HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

PATRISTIC EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGY:
THE CART AND THE HORSE

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This article grows out of two dominant perceptions that I have developed through my work with theological students and teachers. The first of these perceptions is that there is strong and growing interest in patristic interpretation of the Bible among evangelical biblical scholars and theologians. The second perception is that virtually all biblical studies students and professors I have encountered are working from a model for understanding patristic exegesis that is inadequate and does not reflect what patristics scholars have been writing about patristic exegesis for the last several decades. I have in mind the model that divides patristic exegesis into two competing—and largely mutually exclusive—schools, one based in Antioch and the other in Alexandria.

Now I should hasten to add that the inadequacy of such a model is not something that biblical scholars and theologians could necessarily have recognized themselves, and I hope that nothing I am about to write will be taken as a criticism of contemporary biblical scholars. Rather, the prevalence of this model is an unfortunate example of the way the scholarly arena sometimes works. What patristics scholars were saying seventy or eighty years ago about patristic exegesis has worked its way into the historical theology, church history, and hermeneutics textbooks in the last forty or fifty years. As American patristics scholar Charles Kannengiesser recently pointed out, a great deal of work on patristic exegesis done by biblical scholars from about 1950 onwards treated the literal and figurative senses of biblical passages not as interpretive options for the texts under investigation, but rather as general exegetical methods, and these methods were bound to local “school” requirements. Kannengiesser concludes, “The rhetorical and philosophical culture of Antioch inspired the local masters of biblical exegesis with a sense of the value of historical Old Testament narratives, which was different from the treatment of such narratives taught to Christian exeges on the basis of Philo of Alexandria’s legacy.”

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Now that this model has become entrenched in the textbooks, people tend to assume that it is right, and rarely do theologians or scholars of modern hermeneutics go back to read the monumental body of patristic exegesis to see whether the model actually fits the facts. But as the Antioch-Alexandria model has become more entrenched in books in those fields, patristics scholars themselves have been undermining the model since about 1950, so much so that there is a severe inconsistency between what contemporary patristics scholars say about that exegesis and what contemporary church historians, biblical scholars, and theologians write about the same subject.

In light of this inconsistency, and in light of the substantial interest contemporary evangelicals have shown in patristic exegesis, I shall use this article to address the subject of patristic exegesis for the benefit of an audience consisting primarily of biblical scholars and theologians, not patristics scholars. I shall begin by briefly summarizing the typical view of patristic exegesis and illustrating how pervasive its influence upon us is. Then I shall discuss the problems with this view and deal in some detail with the growing body of patristics scholarship that undermines it. Further, I shall summarize what I think is the emerging consensus among patristics scholars about early-church exegesis. Finally, I shall offer some suggestions about what we as evangelical scholars can learn from reflection on this subject.

I. The Antioch-Alexandria Dichotomy and Its Influence upon Us

As I mentioned above, the typical view is that there were two exegetical schools in the ancient church, one in Antioch which favored literal, historical exegesis, and one in Alexandria which favored allegorical exegesis. A representative and convenient example of this view comes in the widely used International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. In the article on the history of biblical interpretation, D. P. Fuller divides his discussion of patristic interpretation into two sections: Origen and the Antiochene School. Fuller describes Origen’s allegorical method of interpretation and asserts that it came directly from Philo of Alexandria and was dominated by a Platonic way of thinking. In contrast, Fuller asserts:

The Antiochene school arose in opposition to Origen, and it included such men as Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 429), the greatest exegete of the early Church, and Chrysostom (d. 407), the greatest preacher of the early Church. Instead of approaching the Bible with Hellenistic presuppositions, these men interpreted the Bible from the vantage point of its own Semitic thought. Theodore stressed the necessity of studying a passage’s phraseology, separate clauses, and sequence of thought until the whole is seen as a sum of its parts. He was adamant in his rejection of Origen’s allegorical interpretation and insisted that the biblical books be understood in their historical setting.2

This typical view is based on three major assumptions. The first is that the Antiochene and Alexandrian schools were fairly uniform internally and were equally represented in the early church. Scholars cite Paul of Samosata (third

century), Eustathius of Antioch (fourth century), Diodore of Tarsus (fourth century), John Chrysostom (fourth/fifth century), Theodore of Mopsuestia (fourth/fifth century), Nestorius (fifth century), John of Antioch (fifth century), and Theodoret of Cyrus (fifth century) as the key Antiochenes; and Clement of Alexandria (second/third century), Origen (third century), Athanasius (fourth century), Didymus of Alexandria (fourth century), and Cyril of Alexandria (fifth century) as the leading Alexandrians. This assumption leads scholars to overlook or underemphasize important differences between fathers from the same school: does Athanasius really belong in the same category as Origen? Fuller’s treatment above would lead one to think so, since Origen is the only Alexandrian whom he mentions. Does Chrysostom actually belong with his fellow student Theodore, as Fuller and most other scholars assume? This assumption also leads scholars to ignore the church’s rejection of certain people in this list. Given that Paul of Samosata, Theodore, Diodore, and Nestorius were all condemned by the church, how representative can one really claim the so-called school of Antioch to have been? Given that Origen was condemned by the church, what right do we have to call him the Alexandrian par excellence?

