptic Church Review* 10, no. 3 (1989): 74–81.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, One Volume ed. (2004; repr., Leiden: Brill, 2006), 209.

<sup>49</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 39, 46. See also, Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 48–78.

<sup>50</sup> Young, “The Rhetorical Schools,” 182–99.

<sup>51</sup> Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation*, 67–68.

Origen, interpreted literally. In the case of the Witch at Endor (1 Sam. 28), Eustathius castigated Origen for interpreting the passage too literally.<sup>52</sup>

These similarities are attributable partly to both schools deriving some of their interpretations from Platonic beliefs about reality. For example, Plato's spiritual realm of "intelligibles" encouraged Origen and other Alexandrians to view the corporeal world as a mere shadow of spiritual realities, prompting them to seek spiritual truths in vertical allegories. Likewise, the Antiochenes also emulated Plato's concept of *theōria*, which was almost identical to the Alexandrian pursuit for spiritual truths not instantly observable through a plain reading of the surface text. In application, there was no substantive difference between Alexandrian allegorizations and Antiochene *theōria* because both derived from the same Platonic goal of achieving a higher level of spirituality.<sup>53</sup>

### **A Common Theological Expediency**

Ultimately, the principle similarity between the two hermeneutical schools was their priority of theological paradigms over objective exegetical readings. In other words, both Alexandrians and Antiochenes interpreted Scripture according to whatever theological scheme they ascribed to and subsequently made their exposition of Scripture fit that theology. Hence, for heterodox Christologies such as Arianism and Nestorianism, the exegetes would interpret some passages literally and some passages figuratively in order to maintain their christological beliefs. For those adhering to proto-orthodox concepts about Christ, the patristics engaged in the same hermeneutical tactic of epicycling scriptural verses to fit their preferred theological paradigm. It was not literalism or allegorism that dictated their exegesis. Rather, it was the particular theology that they wanted to extrapolate from the text that dominated.<sup>54</sup> This preference for theology over objective exegesis was especially blatant in the hermeneutical concept of *theoprepēs* ("God-befitting"),

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<sup>52</sup> Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 6. Likewise, Eustathius' vehement criticism of Origen's interpretation of the Witch at Endor stemmed from a divergent theological belief regarding the role of Scripture, not an opposition to allegory (see Joseph W. Trigg, "Eustathius of Antioch's Attack on Origen: What is at Issue in an Ancient Controversy," *Journal of Religion* 75, no. 2 [1995]: 219–38), <https://doi.org/10.1086/489567>.

<sup>53</sup> Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 17, 20–21.

<sup>54</sup> For more details, see Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 10–16. Cf. Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation*, 3. Readers should note that this same exegetical practice occurs today among all denominational strands of Christianity, including those within orthodoxy and those within marginal or heretical sects.

which asserted that no interpretation derived from Scripture could be allowed to impugn God's good and holy character (cf. Orig. *Hom. Lev.* 7.5).<sup>55</sup>

The primacy of theology in exegetical endeavors explains why the Alexandrian school focused on Christ's spiritual nature (i.e. his deity), which later resulted in the development of Apollinarianism among some Alexandrians. Similarly, the theological focus of the Antiochenes occasioned an overemphasis on the dual nature of Christ, resulting in the Nestorian heresy.<sup>56</sup> This expediency also explains why Antiochene theologians generally rejected the exceedingly symbolic book of Revelation from their canon all the way through to the fifth century.<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, its genre would have potentially disrupted their preconceived ideas about Christ. Hence, the development of both exegetical approaches was the result of theological agendas, polemically and apologetically, that attempted to counter the opposing theologies of Jews, pagans, Gnostics, and perceived heretics within their own churches.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

In the end, it is inaccurate to argue that the Antiochenes were antagonistic toward allegories simply because they were literalists. Rather, they opposed Alexandrian *theological* interpretations, oftentimes employing allegorical readings of Scripture themselves to accomplish their own objectives. Likewise, it would be erroneous to argue that the Alexandrians disregarded the literal or historical sense of the text. Instead, while the two schools had differed procedurally only in degree, their primary objection to each other was their resultant theological constructs and christological paradigms.<sup>59</sup> This explains why one school in particular, the Antiochene system, generated more heretical exegetes than the other. According to Donald Fairbairn, "Only three men truly

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<sup>55</sup> McGuckin, "The Exegetical Metaphysic of Origen," 14–16.

<sup>56</sup> James P. Eckman, *Exploring Church History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 33–34.

<sup>57</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 1977), 60.

<sup>58</sup> See James N. S. Alexander, "The Interpretation of Scripture in the Ante-Nicene Period: A Brief Conspectus," *Interpretation* 12, no. 3 (July 1958): 272–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096435801200302>, though the author is guilty of making too stark of a contrast between the unrestrained allegorism of the Alexandrians and the inordinate literalism of the Antiochenes.

