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FOREWORD BY GRAEME GOLDSWORTHY

IN ALL THE SCRIPTURES

THE THREE CONTEXTS OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

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THE TEXT AS A MIRROR

A Selective History of Hermeneutics

Reading the Bible is like looking into water. If you have ever stood on the bank of a pond and looked down, you surely noticed two things. For one, you could dimly see into the water and vaguely make out the plants and fish. But also, you saw yourself and the luminous sky above. That combination of the contents of the pond together with the reflection of you and your world delivers this poignant message: *you are a part of this ecosystem now*. Your presence impacts it. And that affects what you see. It is hard to see past your reflection. But it is possible.

In this chapter I will lay out a concise history of biblical hermeneutics with particular attention to the way interpreters have tried to move from the meaning in the text to its relevance and application in their times. William Yarchin comments that "much of the history of biblical interpretation concerns the question of referentiality in the Bible: to what extent

are the texts of Scripture to be read for what they *plainly* state, and to what extent *as figures* of something other than their plain reference?" (emphasis original).[1]

It is at that point that various hermeneutical approaches have been employed to navigate *how* such figures work, and whether that "something other than their plain reference" is still in line with the plain reference or something truly *other*. In the end, we will see that there are surer paths to legitimate and ethical interpretation, and the others are distractions. Some provide a clear scope for peering into the pond; others predominantly see the sky above.

If you are not a history buff, please do not be tempted to skip this chapter. I will conclude this historical survey with a very relevant application: an understanding of something called the "hermeneutical spiral." So hang in there. History will tell us a lot about today. As Gerald Bray puts it, "The Bible has shaped the life of the church in a way that nothing else has done, and Christians today are the product of the history of its interpretation."[2]

Alexandria and Antioch (Second–Fifth Centuries)

It might seem logical to start with Jesus or even before Jesus. But I want to save Jesus and his world for the next chapter. Let us begin with the first generation of readers that had a full Bible, after the New Testament had been completed and compiled.[3]

Jesus' apostles, who penned the New Testament, seem to have had quite a consistent hermeneutic.[4] And the church recognized that the apostles' authority now resided in their writings (e.g., 2 Pet 1:12-21).[5] But

[1]William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), xii.

[2]Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 8.

[3]On the canonization of the sixty-six books of the Bible see Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, rev. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., trans. H. De Jonge, 2nd rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1988); Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

[4]To be sure, this is not an undisputed point. I will lay out my argument for this in the next chapter.

[5]Again, this is a reduction. Some also alleged that the living Spirit gave utterances from the resurrected Lord, and others relied on the authority of local bishops. But even with these

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by the time they passed from history the church had spread over wonderfully vast distances. By the end of the first century there were Christian communities across North Africa, Asia Minor, and Greece, stretching as far west as Rome and even eastward beyond Roman territory. As would be expected, over such a large area there were different convictions about how to approach interpretation. Sometimes these different convictions were motivated by the varying theological concerns and pressures felt from the surrounding cultures.

Apologists like Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165) were too engaged in speaking up in the face of persecution to give much attention to hermeneutics.[6] We see, therefore, in the earliest Fathers a mixed methodology.[7] Much was simply literal, but it also had a "Christocentric bias" to it because that is what they saw in the New Testament.[8] The result was two approaches to move beyond literal interpretation to transcendent meanings: allegory and typology. In simplest terms, allegory attempts to dig under the straightforward and historical sense of texts to find hidden, mystical meanings. Typology, on the other hand, starts from the historical sense and perceives the way persons, events, and institutions in the Old Testament prefigure the person and work of Christ.

It is not uncommon to see the Fathers blend allegory and typology in an unsystematic way, though Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 135–200) and Tertullian (ca. 160–220) did recognize the difference and speak against allegory.[9] Irenaeus wrote, "By transferring passages, and dressing them up anew, and making one thing out of another, they succeed in deluding many."[10] Instead, "If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention,

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additional forms of revelation and leadership, the Scriptures were never eclipsed as the foundation of the church.

[6]Unless otherwise noted, all dates in this chapter are taken from Michael Graves, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, Ad Fontes Early Christian Sources (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017) or Donald K. McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007).

[7]Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 151-71.

[8]Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 97.

[9]Stephen Westerholm and Martin Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices from the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 54-63.

[10]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.8.1 (*ANF* 1:326).