The second assumption is that the Antiochenes were the “good guys” who took Scripture seriously, and the Alexandrians were the “bad guys” who paid little attention to the text itself but instead treated the passage under consideration merely as a jumping-off point for philosophical speculation. This assumption is clearly present in Fuller’s treatment cited above, since he calls Theodore the greatest exegete of the early church. 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. We of all Christians want to take the Bible literally, to pay attention to the details of the text. We of all Christians want not to treat the text as a mere jumping-off point for something else. So we have a heightened sensitivity to the danger of “allegorical interpretation,” and we quickly criticize the Alexandrians and run to the defense of the Antiochenes. But once again, this is an assumption, not a proven fact. Is it really true that the Antiochenes treated the text more literally than the Alexandrians?

The third assumption is that the different theologies and homiletic emphases of Antioch and Alexandria were the result of different exegetical methods. With respect to the title of this article, the assumption is that exegesis was the horse that pulled the theological cart, as of course we believe it should be. There is no question that the so-called Alexandrians offered figurative interpretations of many passages in the OT that the so-called Antiochenes took more literally. There is also no question that the Antiochenes focused their teaching and preaching on the moral progress of Christians, whereas Alexandrian preaching sometimes appears to be more abstract and philosophical in comparison. But to assert that these differences were produced by thoroughly distinct exegetical methods is to make an assumption, rather than to state a fact.
And this assumption has been accepted all too readily (and probably uncon-
sciously) in the modern scholarly world at large.

In spite of the fact that these three assumptions are not proven and barely even
acknowledged, the view of an Antioch-Alexandria methodological dichotomy is
so thoroughly entrenched in the scholarly world that it has great influence over
us. It colors the way we look at all aspects of patristic exegesis. Over and over
again we say, “So-and-so wrote this because he belonged to the Antiochene
school of literal exegesis—good for him,” or “So-and-so wrote this because he
was too influenced by the Alexandrian school and too prone to allegorize the
Bible.” A particularly blatant, and almost humorous, example will serve to illus-
trate the influence of this two-schools idea upon us.

John Calvin was a great admirer of John Chrysostom’s sermons, and he
intended to publish a translation of some of these sermons into French. On this
project, Calvin got as far as writing a preface (in Latin) to the proposed transla-
tion, but he never actually completed the translation itself. Recently, the Scottish
Reformation scholar Ian Hazlett translated Calvin’s Latin preface to the never-
completed French edition of Chrysostom’s homilies. As Hazlett introduces his
translation of the preface, he writes, “On the whole, Calvin represents here the
Antiochene tradition of exegesis, which is largely adopted by the Reformation.”
This, of course, is fairly standard and accepted: the Antiochenes were the “good
guys”; the Alexandrians were the “bad guys”; the “best” reformers followed
Antioch. But when one actually reads Calvin’s preface, one should notice two
things. First, Calvin himself never mentions Antioch or Alexandria at all—such
“schools” were unknown at the time of the Reformation. Second, Calvin claims
that the best of the Greek exegetes were Athanasius, Chrysostom, and Cyril of
Alexandria. The first and third of these are undisputed representatives of the
so-called Alexandrian school. And the middle one, Chrysostom, is normally con-
sidered an Antiochene but should actually be placed with the Alexandrians, as I
shall explain below. In other words, what Calvin actually writes here gives abso-
lutely no indication that he favors Antioch over Alexandria or considers the
Antiochenes to have interpreted the Bible the way he does. But Hazlett is so
imbued with the idea of an Antioch-Alexandria dichotomy that he makes a blan-
ket statement that Calvin represents Antiochene exegesis, even though Calvin’s
own words (which Hazlett himself translated!) give the lie to Hazlett’s claim. But
because readers of Hazlett are also imbued with the same Antioch-Alexandria
dichotomy, they rarely recognize the inconsistency between what he writes in his
introduction and what Calvin himself writes.

One could adduce countless other examples of the fact that scholars are
wedded to the notion of an Antioch-Alexandria dichotomy in exegetical
method. But I suspect that the influence of that view upon us is obvious enough,
and I shall now go on to the question of what I believe is wrong with this view of patristic exegesis.

II. Problems with the Antioch-Alexandria Dichotomy

There are two major problems with this typical view. First, as I have already claimed, it is not accurate. And second, if it were accurate, it would not be particularly helpful. I shall deal with the latter of these two problems first, and then I shall address the first problem.

1. The Typical View Is Not Helpful

If it were true that the school of Antioch held firmly to an exegetical method very much like that of modern historical-grammatical exegesis and that the Alexandrian school held equally rigidly to allegorical exegesis as a method, then studying patristic exegesis would not actually teach us anything about how we should interpret the Bible. 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.” If, in fact, one school were all wrong in the way it did exegesis, and the other were exactly like us, then we would not actually need to study the two schools, since we would have nothing to learn from either. In such a case, we would really be doing nothing more than bolstering our own belief that we are doing exegesis correctly, and we would be giving our own methods a bit of what I call “historical authority,” that is, the sanction of a long-standing pedigree. American scholar R. L. Wilken makes this point very well when he writes that the history of exegesis is usually brought forth only to serve the needs of the present-day exegete. He claims (correctly, I think) that we do not ask what the fathers thought and why; we simply use them to show how one can stray if one does not subscribe to the historical method. Wilken concludes:

“This explains in part the fascination for such men as Theodore of Mopsuestia and the Antiochene school: they are more like us. Somehow there is always the tendency to assume that the only standard for judging the history of exegesis was what the text really meant; and what it really meant was known only to the present day interpreter.”

