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Patristic Exegesis as Ecclesial and Sacramental

William C. Weinrich

Recently, a well-known television evangelist held aloft in his hand the Bible from which he was preaching. "This," he proclaimed with a loud voice, "is the eternal, ever-living word of God, which shall never pass away, shall never be destroyed, and shall never be conquered." This was foundational material for his message, that because the Bible was the "eternal, everliving word of God," the counsel and direction it gives is certain for those who choose to follow it. What counsel and direction does it give? It provides direction for the victorious life characterized by prosperity, happiness, contentment, and, yes, the reception of all that one needs and desires—what one needing being roughly coterminous with what one desires. Why is it that this preacher, who holds such an exalted estimation of the Bible, does not see the Bible as possessing as its sole, allencompassing message the death and resurrection of Jesus for the life of the world?

Perhaps the stage setting in which this preaching took place offers a clue. The stage was set up as though a comfortable living-room; the couches were spacious, allowing the people sitting there to adopt an informal, lounging posture, appropriate for casual conversation. The space was decorated with winding staircase, huge glass mirrors, and sizeable flora, all unmistakably suggesting comfort, ease, and prosperity. The dress code corresponded, slacks and casual sweaters being the attire of the day.

Despite asseverations to the contrary, style and substance do tend to follow one another. Might I suggest that the same is true of Bible study and interpretation. If the home Bible study becomes the interpretive context for reading and understanding the Bible, we should not be surprised if idiosyncratic and strange doctrines are derived from the text. The cozy question, "What does the Bible mean to you?" is a sure-fire method for ensuring that the message of the Scriptures according to its own intrinsic and given meaning will ultimately be lost.

The context in which the Bible is read and expounded is not unimportant to its interpretation. That raises an interesting question. Why is it that in the context of the church's worship and liturgy, and most especially in the context of the church's sacramental action, the Bible is read at all? This may seem to be a self-evident question. Yet, often those practices that seem most evident are those which hide considerable significance. Do we read the Bible in the context of the church's worship because this text is the traditional text, the text of our history presenting to us the interpretative symbols of our particular community? Or, do we read the Bible because this text is thought to be the inspired, inerrant text whose words to us are reliable and can be trusted as we strive to fulfill its precepts and to believe its words?

The early church was not unacquainted with questions such as these and had an answer to them. The Scriptures are read in the church because the Scriptures are the church's book. For the Scriptures to be read outside the church or apart from the church is for them to be decontextualized. That is, read apart from the church, the Scriptures are abstracted from and placed apart from those realities to which they in fact refer.

To put this in a somewhat provocative manner, the biblical text is not in any absolute sense its own context. For it to be considered, as it were, alone and unto itself, is for it ultimately to become a hidden and undecipherable book, open to various meanings as it finds—as it must—new contexts for its interpretation. If it is true, as a recent article claims, that Jesus has become a "growth industry" because "he lends himself so agreeably to '90s values" and "comes dressed up in the clothes of our own culture," we would be wholly naive to think that the Bible itself is immune from similar metamorphoses. If Jesus is especially popular because people want "an easily translatable God," one which is tradition free, context free, and generic, 1 it is not surprising that in our time, when the Bible is a money-

¹One may see "It's Trendy to Love Jesus Now," The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette, January 16, 1999, 4A.

making best seller, the people reading it are non-committal concerning the church and illiterate concerning its doctrinal substance.

How then did the early church consider the Scriptures and the reading and interpretation of them? Let us first make the general observation that in their comment on the Scriptures the fathers were not primarily interested in the historical or grammatical significance of the text. To be sure, the fathers were often thoroughly acquainted with the grammatical and literary critical methods taught in the secular, pagan schools. This is clear from the rhetorical sophistication of Melito of Sardis and the complexity of Cappadocian textual argument. Nonetheless, although grammatical and literary methods could be used, and often were used, they did not determine the message of the text. Indeed, it is possible that the fathers did not think such methods even necessary to understand the message of the Scriptures. They often argue issues of grammar and literary criticism to counter arguments of heretics and other false interpreters. But the foundation upon which the fathers stood to read and to interpret the Scriptures lies elsewhere.