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he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling. . . . He was pointed out by means of types and parables."[11] The coming of the Son provides, therefore, "the explanation of all things" where anything that was hidden is now "brought to light by the cross of Christ."[12] And Melito of Sardis (d. ca. 180) calls Isaac "a type of Him who should suffer"[13] and in the exodus and Passover "a preliminary sketch is made of what is to be."[14] But the underdevelopment of hermeneutics in this first generation is evident in the way one interpreter can lean toward one approach and then switch to the other.[15]

For example, in a book called *The Epistle of Barnabas* (likely written as early as AD 100–130) the author asks in 6:10, "What, therefore, does 'into the good land, a land flowing with milk and honey' mean?"[16] He answers his own question: entering into the good land is a reference to the Christian understanding of regeneration or being born again (6:11-16), and the milk and honey—the food of infants—has to do with our need to be "nourished by faith" (6:17). This would be an example of allegory; there is nothing specifically in the text to point this way. But the author goes on with what appears to be a rather sophisticated—and quite intriguing—theological understanding of the relationship between Adam's role in the creation, Israel's call, redemption in Christ, and the final blessed state of humanity. This feels like typology, Adam and Israel prefiguring later realities in Christ.

It was not long before these two approaches were distinguished, however, and the two main schools of thought that finally emerged were associated with Alexandria and Antioch.

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[11]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.26.1 (*ANF* 1:496).

[12]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.26.1 (*ANF* 1:496).

[13]Melito of Sardis, *The Catena on Genesis* (*ANF* 8:759).

[14]Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha* 36 (Alistair Stewart-Sykes, trans., *On Pascha: With the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans*, Popular Patristics Series [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001], 46).

[15]This has contributed to some conclusions that there really is no difference between allegory and typology. I make the case in this chapter and throughout this work, that there are very many differences. Early examples of their conflation are no evidence to the contrary, but only an underdevelopment of both. See, e.g., Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament and the New*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 1-20.

[16]Translations from Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

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Figure 1.1. Alexandria and Antioch were about five hundred miles apart by boat.

Alexandria, located at the mouth of the Nile, had been a center of learning and philosophy for centuries before the New Testament was written. Thus, by the time the church grew in Alexandria, it was already primed to have an influence beyond its borders. Additionally, Alexandria's tradition of Greek philosophy was very influential on church leaders. Interpreters of the Alexandrian school felt both an appreciation for the Greek philosophy that gave the city its renown, and also the need to make an apologetic to the world that Christianity was not a philosophically regressive system. They wanted to show the world that Christianity not only spoke intelligently into the philosophical climate, but even eclipsed the best of Greek philosophy.[17]

The Alexandrians reached for a hermeneutic to accomplish this task, therefore, and *allegory* was ready made for it. Thus, accounts like the calling of Abraham, the events of the exodus, or the temple cult were less important to the Alexandrians than an immediately applicable philosophical interpretation that could speak directly into the Greco-Roman world around them. Their appreciation for Greek philosophy had turned into the *application* of Greek philosophy.

[17]Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 119-21.

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Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215) and Origen (ca. 185–253) are the conduits of this interpretive tradition into the wider Christian movement. Clement wrote, "I seek after God, not the works of God. Whom shall I take as a helper in my inquiry? . . . How, then, is God to be searched out, O Plato?"[18] While Origen was deeply concerned with historical matters, the literal historical meaning was only a starting point to move into the important matters of interpretation: getting to the allegorical meaning (developed in his *On First Principles*). For example, Origen believed in the historicity of the flood, but moved quickly to allegorical speculations on the meaning of the dimensions of the ark.[19] At other times, however, Origen simply rejected the historical claims of the text in favor of an entirely allegorical interpretation.[20] It suited his goal of combating heretics and reaching the Hellenized world, but it also fit his philosophical Platonism: if the objects and events of this world all have a deeper spiritual meaning, then so too the Bible. It is "everywhere sprinkled with riddles and dark sayings."[21]

To be sure, however, Origen believed that the passages that could be taken historically and literally made up the greater proportion than those that *had* to be taken allegorically. All the same, it was his Greek philosophical construct that swayed his hermeneutical tendencies.[22]

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[18]Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen* 6.1 (*ANF* 2:191).

[19]Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality*, trans. Dom Wulstan Hibberd, Studies in the Biblical Theology of the Fathers (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1960), 103-12.