Needless to say, if only the present-day interpreters know what the text really meant, then we do not need to study patristic exegesis. It is only if the exegesis of the early church is both not like ours and potentially insightful that we actually have something to gain by studying it. Only if we are humble enough to say that we need to learn more about how to interpret the Bible, and that the very differences between patristic interpretation and our own might help us to learn more, can we actually profit from studying patristic exegesis per se. But very little modern study of patristic exegesis by biblical scholars and theologians actually

starts with such a humble, teachable attitude. Most such scholarship is simply an attempt to give historical authority to our own methods. And I suggest that if that were all one was trying to do, then it would not be worth studying how the church fathers interpreted the Bible.

2. The Typical View Is Not Accurate

I turn now to the more serious issue, my claim that the Antioch-Alexandria model is not an accurate way of describing patristic exegesis. Patrists scholars who concentrate on the exegesis of particular fathers considered to be Antiochene or Alexandrian have noted a number of significant anomalies that serve to undermine the model, and their recognition of these anomalies has led them to modify their assessments of patristic exegesis. In this section I shall summarize some of the results of this scholarship.

1. Anomalies. There are many anomalies that create problems for the model of an Antiochene-Alexandrian exegetical dichotomy. One of the most obvious is that the so-called Antiochenes sometimes allegorize passages that the so-called Alexandrians take literally. Writing in 1989, English scholar Frances Young, one of the foremost recent experts on patristic exegesis, contrasts the way Eustathius of Antioch and Origen of Alexandria handle the account of Saul’s meeting with the Witch of Endor in 1 Sam 28. Surprisingly, Origen takes the passage as literal history, whereas Eustathius insists that it be interpreted as the devil’s using the witch’s mind to control Saul, not as the witch’s actually bringing Samuel back from the dead. In fact, Eustathius (allegedly an early representative of the Antiochene school of literal exegesis) actually criticizes Origen (who is supposedly the great villain of the Alexandrian school of allegorical exegesis) for taking the passage too literally.6

A second, and much more serious, anomaly patrists scholars have noted is that fathers from the same school, allegedly using the same method, often come to vastly different conclusions. Here it will be useful to compare Theodore of Mopsuestia (clearly that most representative of “Antiochene” exegesis) both to his fellow pupil, Chrysostom (the most illustrious preacher of the early church), and to one of his most devoted disciples (who was also deeply concerned with exegesis), Theodoret of Cyrus.

Writing in 1964, Australian scholar Camillus Hay argues that for both Theodore and Chrysostom, John 1:14a is a crucial passage for understanding all of NT Christology. Theodore takes the statement, “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us,” to mean that the Logos dwelt in a man, and he subsequently uses the phrase “assumed man” to refer to Christ who was united to God the Word. The “he,” the active agent in the events of Christ’s life, is normally the assumed man. In stark contrast, Chrysostom takes “flesh” to refer to humanity,

not to an assumed man. For him, the “he” is always the divine Son of God, never the man. Hay concludes:

Wherever statements are attributed to Christ in the Gospel, Theodore refers them directly to the “assumed man” unless it is clear—as in the anti-Arian texts—that they refer to the eternity or consubstantiality of the Word; while Chrysostom attributes them directly to the Eternal Son, unless there is question of physical sufferings or emotions which he attributes to the flesh.

Later in the article Hay poses the problematic question: “Why was it that both authors, while professing to follow a literal form of exegesis, reached such different interpretations of christological texts?” His answer is that theology (particularly Theodore’s concern about the threat of Apollinarianism in contrast to Chrysostom’s lack of attention to that heresy) influenced their exegesis. I shall return to this idea later, but for now the point is simply that two great biblical interpreters, thought to belong to the same school and to adhere to the same exegetical principles, deal with christological passages very differently.

When one compares Theodore to Theodoret, the differences are also quite marked. Young, writing in 1983, asserts that the two men are very similar in what she calls the mechanics of exegesis, that is, paying attention to background, parsing lexical forms, analyzing sentence structure, tracing the flow of thought, and so forth. This similarity of mechanics amounts to what we would call an identical “method”; but in spite of this, Young finds their exegesis to be essentially different. She writes:

There is also a fundamental shift in perspective. For Theodore, as we have seen, there was a radical distinction between the old order and the new, a strong eschatological outlook which favoured discontinuity between the two Testaments. This perspective, so characteristic of Theodore, led him to deny the christological character of many Old Testament texts, to refuse to see any indications of the trinitarian nature of God in the Old Testament writings, and to reduce to a bare minimum direct prophecies of the New Age. . . . The abandonment of this radical Two Ages dichotomy enabled Theodoret to develop a more explicitly Christian view of the Old Testament. . . . So, unlike Theodore, Theodoret can relate Old and New Testament texts, using them to interpret each other. Much more than Theodore, Theodoret perceives a unity in the whole of scripture. Old Testament texts did not have to have only one skopos, they could have a near reference to their own time and a far reference or a prediction of the future.

In this important passage, Young indicates that the anomaly (that is, the reason the data do not fit the view of an Antiochene-Alexandrian methodological dichotomy) is not merely that two Antiochenes disagree on how to interpret the OT. The anomaly is that Theodore and Theodoret disagree even though they are using the same “method.” What separates the two so-called Antiochenes is

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8 Ibid., 17 (italics in the original).
9 Ibid., 22-23.
a theological difference that leads them to handle the OT differently, in spite of their similarity of method. It is not accurate to say, as the typical view does, that Antiochene interpretation is uniform from exegete to exegete and that this uniformity derives from a desire to take the OT seriously and from a literal, historical methodology. Perhaps there was a uniform exegetical method in Antioch (more on this later), but there was by no means uniformity of interpretation within that so-called “school.”