<sup>59</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, "Patristic Rhetoric on Allegory: Origen and Eustathius Put 1 Samuel 28 on Trial," *Journal of Religion* 85, no. 3 (2005): 414–45, [doi.org/10.1086/429573](https://doi.org/10.1086/429573); Fairbairn, "Patristic Exegesis," 11.



belong in the Antiochene camp: Diodore, Theodore, and Nestorius. And, of course ... all three of these were condemned by the church....Clearly, then, the Antiochene school was not a significant portion of the early church, nor were the Antiochenes the ‘good guys’ in the mind of the church at that time.”<sup>60</sup> As Fairbairn rightly concludes,

Discussions of patristic exegesis by modern biblical scholars are rarely merely descriptive. They *almost always* involve value judgments about the validity of certain exegetical methods, and those value judgments universally favor Antioch over Alexandria. This assumption is the one that plays most directly to the sympathies of evangelicals....This, of course, is fairly standard and accepted: the Antiochenes were the “good guys”; the Alexandrians were the “bad guys”....We would study Alexandrian allegory basically in order to condemn it. We would study Antiochene literal exegesis basically in order to pat ourselves on the backs and say, “See, even in the early church there were people doing exegesis the way we do, so it must be right.”<sup>61</sup>

This type of “shoehorning” is evident among non-historians, as depicted in Scott Newman’s naïve belief that Antiochenes “saw only one true meaning to any text doing away with Origen’s notion of countless interpretations for any given verse.”<sup>62</sup> Newman fails to recognize that the idea of only one meaning is completely foreign to most of church history and does not account for the spiritualized, christocentric hermeneutic evident in the New Testament and the church fathers.<sup>63</sup> Both the Antiochenes and the Alexandrians discovered multiple levels of meaning imbedded in Scripture. As Dennis Stamps remarks, “The Enlightenment-informed, scientific, historical-critical approach to Scripture in a post-Christian context is distinctly different from the way the NT writers understood their interpretative task.”<sup>64</sup> Vern Poythress likewise

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<sup>60</sup> Fairbairn, “Patristic Exegesis,” 14–15.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–5; emphasis in original.

<sup>62</sup> Newman, “The Scandal of Reason,” 262.

<sup>63</sup> See Peter Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving Beyond A Modernist Impasse,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 266–70 and Myers, “Interpretation,” 526–28.

<sup>64</sup> Dennis L. Stamps, “The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament as a Rhetorical Device: A Methodological Proposal,” in *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 20–21.

contends, “When later human writers of Scripture interpret earlier parts of Scripture, they typically do so without making fine scholarly distinctions concerning the basis of their knowledge. Hence we ought not to require them to confine themselves to a narrow grammatical-historical exegesis.”<sup>65</sup>

The simple fact is that the Antiochenes did not approach the Bible more “literally” than others. It is true that the Alexandrians developed a figural interpretation of many passages that the Antiochenes regarded as literal. Theologians can also acknowledge that Alexandrians tended toward philosophical and abstract interpretations while the Antiochenes often focused on Scripture’s moral implications. Therefore, it is correct to claim the Antiochenes emphasized history and philology while the Alexandrians highlighted metaphorical symbols.<sup>66</sup> However, it is inaccurate to suggest that the patristic fathers adhered to a hermeneutical method that isolated biblical meanings solely to the text’s authorial intent through historical-grammatical readings. Their overtly spiritualization of the text rules this out as a possibility.

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<sup>65</sup> Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 48, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 279. The irony is that many defenders of historical-grammatical hermeneutics and authorial-intent discourse oftentimes reject the skeptical presuppositions of Enlightenment beliefs while simultaneously adopting its methodological approach to literature without question. For examples of this type of naiveté, which claim to adopt Christian hermeneutical traditions but scorn the multivocal, polysemic, and multivalent spiritual interpretations of the patristic fathers, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (1988; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998) and John Douglas Morrison, *Has God Said? Scripture, The Word of God, and the Crisis of Theological Authority*, Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series 5 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> Fairbairn, “Patristic Exegesis,” 3–4, 9.

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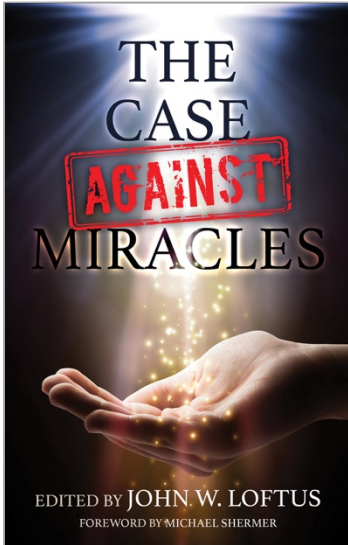
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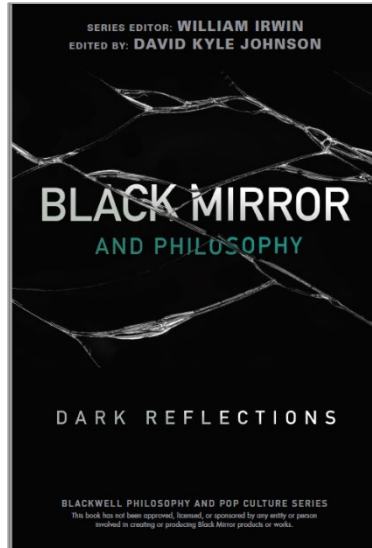
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