[20]Ironically, it may be because Origen read the Bible *so* literally in a plain sense, that he had to resort all the way to allegory when things like "circumcise your heart" were nonsensical to him (Westerholm and Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture*, 80-90).

[21]Origen, *On First Principles* 4.2, trans. G. W. Butterworth (London: SPCK, 1936; repr., Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1966, 1973), 360-61.

[22]This is not to deny, however, that Origen thought Christianly. Of course he did. Only the contemporary philosophy influenced his otherwise Christian understanding of things. In fact, McCartney and Clayton make the interesting conjecture, "Since Origen's presuppositions about the Bible and God's word were more central to him than his Neoplatonic philosophy, it is arguable that Origen would have moved closer to a biblical worldview had he lived longer. In fact, in his later works (such as his commentary on Matthew and *Against Celsus*), he is not nearly as fanciful in his allegorizing as in his earlier works" (Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, 2nd ed. [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002], 86). For a far more thorough and sympathetic explanation of the Fathers' allegorical methods, see Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

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We see in this how easy it is that the pressing philosophical concerns of the day can float the interpretive boat. Either intentionally (because the exegete has the desire to speak into such a philosophical environment) or accidentally (because the exegete may not know to what extent they are influenced by their philosophical environment) interpretations are easily shaped by the cultural context of the reader. This is to be expected in a lot of ways, and I will return to this culture-reader-text dynamic below. For now, I point this out to show how the goal and result of exegesis can become lines for retrieving preset philosophical ideals.[23] I call this *eisegesis of the reigning Zeitgeist into the ancient biblical text*.

Eisegesis is the opposite of exegesis. Exegesis, as discussed in the introduction, is the process of drawing the meaning *out* of the biblical text. *Eisegesis* is when we read foreign ideas *into* the biblical text. A *Zeitgeist* is the collection of ideas and feelings that predominate a culture in any given era. It literally translates as "the spirit of the age." Many interpretations down the ages are the result of the reigning Zeitgeist—that collection of pervasive and dominant philosophical ideals of any culture—being read *into* biblical texts. In such cases we miss what is really in the text, and in turn simply pull out of the text what we ourselves read into it—the Zeitgeist—often enough not even knowing we are doing that.

The biblical interpreters of Antioch, however, approached things differently. They placed a lot more value on the historical locatedness of biblical texts, and found the meaning inherently bound to the actual events they describe. In turn, they reprimanded the allegorists for "depriv[ing] biblical history of its reality."[24] The creation account matters because it attests to God's involvement in history. The exodus matters because it happened. Abraham's life matters because God called him in space and time. History matters to the Old Testament writers, so the interpreter can find meaning there. Therefore, allegory is not necessary. In the end, the Scriptures are not a storehouse of hidden philosophical treasures, nor do they need to be rescued from their earthiness to suit

[23]See Daniélou, *Shadows to Reality*, esp. 58.
[24]McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*, 88.

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Greek philosophy. They are God's revelation of himself in history and through history.

Yet the Antiochenes also knew that there had to be some kind of contemporary relevance. The Bible does not just list the brute facts of history. Diodore of Tarsus (ca. 330–394), therefore, allowed for "the higher interpretation," which he called *theoria*, as long as it worked in line with the historical meaning.[25] So the various genres of the Old Testament, while embedded in history and concerned with their own historical moment, look back and look forward to these "higher" meanings. "This fundamental distinction between *theoria* and allegory allows Diodore to perceive typologies created within the biblical narrative itself."[26] The simplest example of this would be the Passover lamb: it was sacrificed in Egypt for sure, but its "higher interpretation" (*theoria*) points to Christ as the final lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428) detected such typology when the Old Testament uses "hyperbole." His close attention to the historical sense of any text is what made him particularly aware when the authors used "hyperbole," which he called overstatements regarding some figure or event that could only make sense in relation to the coming Christ.[27] In Psalm 16:10, for example, David says the Lord will not let him see decay which is actually a reference to the coming Messiah, not David himself (as Peter says in Acts 2:24-32). So Christopher Hall summarizes:

> Theodore understands hyperbolic language, then, as purposeful exaggeration by a biblical writer in light of God's future greater acts. In a strict interpretation, David's body experienced decay. His words in Psalm 16 appear to run aground. Theodore teaches, however, that "they are found to be true in so far as they were said concerning Christ the Lord."[28]

[25]Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 109-10.