To put the point simply, but completely, the foundation upon which early Christian interpretation rested was Christ. Robert Wilken has compared the comments of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the prophesy of Isaiah 2 with those of Jerome, Cyril of Alexandria, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus. Isaiah prophesied concerning the return of the people to Jerusalem:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths" (Isaiah 2:2-3).

Theodore, perhaps the most consistent of Antiochene exegetes, insists on giving only a grammatical, historical interpretation to the text of Isaiah, and for that reason refuses to

give to it any messianic interpretation. Theodore writes: "I do not know how one could be brought to say that [these things spoken by the prophet about the return from Babylon] are a type of the events that took place at the time of the Lord Christ. For it is clear that every type has a correspondence to the thing of which it is type."²

Theodore was working from a particular definition of what constituted a type, and he did not see the required "correspondences" to conclude that the Old Testament prophecy concerning the return from Babylon had the events of Christ in mind. Literary assumptions and convictions determined biblical interpretation. For their understanding of the prophecy of Isaiah, on the other hand, Jerome, Cyril, and Theodoret, took as key the indication of time that begins chapter 2: "It shall come to pass in the last days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains." They discerned in this indication of time the economy of divine activity which made any reference in the Isaianic text to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple impossible and made reference rather to Christ and to His church necessary, for in them the last days had come. In his comments, Theodoret cites the quotation of Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:17 and following and notes that, unlike Joel, Luke began the passage with the words "in the last days." Secondly, Theodoret cites Hebrews 1:1, "In many and various ways God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by His Son."3 In the coming of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, that is, in the establishment of the apostolic church, the "last days" had come. Any reference to the "last days" in the Old Testament must necessarily refer to Christ and to His church.

²Robert Wilken, "In novissimis diebus: Biblical Promises, Jewish Hopes, and Early Christian Exegesis," in Remembering the Christian Past (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 95-119. This quote of Theodore, from his Commentary on Micah, is on page 105.

³Wilken, "In novissimis diebus," 116.

What determined the interpretation of the Scriptures, therefore, was not a particular literary theory, nor the definitions of tropes, hyperbole, types, and the like, nor any theory of semantics and communication. What determined interpretation was a particular set of historical events-the salvific events of the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus. When Ignatius of Antioch was in dispute with certain Judaizing Christians in Philadelphia, he answered their claim that they would not believe something to be in the gospel if it could not be found in the "ancient texts" by responding, "To me the ancient texts are Jesus Christ, the sacred archives are His cross and His death and His resurrection and the faith which is through Him."4 The history of Jesus Christ determined what was to be perceived in the Old Testament; prophecy did not determine what the fulfillment would be, but that which was intended by God as His final and consummating purpose, the fulfillment, determined what was given by the Spirit to the prophets to say and to do.

It is true, then, that patristic exegesis was first and foremost Christological. When Christ opened the minds of the apostles to understand the Scriptures and said that His sufferings and resurrection and the apostolic preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins to the nations were the content of the Scriptures (Luke 24:44-49), He simply catechized them to do what then they did, preach Christ on the basis of the Scriptures because they testify of Him. This apostolic preaching is nowhere more significantly and canonically stated than in the four Gospels, which are nothing other than the record of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament writings and of the institutions of Israel concerning which they speak. The four Gospels are the exposition of the Old Testament in terms of its messianic fulfillment. Not to read the Old Testament documents in terms of their Christological

⁴Ignatius of Antioch, Ad Phil. 8:2. One may see The Epistles of Saint Clement of Rome and Saint Ignatius of Antioch, translated by James A. Kleist (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Bookshop; London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1961), 85-89.

meaning is to rob them of their teleological and eschatological intention.