2. Changing Assessments by Patristics Scholars. These anomalies and others like them serve to cast a shadow over the prevailing model of a dichotomy of exegetical method between Antioch and Alexandria, and in the past half-century they have led patristics scholars to modify their assessment of early-church exegesis markedly. Before the middle of the twentieth century, patristics scholars were already beginning to recognize that the two “schools” were much closer together on exegetical method than had previously been thought. At that time French scholar Jacques Guillet conducted an extensive study (published in 1947) on the exegesis of Origen (the most extreme of the Alexandrian allegorists) and Theodore (the Antiochene most vehemently opposed to allegory). Guillet writes, “Origen and Theodore are in agreement in their fidelity to the literal sense and in the care they take to elucidate it. They are also in agreement in thinking that the biblical texts have a more profound sense than their apparent one.”

Later in his work Guillet concludes that both schools see the historical meaning of a given passage as being important and both claim to find in the OT the mystery of the Savior. Antioch, he asserts, concentrates more on the prophecies of Christ in the OT, and Alexandria more on the way the events and people in the OT symbolize and prefigure Christ. Antioch traces the history of divine action, and Alexandria looks more at the way the nature and being of Christ are to be found in the OT. Similarly, in an extensive 1952 monograph on Cyril of Alexandria’s OT exegesis, Alexander Kerrigan argues that Alexandria and Antioch are not as far apart as once thought, and that Cyril places a great deal of emphasis on the literal meaning of the text and on the historical evolution of the faith of Israel.

Kerrigan concludes his study by asserting that Cyril was influenced by Jerome, who was in turn influenced by Antioch’s attention to the Bible as history, and that Cyril’s attention to the literal sense of the OT marked an advance over earlier generations of Alexandrians. Scholars such as Guillet and Kerrigan represent the turning of the tide, as mid-twentieth-century patristics scholars began to recognize that sharp distinctions between the two “schools” were not warranted.

More recently, scholarship on patristic exegesis has asserted even more strongly that the differences between Antioch and Alexandria were produced by factors other than exegetical method. Young argued in 1989 that it is incorrect
to characterize Antiochene exegesis as if it were the precursor of the modern historical-critical method. She concludes, “So neither literalism nor an interest in history stimulated the Antiochene reaction against Origenist allegory, but rather a different approach to finding meaning in literature which had its background in the rhetorical schools.”

American scholar John O’Keefe argued in 1996 that Cyril’s interpretation depends less on his exegetical method than on his understanding of the nature of Christian faith, Christian ministry, and moral behavior. O’Keefe asserts that there are sound reasons to question any sharp distinction between Alexandrian and Antiochene exegetical methods.

In the 1996 work *New Perspectives on Historical Theology*, two chapters by American Eastern Orthodox scholars deal directly with the alleged dichotomy of method between Antioch and Alexandria. Bradley Nassif insists that the Antiochenes’ exegetical method was “spiritual” rather than “literal.” More precisely, he argues that the notion of *theoria* enabled the Antiochenes to see the OT both historically and christologically, to take seriously both the literal and the symbolic meanings of the texts. And in a very interesting chapter Demetrios Trakatellis asserts:

This unique body of literature [patristic exegetical work], though highly appreciated, seems somehow to have suffered from stereotyped and oversimplified classifications. Biblical patristic exegesis of the first five centuries, for instance, has been conveniently divided into schools of exegesis, basically the Alexandrian and the Antiochene. Such a division and classification, justifiable to a certain degree, is, nonetheless, inadequate if not misleading.

Trakatellis goes on to analyze Eusebius’s, Chrysostom’s, Cyril’s, and Theodoret’s commentaries on Isa 1, 6, and 7, and he reports that all of the exegetes are respectful of the historical facts of the text, none uses allegorical interpretation extensively, and all interpret the text christocentrically. Trakatellis concludes that by the time of Theodoret in the early fifth century, there was no rigid distinction between Antiochene and Alexandrian exegesis, but rather a synthesis of the Antiochene concern for history and philology and the Alexandrian concern for metaphorical interpretation.

At this point, it should be clear that over the last fifty years, patristics scholars have been repeatedly emphasizing that the old distinction between Antiochene and Alexandrian exegetical methods is inaccurate and misleading. Externally,
the “schools” are not as distinct as they have been made out to be: the Alexandrians do not “allegorize away” the OT as much as has been thought, and the Antiochenes are not necessarily more literal in their methods than the Alexandrians. Internally, the two “schools” are not as consistent as the typical view makes them out to be: there are significant differences in interpretation from one person to the next within the same “school.” And when the interpretation of the two “schools” does seem to fit the model, recent scholarship indicates that exegetical method is not what produces the interpretation in question. All of this is well known in the world of patristics scholarship, if not in the scholarly world at large. The question that now arises is, what would be a better way to understand patristic exegesis of the Bible?

III. A New Way of Describing Patristic Exegesis

Not surprisingly, as scholars have recognized the problems with the idea of an Antiochene-Alexandrian dichotomy, they have also offered alternative ways of describing early-church interpretation. Most of these efforts focus on rethinking the relation between theology and exegesis. Rather than asserting that exegesis was the horse pulling the theological cart, as the older view did, more recent scholarship has insisted that to a great degree, theology was the horse and exegesis the cart. More specifically, patristic exegesis, according to recent patristics scholars, was a task of reading all of Scripture in light of a controlling theological idea. In this section of the article, I should like to summarize important scholarship on this subject.