[26]Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 161.

[27]Hall, *Reading Scripture*, 167-69.

[28]Hall, *Reading Scripture*, 168; closing quote from Theodore himself from his *Commentary on Zechariah*.

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Thus, the Antiochenes saw themselves as working with the historical sense of the text that *itself* points to the christological horizon of meaning.

Theodoret of Cyrus (393–458) did not eschew allegory with the same force, but his preference for typology is clear. When writing on the suffering and victory expressed in Psalm 30, he writes of the historical experience of Hezekiah *and* Jesus:

> Isaiah brought Hezekiah the sentence of death in the evening, and towards morning brought him in turn the good news of life. And it happened likewise in the case of the salvation of everyone: the sacred apostles and the believers along with them lamented the Passion of the Lord, but towards morning the women came and brought the joy of the Resurrection.[29]

Thus, Theodoret has grounded the meaning of the psalm with a true historical referent (Hezekiah), and also illustrated how that history serves as a pattern for Christ's experience. As Hezekiah was as good as dead and revived the next day, Christ truly died and was brought back to life in three days. The primary mark of this kind of interpretation that distinguishes it from allegory is the anchoring of the meaning in real history that then provides the reflection on an intrinsic pattern across the Scriptures, especially in the person and work of Christ. Allegory, on the other hand, has no need for history and often enough runs *around* Christ.[30]

Before leaving the Fathers, a word should be said about Jerome (ca. 347–419) and Augustine of Hippo (354–430).

Both seem to embody something of the uneasy but also inseparable relationship between allegory and typology. Jerome had been a translator and proponent of Origen's writings, but eventually distanced himself and rejected his allegorical methods. Yet, in his later years Jerome would still turn to allegory in certain circumstances.[31] Augustine, similarly, distrusted allegory but nonetheless resorted to it from time to time. He is

[29]Theodoret of Cyrus, "Commentary on Psalm 30," in *A Commentary on the Psalms: Psalms 1–72*, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 101 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 189.

[30]Jean Daniélou, *The Lord of History: Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History*, trans. Nigel Abercrombie (London: Longmans, 1958), 140-41.

[31]Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 91-92, 103.

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also remembered for many interpretive "rules" that the Antiochenes would have (largely) applauded.[32] Among them are important considerations of historical and literary contexts as well as an appreciation for the progressive nature of Scripture—the idea that the Bible slowly unfolds God's revelation, and so the later parts need to be understood in light of the earlier and vice versa. But he liked allegory ever since he met Ambrose of Milan; it was able to be used to combat the Manicheans and yet fit within his Neoplatonism.[33] That is to say, as we have seen above, it fit within his preconceived philosophical system and proved useful with other philosophical agendas. All this goes to show how influential a Zeitgeist can be even when hermeneutical principles are well conceived. It seems to be a constant breeze in the interpretive sails.

Two Paths Diverge (Sixth–Sixteenth Centuries)

The Middle Ages can be generally viewed in terms of the legacies of the Alexandrians and Antiochenes.[34] While the school of Antioch is not without its medieval alumni, it was the Alexandrian hermeneutic that had a larger influence on the Middle Ages.[35]

Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) warned against the excesses of allegory, but nonetheless employed it quite readily himself, giving further development to Origen's multiple senses.

For his part, he believed that the primary goal of Bible teaching is ethical instruction. He was eager to see moral commands in any text, and allegory provided the means to such ends. He taught, for example, that when Jesus asks the blind man in Luke 18:41, "What do you want me to do for you?," this is instruction to us to always pray. For even though the Lord knows all, he is provoking the beggar to ask him anyway; thus

[32]Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1-3 (*NPNF1* 2:522-73).
[33]Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 61-62.
[34]This book is written primarily in dialogue with the Western tradition. My hope, nonetheless, is that it will prove helpful for the worldwide church. For insights into historical and contemporary hermeneutical traditions in a global context, see William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, eds., *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).
[35]For more of the medieval diversity than what can be accomplished here, see Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 129-57.