Allow me to illustrate. The prophet Zechariah speaks of the "day of the Lord" in terms of the symbolism and rites of the Festival of Tabernacles: "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea" (Zechariah 14:8). When the Evangelist John reports that Jesus, in Jerusalem during the Festival of Tabernacles, cries out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me, and let him who believes in me drink, as the Scripture says, 'Out of His belly shall flow rivers of living water," he lays the basis for the later report that when the soldiers thrust the spear into the side of Jesus water and blood came flowing out. If, as John would have it, the prophecy of the living waters that were to flow out from Jerusalem on the "day of the Lord" finds its fulfillment in the passion of Jesus, where is the "new Jerusalem" of which the New Testament speaks to be located? Clearly the "new Jerusalem" exists there where the death of the Lord is located, in the preaching of the crucified, in the baptism into His death, and in the body and blood given and shed. In "the last things Old Testament become themselves contextualized. In this case, the "new Jerusalem" is no longer to be regarded as part of geographical Israel, and therefore bound up in struggles of near eastern geo-political strife. The "new Jerusalem" is the home of spiritual Israel, the church, in which the crucified continues to be proffered in preaching and the sacraments. It is, therefore, wholly commensurate with this Christological and ecclesial understanding that at the beginning of the eucharistic service the hymn, "What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me?" is sung. This introductory hymn concludes with these words: "I will pay my vows to the Lord now in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of you, O Jerusalem." To be in the liturgy of the church is to be in the "new Jerusalem." Not coincidentally, therefore, Saint Paul speaks of Israel having been baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and having

⁵Lutheran Worship (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 188.

eaten and drunk the supernatural food and drink and then refers these narratives to us "upon whom the consummation of the age has come" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

It is precisely this conviction, that in Christ and His church the "end of the age" has come, that governs patristic exegesis and makes it Christological and ecclesial. A few examples will illustrate. In his letter to the Smyrnaeans, Ignatius of Antioch (died about A.D. 110) presents an anti-docetic creedal form which ends like this: "in reality ($\alpha\lambda\eta\theta\hat{\omega}_{S}$) He was nailed in the flesh under Pontius Pilate and Herod . . . in order that He might raise up a standard for the ages through the resurrection for His saints and faithful, whether among the Jews or among the Gentiles, in the one body of His church." The raising of the standard refers to certain Old Testament prophecies, which speak of God raising an ensign/standard in the last days to which His people in diaspora, and also the Gentiles, would gather.7 Commentators on Ignatius are virtually unanimous in the view that for Ignatius this standard is the cross of Christ, and I concur with that view. However, it does not sufficiently interpret Ignatius' meaning. The creedal form of Ignatius says that this standard shall be raised "in the one body of His church." But where, for Ignatius, is the passion of Christ "in the one body of His church"? Reading Ignatius, it would be difficult not to conclude that the passion of Christ in the one body of the church is the eucharist. Typically, therefore, Ignatius speaks of the gathering around the eucharist in wholly eschatological terms:

Be zealous, therefore, to come together more often unto the eucharist of God and unto glory. For whenever you are often in one place, the powers of Satan are destroyed, and the ruination that he causes is done away within the harmony of your faith. Nothing is better than peace, in which every warfare in heaven and on earth is overcome.⁸

⁶Ignatius of Antioch, Ad Smyrn. 8:2. One may see The Epistles of Saint Clement of Rome and Saint Ignatius of Antioch, 90-95.

⁷For example, Isaiah 5:26; 11:10,12; 18:3; 49:22; 62:10.