1. Exegesis and Theology

One of the most crucial works responsible for the changing assessment of early-church exegesis by patristics scholars was The Captain of Our Salvation, published in 1973 by American scholar Rowan Greer. This comprehensive study, which includes Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Eustathius, Diodore, Chrysostom, Theodore, Nestorius, Cyril, and Theodoret, contends that the emergence of Antiochene Christology cannot be attributed to differences of exegetical method. The issue was not one of Alexandrian typology and allegory vs. Antiochene historical consciousness. Rather, the separation between the two traditions resulted from different ways of refuting the theological challenge of Arianism, which argued that since God the Son suffered and died, he must have been passible and therefore less than the Father. In response, the Antiochenes argued that the one who suffered and died was not God the Son, and thus they could still affirm that God the Son was impassible and equal to the Father. This led them to a Christology that divided the Logos from the man Jesus and understood salvation as a human march, following Jesus, from what Theodore called the first age (one of imperfection and mortality) to the second age (one of perfect human life). This in turn led the Antiochenes (especially Theodore) to read the OT not as a prefiguring of the NT, but as a document related to the first age. The result was a way of interpreting the OT that looks more literal to
moderns, but in actuality it was the theology of the two ages that produced this style of interpretation, not any particular desire to take the text at face value or to take history seriously in a methodological way.\(^{21}\)

In sharp contrast, Greer argues, the Alexandrians refuted Arianism by affirming that it was God the Son who suffered, but that he suffered in his humanity, not in his divine nature per se. This led them to a view of salvation in which God the Logos himself was the active agent at every point—coming to earth, going to the cross, uniting us to himself so that we might participate in him. As a result, Alexandrian exegesis of passages describing Christ ascribed all of his actions and experiences to the Logos himself, but divided between what the Logos did that was in keeping with his divine nature, and what he did that was in keeping with his newly adopted human way of living. Antiochenes (especially Nestorius) dealt with the same passages by ascribing some actions to the Logos and others to the man Jesus.\(^{22}\) Thus, the competing sides in the christological controversy were separated by different theologies of salvation produced by different theological ways of responding to Arianism. Differences of exegetical method were derived from the theological differences, and were not the source of the differences themselves.

Greer’s conclusions are very significant and worth quoting at some length. He affirms that there were different exegetical traditions at Antioch and Alexandria, but he insists:

At every step of the argument we have found theology playing a decisive role in the development of these exegetical traditions. . . . Within the Antiochene school, examination of Theodore’s exegetical method demonstrates that it is itself an aspect of the theological view he espouses. The typological method functions as a handmaid to the Antiochene theology, and its antipathy to allegorism is not so much the repudiation of a method as of its results.\(^{23}\)

One should notice here that if Greer is correct on this point (and my own fairly extensive reading of Theodore convinces me that he is), then it is not Theodore’s exegetical method that makes him averse to “spiritual” readings of the Bible, as the typical view insists. In fact, he is not averse to spiritual interpretation at all, and one should remember Nassif’s insistence that Antioch, like Alexandria, favored spiritual exegesis over literal. Rather, Theodore is averse to the theology that leads the Alexandrians to use spiritual interpretation in the way they do. Armed with a different theology, he uses his exegetical tools (in many ways, the same exegetical tools that the Alexandrians were using) to produce a different interpretation. Theology was the horse pulling the cart, not the other way around.

At this point in his conclusion, Greer of course senses the potential objection: if he is right, then the fathers are not being “objective.” Greer continues:

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 322-48.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 356-57.
It should be more than evident that the patristic writers treat Scripture with great reverence and care. The Scriptures, in their view, supply the very foundation stone of theology. They must be read with exact attention. To be sure, the patristic exegetes assume the uniformity and the inspired character of the Scriptural witness, but these assumptions are surely not unintelligent ones for the theologian. And it is only if we attach an exaggerated importance to our own time in history that we can dismiss the Fathers because they ignore nineteenth-century canons of objectivity. The sense in which theology is decisive in their exegesis is the way in which it provides a framework for interpretation. The theological traditions, derived themselves from Scripture, determine the questions asked of the text.24

Here Greer puts his finger on several presuppositions that undergird modern exegesis of Scripture: the assumption that the Bible is not uniformly inspired (or perhaps not even trustworthy), the belief that in order for an exegete to be credible, he must meet nineteenth-century canons of “objectivity,” and most of all, the assumption I mentioned earlier in this article, that exegesis produces theology, not the other way around. Greer subtly rejects these presuppositions when he calls the belief in the uniformity and inspired character of Scripture a “not unintelligent one,” when he criticizes nineteenth-century notions of objectivity, and when he insists that there is an interactive relation between theology and exegesis, rather than a linear one.

Greer then turns his attention more directly toward modern interpreters, and he affirms openly what he has implied previously:

Should we not in our own time take more seriously the role of theology in the exegesis of Scripture? Much of the ‘hermeneutical’ discussion pursued today seems to assume that if one persists in historical or linguistic exegesis of Scripture, theological norms will somehow emerge.25

I answer Greer’s semi-rhetorical question with an emphatic “yes.” Theology does influence exegesis, and modern interpreters have labored for too long with the mistaken belief that the right exegetical method will necessarily produce the right results, the right theology. That belief, as much as any other, is responsible for the mistaken way of looking at patristic exegesis in terms of distinct exegetical schools in Alexandria and Antioch.