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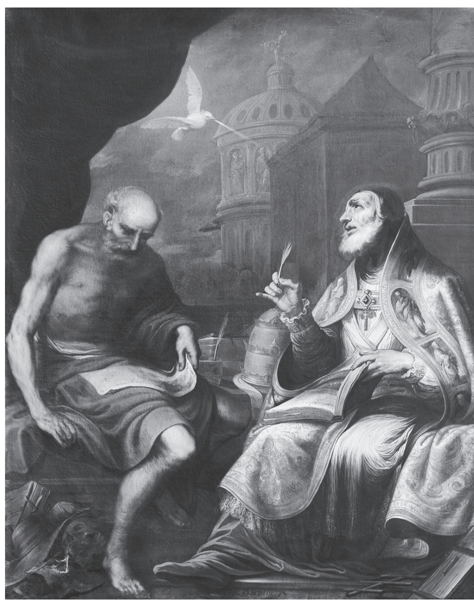

Figure 1.2. Jerome (ca. 347–419) and Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) by Juan de Sevilla Romero

"he counsels us [also] to be untiring in our prayers."[36] It is not enough for Gregory that Jesus' question be merely a historical detail of the narrative. It must also have ethical practicality. Another example would be the color and type of thread used for the tabernacle: it represents service in the church mixed with worldly employment. Why should colors and materials represent that? Well, Gregory had to do *something* ethically symbolic with it. As Hall puts it, "Gregory has transmuted an Old Testament text into a trenchant devotional comment on ecclesiastical life."[37] Thus, allegory was able to get Gregory what he was looking for.

The Venerable Bede (673–735) is another early influence. He believed that reading the Bible should provide spiritual nourishment. Insofar as some texts do not provide such (or it is hard to see how), interpreters need to "know how to draw out the allegorical meaning."[38] These, like most others, recognized the importance of a historical interpretation, but often only to move beyond it to a sense more mystical and analogical. What they wanted, they found.

Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1224–1274), however, contended that the historical and spiritual meanings cannot be separated. He and his followers

[36]Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies* 13, trans. David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1990), 97.
[37]Hall, *Church Fathers*, 130.
[38]Bede, *Expositionis allegoricae in Samuelem prophetam libri quatuor*; quoted in Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 146.

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Figure 1.3. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1224–1274) at the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, Italy

propelled a new rise in literal reading. Built, then, upon that literal and historical sense, Aquinas gave attention to the sweep and scope of God's acts of salvation "ordained by God and extending from the creation to the apocalypse, with its center in Jesus Christ."[39] And to be sure, there were others in the Middle Ages who were not so prone toward allegory: Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141); Bonaventure (ca. 1217–1274); Nicolas of Lyra (ca. 1270–1349); John Wycliffe (ca. 1320–1384). But the majority of the (Western) Church took this path, and even those who disagreed with it in principle nonetheless still employed it when needed.

In turn, one could say that medieval hermeneutics reached a crisis point when Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (ca. 1455–1536) observed how unclear exegetes were when they did refer to the literal sense. It is one thing to give the literal sense priority; it is another to elucidate what that means exactly. Moreover, Lefèvre insisted that there are actually *two* literal senses, especially in regard to Old Testament books: the evident historical

[39]K. Froehlich, "Thomas Aquinas," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters,* ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 982-83.

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sense, but equally the prophetic sense (which he also called "literal") that points forward to the coming of Christ.[40] With Lefèvre's influence on Luther, Luther's influence on Calvin, and Calvin's influence on everyone, a decisive turn back to typology is here occurring.

Sola Scriptura Is a Hermeneutical Claim (Sixteenth–Seventeenth Centuries)

The Protestant Reformation was a time of questioning long-standing customs. The Renaissance motto *ad fontes*—"to the sources"—carried into the Reformation period and propelled scholars to return to studying the Scriptures in their original languages. When they compared their renewed findings to several points of medieval dogma, they found the latter out of step with the former.[41] Thus began a debate over where the locus of Christ's authority resides. Do church traditions hold equal (or more?) authority to the Scriptures? Or are the Scriptures the unrivaled highest authority for the church? The Reformers, of course, believed the latter. This, then, constituted the formal cause of the Reformation: *sola Scriptura*.

There are many implications to this rallying cry, *sola Scriptura*. For one, it means the Bible is the only authority for doctrine and piety. All other opinions must be tried against the Scriptures, never vice versa.[42] Second, Scripture is its own interpreter. There is no earthly power that authoritatively prescribes the meaning of Scripture, but Scripture interprets itself. When there is a dispute over the meaning of a given passage, then the rest of the Bible is brought to bear. This comes from Irenaeus and Augustine (*Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*). Third, and this develops

[40]Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 158.