Patristic scholarship since Greer’s work has tended to focus on what Greer called the patristic belief in the “uniformity and inspired character of the Scriptural witness.” Writing in 1983, and relying on the work of Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou, Peter Gorday asserts:

The biblical writings do possess for the patristic exegetes a real and vital wholeness. This wholeness proceeds from the fact that for the fathers the Old and New Testaments together are “Scripture,” i.e., the authoritative body of writings on the basis of which theology can be synthesized and comprehensively stated.26

24 Ibid., 357.
25 Ibid., 358.
In other words, what modern interpreters call a lack of fidelity to the literal meaning of a given text actually grows out of the fathers’ conviction that since the Bible is God’s Word, it has a unity about it that can be discerned if we recognize the patterns connecting the various passages one to another. Conversely, the reason modern interpreters focus so intently on a single text, in its own context, is that they generally do not believe the Bible fits together as a unity, so they are not permitted (or so they think) to allow the rest of Scripture to infringe on the interpretation of a given passage. Kannengiesser expresses the same idea even more boldly when he asserts that the basis for patristic interpretation was the belief in the stunning idea that the radically transcendent God had indeed revealed himself in the words of Scripture. This belief alone made it possible for them to see connections between different parts of Scripture, and thus to use “typology” and “allegory” to interpret the texts. Kannengiesser insists further that such a belief is not an option to moderns today, and he concludes: “Hence the divine relevance of Scripture has shifted from the supracosmic Beyond evoked in it, and from the miraculous data reported in it, to the believing creativity of the communities that sponsored the production of biblical writings.”

Kannengiesser’s claim that the belief in a transcendent God who has revealed himself in Scripture is not an option today probably makes evangelicals bristle, and it should. But his comments should also help us recognize something fundamental both about patristic interpretation and about modern exegesis. The church fathers all operated from the conviction that God was directly at work in human history and that the Bible represented God’s self-revelation to humanity. The differences among them concerned the questions of how God was at work, what the nature of his self-revelation was, and most important, what the economy of salvation looked like. These differences were theological, and while the varying theologies depended on Scripture, they also dramatically influenced the way individual exegetes looked at the Bible. The fathers unashamedly declared their theological convictions and used them to interpret Scripture.

In sharp contrast, what lurks just below the surface of Kannengiesser’s irritating claim is the possibility that modern exegesis as a whole, with its almost fanatical commitment to each individual text and its exhaustive probing of all possible backgrounds to that text, is wedded to a view of reality in which the Bible is not the self-revelation of God, is not trustworthy, and is definitely not to be seen as a unity. To put it another way, the painful search for “objective” methods of exegesis in the modern world may actually be an attempt to discover a foundation for truth outside of the Bible itself, since the theological conviction that God has revealed himself to humanity in the words of Scripture is deemed to be either false or irrelevant. If this is true, then it leaves evangelicals in the rather awkward position of advocating modern methods and opposing the “methods” of most patristic exegetes, even though we as evangelicals affirm the theological framework of the early church and would thoroughly reject modernity’s search for a

non-biblical foundation of truth, if we realized what was happening with modern exegesis. I shall return to this point in the conclusion of this article, but now I would like to turn to the question of what value, if any, still remains in speaking of Alexandrian and Antiochene exegetical schools.

2. The School of Antioch—A Useful Notion?

I am convinced that patristics scholarship in the past half-century has thoroughly repudiated the idea that for the fathers, exegesis was the horse pulling the theological cart. Instead, as I hope my summary of some of that scholarship has demonstrated, theology and exegesis were involved in a continual interplay, and if one must oversimplify, it would be more accurate to say that theology produced exegesis than to say that exegesis produced theology. To some degree, theology was the horse and exegesis was the cart.

But where does this leave the notion of the so-called “schools” of Antioch and Alexandria? At first glance, it may appear that we should continue speaking of distinct schools but should recognize that they were schools of theology (more precisely, of Christology), rather than exegetical schools per se. This is what most patristics scholars, including the ones I have cited in this article, do. But I suggest that still more revision of the typical view is necessary. The reader may remember that one of the assumptions of the typical view was that both schools were equally represented in the early church. However, if theology really lay behind exegesis, then who actually belonged to the so-called school of Antioch? As I mentioned early in this article, the names usually brought forth are Paul of Samosata, Eustathius of Antioch, Diodore of Tarsus, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius, John of Antioch, and Theodoret of Cyrus. But we have already seen in this article that scholarly comparisons between Antiochenes indicate that neither Eustathius nor Chrysostom nor Theodoret really fits the Antiochene mold exegetically. And, in fact, if one looks more deeply at the theologies lying behind the exegesis, my own work on patristic Christology attempts to show (among other things) that Chrysostom, John of Antioch, and Theodoret are much more Cyrillian in their Christology than they are Theodorean. To use the typical terminology, these figures are Alexandrian, even though they are claimed for the school of Antioch.

If this is correct, then which patristic thinkers were genuinely Antiochene in their theology and in their exegesis? In other words, which fathers read Scripture in light of the idea of two ages (and thus refused to relate OT passages to the second age or the NT) and viewed Christ divisively (and thus placed their emphasis on the assumed man, rather than on the divine Logos)? It seems that only three men truly belong in the Antiochene camp: Diodore, Theodore, and

And, of course, one must hasten to add that all three of these were condemned by the church: Nestorius during his lifetime at the Third Ecumenical Council in 431, and Diodore and Theodore long after their deaths at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553. 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. They were a tiny minority, and their thought was deemed to be heretical. In fact, O’Keefe argues convincingly that the condemnation of Diodore and Theodore in 553 was a rejection not just of one aspect of their Christology, but of their entire theological-exegetical system. The church believed that their theology forced one into a reading of the OT that was too “Jewish” to be Christian. In other words, they did not sufficiently show the way the OT pointed to Christ and the NT, and this was considered to be an exegetical deficiency as well as a theological one.

I suggest, then, that the time has come for the entire notion of an “Antiochene school” to be laid aside. To say that the Antiochenes were a significant portion of the church and that they were the “good guys” both christologically and exegetically is to say that the early church’s judgment about the Antiochenes was wrong. First, the church was wrong in condemning Diodore, Theodore, and Nestorius; and second, it was wrong in discerning a difference between those three on the one hand and on the other John of Antioch (who engineered peace with Cyril after the fractious Council of Ephesus in 431 and died as one of the church’s most illustrious statesmen) and Theodoret (some of whose christological writings were condemned, but who was nevertheless regarded as a significant expositor and Christian leader). If we are willing to accept the church’s judgment on these matters, then we need to recognize that the faith (and, to some degree, the exegetical methods) of Alexandria were those of the whole church. Furthermore, the faith and methods of “Antiochi” were rejected by that church for what most Christian leaders considered good theological reasons. The whole idea of a school of Antioch then serves no useful purpose in helping us understand patristic exegesis or the truth about Jesus Christ. Such an idea merely leads us to lump patristic theologians together who do not belong together (such as Theodore and Chrysostom), and to draw distinctions in the wrong places between some patristic thinkers and others (by claiming, for example, that method, rather

29 During the early days of my Ph.D. studies, I would occasionally speak of the “school of Antioch” during conversations with my supervisor, Dr. Lionel R. Wickham. Whenever I did so, Dr. Wickham gently reminded me that that term could refer to only three people: Diodore, Theodore, and Nestorius.


31 My own work (some of which is cited in n. 28 above) has sought to show that the church’s stand was not at all based on politics alone—there were compelling theological and soteriological reasons to condemn Theodore and Nestorius but to accept John of Antioch and Theodoret.
than theology, distinguished Origen and Theodore). The idea of an Antiochene school was unknown to the early church itself, or to the Reformers for that matter; it is a notion created in modern scholarship. And recent patristics scholarship has rendered the notion of an Antiochene school historically meaningless. It is thus time for the term itself to be discarded.

IV. Lessons for Evangelical Scholars

In this article, I have painted with a very broad brush, and I do not pretend that my arguments will necessarily be convincing in and of themselves. Indeed, I have not even tried to support or document my arguments from primary sources, because my purpose has not been to present my own research, but rather to summarize and discuss the implications of others’ work. At this point, though, it is worth pointing out that my own reading of the relevant church fathers leads me to believe that Greer, Young, and O’Keefe are correct about the relation between exegesis and theology. My own reading corroborates the conviction of those scholars that the dominant exegetical “method” of the early church was simply to read the whole Bible in light of one’s own theology, and that varying theologies produced different kinds of exegesis. If this is correct, then what are some of the lessons we as evangelical scholars can learn from the whole subject of patristic exegesis? I shall suggest three such lessons.

First, it is crucial for us to understand the theological commitments of the historians on whom we rely, so as to ask how those presuppositions affect their interpretation of historical theology. To say that the Antiochenes were the “good guys” because they took the Bible literally and emphasized the full humanity of Christ (in contrast to the Alexandrians who allegorized Scripture and did not see Christ as fully human) sounds very appealing, but it is a gross distortion of what was actually happening in the early church. Unwittingly following such a distortion sets us up to give our support to ideas with which we actually disagree. To nineteenth-century historians, “full humanity” meant “independent humanity.” Christ could not be fully man, they reasoned, unless he was independent of the Logos. Therefore, in their minds, the only acceptable Christology was one that made the man Jesus the locus of Christ’s personality.32 As evangelicals we should vehemently disagree with this idea. No human being is meant to be independent of God. Why should “independence” be a prerequisite for the Savior’s full humanity? To say that Jesus must have been and was independent of the Logos is effectively to deny any real incarnation of the Logos on earth. This denial is what Theodore and Nestorius professed, and it is what many in the nineteenth century professed. When one understands this

32 A famous statement of this idea comes in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (ET of the 2d German edition; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928; repr., 1989), 391-402. Schleiermacher uses a great deal of the church’s language, but his explanation of it reveals his assumption that the Redeemer must have been and was a man separate from the Logos but living in such a way as to depend upon him. He emphatically rejects the possibility that the personality of Christ was centered around the Logos himself.
situation, it becomes clear that we evangelicals side with the “Alexandrians” (that is, with the whole early church) on this question, not with the “Antiochenes.” But if we read the phrase “full humanity” without understanding what lies behind it, then we are prone to say that Antioch’s Christology was more biblical.

Similarly, for nineteenth-century exegetes “taking the text literally” derived from a refusal to grant that the whole Bible conveyed a unified and single truth, and thus a refusal to admit that the rest of Scripture could and should shape the way we look at a given passage. So each text was to be taken in its own historical context, but in relative isolation from the Bible as a whole. The reason nineteenth-century scholars considered allegory to be problematic was not because it might disconnect interpretation from the text of Scripture; it was because it might tie interpretation to other biblical texts that they believed had nothing to do with the text in question. Specifically, what they rejected was the link between the OT and Christ (at least as Christians understood him—scholars did link the so-called “historical Jesus” to the OT, but argued that the “Christ of faith” was something else altogether).33 Theodore similarly denied such a link between the OT and the Christian Christ, and if we evangelicals knew what Theodore and the nineteenth-century scholars meant, we would find ourselves in utter disagreement. We may not like the way certain Alexandrians forge the link between the OT and the NT; but we insist that such a link is there, and we can and should read the OT as a document that points to Christ, the church, and the Christian life. When phrases such as “full humanity” and “taking Scripture literally” are severed from the presuppositions that give them meaning, they sound very good to us, and they lead us to throw our lot with the Antiochenes. But when we actually understand the assumptions lying behind those phrases, it becomes clear that we do not agree either with the nineteenth-century liberals who coined those phrases or with the very small handful of church fathers whom they admired.