[41]To be clear, the Reformers did not disparage all of medieval theology, but considered only 1200–1500 an "era of decay." They still valued many earlier theologians insofar as they saw them working well from the text of Scripture (McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 155-56). As Bray puts it, the Reformers did not reject the hermeneutic they inherited, but sought "to purify and systematize it" (*Biblical Interpretation*, 9).

[42]The Reformers made a distinction between the "magisterial" use of tradition and the "ministerial" use of tradition. Tradition is "ministerial" insofar as it teaches us and we can stand on the shoulders of others. But once tradition takes on a ruling and determining function—"magisterial"—that is the moment it mutes the Bible's ability to correct any poor traditions. To the Reformers the "*sola scriptura* principle thus involved the claim that the authority of the church was grounded in its fidelity to Scripture" (McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 154).

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out of the second, the Bible itself teaches us how to read it.[43] Later passages reference and interpret earlier passages. Thus, the later passages are applying a hermeneutic. Interpreters can look at that and glean how, in a sense, the Bible is asking to be read. As A. S. Wood puts it,

> *Sola Scriptura* insists that the Bible itself must teach us how to interpret the Bible. The first hermeneutical circle is to be drawn from the design of the Word. The sphere from which the methodology of hermeneutics is to be derived is that of Scripture itself. The true principles of biblical interpretation are themselves quarried from biblical sources. To break this circuit is to deprive interpretation of its essential dynamic and authority.[44]

Fourth, now developing out of the third, the whole Bible is about Christ. "What gave Luther's doctrine [of *sola Scriptura*] its unique reformational character was its radical Christocentric basis. . . . The great weakness of allegorical exegesis was precisely that it obscures the Christological witness."[45] Again, this is a conviction that emerges when the authority of the Bible is recognized, and therefore the Bible is carefully studied.[46] This means that the scope of the whole (and any part thereof) does not address the concerns of contemporary culture as a first priority; but its concerns are with Christ first and foremost. To put it another way, the Zeitgeist comes under the judging gaze of Christ. It does not set the agenda for reading or theologizing. It is this rejection of allegory and promotion of christological readings that resulted in several material causes of the Reformation, the other traditional *solas*.[47]

John Calvin (1509–1564) especially avoided allegory and spoke against it.[48] Instead he saw typological correspondences pointing to Christ, averring

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[43]David I. Starling, *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship: How the Bible Shapes Our Interpretive Habits and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 9-20.

[44]A. S. Wood, *Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (London: Tyndale, 1960), 12.

[45]Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1988), 83.

[46]McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 158-60.

[47]The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture also arises, in part, out of these hermeneutical convictions: allegory was simply far too esoteric, left only for the "experts."

[48]David S. Dockery, "New Testament Interpretation: A Historical Survey," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and Davis S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 26-27.

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that "the clarity of sacred Scripture is grounded in Christ alone."[49] For example, Calvin saw that the crying of the mothers in Jeremiah 31:15 is immediately followed with "the most delightful consolations" in the next two verses.[50] Israel's mothers should *not* weep for their children because they will come back to her. Then in Matthew 2:18 the crying is again mentioned, but not the consolation, as again "Rachel's children" are taken from her. To Calvin, the reader is to see the repetition of Jeremiah's situation in the days of Christ and so equally expect the restoration that Jeremiah foresees: "as Jeremiah promises a restoration . . . so Matthew reminds his readers that . . . [Christ will appear] shortly afterwards as the Redeemer."[51] Thus, the historical circumstance in Jeremiah has elucidated a typological pattern of Christ's life.

Figure 1.4. Of all the Reformers, John Calvin (1509–1564) had the largest hermeneutical influence on the church.

Yet, while Martin Luther (1483–1546) affirmed these tenets, he still did allegorize at times. You can take the monk out of the monastery, but you cannot take the monk out of the man. This just highlights again how thoroughly pervasive Zeitgeists continue to bedevil people, even when they want to shed them on theoretical grounds. I think the reason is

[49]Hans-Joachim Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 18. Calvin was also particularly concerned with the biblical authors' historical circumstances and literary contexts (Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," 12-18).

[50]John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845–1846; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 1:148.

[51]Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:148-49.

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because the cultures people live in exert an enormous hermeneutical influence, more than they themselves realize.

The "Modern" World Sure Is Out of Date (Eighteenth–Nineteenth Centuries)

The period known as the Enlightenment was marked by confidence in autonomous human cognitive abilities. There was a real "We can do it! We can improve the world!" mentality *if only we put our minds to it*. Right thinking and more assured methods of discovery would result in clearer paths of truth. The only hindrance to such progress was, of course, ignorance. Overcoming our ignorance—discovering more and more about our world through these new more certain methods—was, then, the goal.

What were these new methods of discovery and learning? The first was *rationalism*, where the dictates of human reason became the arbiter for what can be considered true. Now to be clear, I do not mean to suggest that the 1700s marked the birth of reason, nor that it was the first time thinkers gave attention to that which is "reasonable." Rather, that century saw the elevation in confidence in the abilities of reason to secure answers to our major questions. For centuries in the West, theology had been the "queen of the sciences." Therefore listening to the revelation of Scripture and the authority of the church were paramount. But René Descartes's famous "*I think* therefore I am" encapsulates the ethos of this new era. Increasingly less common was the idea that "*God is* therefore I am," making his revelation less necessary. In turn, theological distinctives, like the doctrine of the Trinity, were more commonly questioned.

David Hume (1711–1776) is commonly associated with the next major school of thought: *empiricism*.

Empiricism is the idea that only that which can be discerned through the human senses can give us certainty of truth. Only that which can been seen, heard, touched, smelled or tasted is sure data upon which to base our knowledge. To Hume, this created a gap between the knowability of this world and the claims theologians make about God. For God—and matters with which the Bible is mostly concerned—cannot be

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Figure 1.5. David Hume (1711–1776) with St. Giles's Cathedral in the background, Edinburgh, Scotland

seen, heard, touched, smelled or tasted. So how could we ever *know* these things to be true without experiencing God through the senses? As with rationalism, the promulgation and popularity of empiricism cast a shadow of suspicion over the veracity of much of the Bible's teachings, especially miracles (like revelation, the teaching that God has spoken truth to humanity now codified in a book).

This leads to *naturalism*. While Hume never said miracles or the metaphysical claims of the Bible are impossible (just unknowable), his writings gave legs to the idea that all that truly exists—or is worth knowing—is the natural world. Given that the natural world operates on observable and predictable chains of cause and effect, miracles (like God speaking to humans through the process of inspiration) became less philosophically palatable than ever. And without that belief, there is little left for Christianity to stand on, other than its long-standing cultural presence. Now God is not only unknowable, but probably does not even exist.

The point here is not to trace the denigration of biblical doctrines like the Trinity, miracles, or revelation/inspiration, but the way the ascendency of these Enlightenment epistemologies also called for new

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hermeneutical approaches. Epistemology is the study of how we know—how we learn, synthesize knowledge, remember, and so forth. And hermeneutics is a branch of epistemology. Thus, these moves toward rationalism, empiricism, and naturalism are new epistemological commitments that have shaped Western hermeneutics ever since. Empiricism and naturalism especially challenged the belief in miracles, and since the Bible is *full* of miracle stories, other explanations had to be sought for where these stories came from. Surely the authors did not record historical events—because miracles are dismissed as impossible—but drafted tales that could inspire faith. The new driving hermeneutical questions, therefore, were less "What is in the text?" and more "How can we reconstruct the true history behind the text?" This gave rise to new understandings of Israel's history, the historical Jesus, and the origins of the church as scholars brought their empiricist and naturalistic assumptions to bear on the hermeneutical task.

It became popular to read the Old Testament not as a record of Israel's past but as "historicized prose fiction."[52] These are fictitious stories retrojected upon a people to give them identity and legitimacy. This happened primarily during the exile when (some of) Israel's sacred texts were assembled into what we now call the Old Testament. The miracles, therefore—and most of the historical narratives in fact—were myths made up to help the Jewish people understand why their city was recently destroyed and how to maintain hope for the future. So did Noah build an ark and survive a worldwide flood? Of course not. This is a story adapted from their Babylonian captors and given a Hebrew spin. Did Joseph go down to Egypt where God preserved him and helped him? No. This is a story to give hope when the Jews were also in captivity far from home. Did Joshua conquer the land? Surely not. These are stories to give Israel a claim on that real estate. All of this starts, as mentioned, with the assumption that the miracles recorded in these stories could not have happened. This new understanding of history and textual origins has become the alternate explanation to believing in such miracles.

[52]Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, upd. rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 25-54.

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