A second lesson for us is that theology always influences exegesis. Neither the church fathers, nor the nineteenth-century scholars who so highly prized objectivity, nor any of us are actually objective, and we do not help matters by pretending that we are. It may not be fair to say that theology is necessarily the horse pulling the exegetical cart, but it is certainly not accurate to pretend that exegesis is always the horse pulling the theological cart. Rather than ignoring the influence of theology on exegesis, we need to look consciously for that influence. We need to unveil the assumptions about God and the world that lie behind patristic and modern exegesis so that we may submit those presuppositions to the judgment of Scripture itself.

33 A very helpful introductory summary of the rise of historical criticism may be found in Edgar Krentz, The Historical-Critical Method (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 6-32. Krentz’s treatment makes clear how completely the assumptions of nineteenth-century critical scholars were opposed to the presuppositions of both the fathers and modern evangelicals. At root, what forces modern critical scholars to interpret texts without recourse to the rest of Scripture is the assumption that the Bible is not trustworthy and not unified.
A third lesson—perhaps the most difficult but also the most important to learn—is that the modern historical exegetical approach grows out of the assumption that Scripture has to be assessed and judged, that it is not trustworthy, that we must dig deeply to get to the history behind the text. As evangelicals we do not accept this assumption. We believe that the Bible is trustworthy and that it accurately conveys saving history to us. Yet we use a method that is closely linked (some would say inextricably linked) to such an assumption. Now, on the one hand there is great value in using the method that dominates the scholarly world. We are trying to show the liberal academy that even if one adopts its standards for historicity, even if one uses its tools of interpretation, the Bible still shines forth as an accurate, reliable set of documents. In short, we are trying to engage in scholarly level apologetics, to fight a battle on our opponents' turf and still win the battle. This is a very valuable undertaking.

On the other hand, however, have we sufficiently considered whether a method that is dominated by liberal assumptions is really what our pastors and churches need? Have we really asked ourselves to what degree the historical-critical method can be disengaged from its moorings in the Enlightenment’s rejection of biblical authority and used consistently by evangelicals? By our use of this method, have we unwittingly fostered among Christians an attitude that says, “I will not accept the text unless we can show historically that it is reliable,” rather than an attitude that says, “I will accept the text because the Holy Spirit has convinced me that it is accurate, whether we can demonstrate its reliability or not”? In contrast to this modern, skeptical approach, the church fathers assumed the reliability of the text and made absolutely no effort to “get behind it.” As far as they were concerned, the text itself was the locus of meaning. Also, patristic interpretation assumed that God is active in the world, that there is consistency between the way God has acted in Israel, in the NT, and today. This was the basis for their elaborate typological and even allegorical interpretation. Modern exegetes reject all of this, and rightly so, since they do not believe God acts in the world. So modern exegetes are forced either to admit that they are not handling the Bible the way any of the fathers did, or try to find precedent in the early church for their way of looking at Scripture. The second of these is what they do, by imagining that the handful of “Antiochenes” whose thought is so congenial to their own comprised the bulk of the church, and by recasting these “Antiochenes” into a bona fide school whose “superior” theology comes directly from its exegetical method.

But as evangelicals, we do believe that God is active in the world, that the Bible is his self-revelation to humanity, and that the Bible is a unity telling one consistent story from Genesis to Revelation. Why then do we reject out of hand the patristic style of exegesis that shares our assumptions, in favor of a modern method of exegesis that utterly rejects our world view? (Keep in mind the boldness of Kannengiesser’s statement that the world view assumptions undergirding patristic exegesis are not an option to people today.) Given the fact that we evangelicals share the world view of the church fathers, is it not worth our while to give serious attention to patristic exegesis on its own terms? Rather than reading patristic
exegesis simply to laud a certain father for taking the text literally or to scold him for allegorizing it, perhaps we need to ask what theological assumptions led him to treat the text the way he does. Why does he link this OT passage to that NT idea, when we discern no clear relationship? What prompts him to dig deeply into this passage and to find things that we do not see there, rather than being content with the obvious? Is he onto something that we have missed? These are the sorts of questions that might help us to learn from patristic exegesis, rather than using it as evidence to bolster our notions about the superiority of modern (liberal) exegesis.

If this article has convinced anyone that patristic exegesis might be worth our serious, humble attention, then I have a recommendation for an outstanding place to begin exploring why the fathers handled the text of Scripture the way they did. In 2005 a book was published by The Johns Hopkins University Press in Baltimore entitled *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible*. The authors are John O’Keefe (one of the brightest minds in the study of patristic exegesis—I have cited him several times in this article) and R. R. Reno (a modern theologian and colleague of O’Keefe at Creighton University in Nebraska). This book lays out clearly and convincingly the different assumptions that the fathers and modern (liberal) scholars bring to the Bible, and it also offers an intriguing and provocative account of how the fathers’ theological and world view assumptions functioned in their exegetical system. I heartily recommend this book to help evangelicals begin revisiting the question of what we might learn from the fathers’ biblical interpretation.