⁸Ignatius of Antioch, Ad Eph. 13. One may see The Epistles of Saint Clement

With this eucharistic center of Ignatian thinking in mind, one reads other passages differently than one might otherwise. For example, take this passage from his letter to the church in Philadelphia, which more extensively than any other expresses the view of Ignatius concerning the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament:

Indeed the priests were good, but better is the High Priest who has been entrusted with the Holy of Holies, who alone has been entrusted with the hidden things of God. He Himself is the door of the Father, through whom enter Abraham and Isaak and Jacob and the prophets and the apostles and the church. All of these things into the unity of God. The gospel possesses something distinctive, namely, the presence of the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, His passion and resurrection. For the beloved prophets proclaimed in view of Him, but the gospel is the completion of incorruption. And all things taken together are good, if you are faithful in agape.9

Here Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament priesthood, the fulfillment of the preaching of the prophets, and also the fulfillment of the patriarchal history. He is also the door for the apostles and the church. All the canonical history has its fulfilled center in Him. But this Christological center is found in what Ignatius calls the "unity of God" and the "agape." In my reading of Ignatius, I find it impossible to interpret "the unity of God" and the "agape" as anything other than the eucharistic gathering of the church, an interpretation that the mention of the "Holy of Holies" in this passage supports. For Ignatius, the church in its eucharistic assembly is gathered around the passion of Jesus, which is "our resurrection," and this is the "completion of incorruptibility."

Because the ecclesial and sacramental realities are regarded as the true and final referents of Old Testament prophetic event and oracle, it is evident why a typological exegesis occurs so

of Rome and Saint Ignatius of Antioch, 60-68.

⁹Ignatius of Antioch, Ad Phil. 9:1-2.

often in preaching that is explicitly liturgical and sacramental. The eventful character of the church's sacramental liturgy sums up and brings to completion the events of the Old Testament covenant. An outstanding instance of this is the paschal homily of Melito of Sardis (died about A.D. 190). Melito begins by explicitly referring to the exodus narrative of the Old Testament, which clearly has just been read to the gathered Christians: "The Scripture from the Hebrew Exodus has been read and the words of the mystery have been plainly stated." Immediately, Melito introduces the interpretative-homiletic device of typology:

Understand (ξύνετε), therefore, O beloved, how it is new and old, eternal and temporary, perishable and imperishable, mortal and immortal, this mystery of the Pascha . . . Old is the law but new the Word; temporary the type but eternal the grace; perishable the sheep, imperishable the Lord. . . . For the type indeed existed, but then the reality $(\mathring{\alpha}\lambda\mathring{\eta}\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha)$ appeared. 11

After giving a summary of the paschal narrative in the book of Exodus, Melito compares the Old Testament narrative to the preliminary sketch of a sculptor:

This is what occurs in the case of a preliminary sketch; it does not arise as a [finished] work, but [it exists] on behalf of that thing which is going to be seen on the basis of this image which is serving as a model. The sketch is made out of wax or clay or wood on behalf of that which is going to be. . . . But when that of which it is type has come, that which bore the image of the future thing is destroyed, having become useless, the image of it yielding to that which is really true ($\tau \hat{\omega}$ $\phi \hat{\omega} \cos \hat{\alpha} \lambda \eta \theta \hat{\epsilon} \hat{\iota}$). That which once was precious becomes worthless, when that which is precious by nature is manifested. 12

¹⁰Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pasha* 1. The Greek text and an English translation are available in *On Pascha and Fragments*, texts and translations edited by Stuart George Hall (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1979).

¹¹Melito of Sardis, On Pascha, 2, 4.

¹²Melito of Sardis, On Pascha, 36.

What is this "future thing" which is "precious by nature"? Melito gives the answer:

For the salvation of the Lord and the realities $(\mathring{\alpha} \lambda \mathring{\eta} \theta \epsilon_1 \alpha)$ were prefigured in the people, and the decrees of the gospel were proclaimed beforehand by the law. The people then was a type by way of a preliminary sketch, and the law was the writing of a parable; the gospel is the recounting and fulfillment of the law, and the church is the repository of the reality $(\tau \mathring{\eta}_S \mathring{\alpha} \lambda \eta \theta \epsilon \acute{\alpha}_S)$.

As the remainder of the homily indicates, the Christian Pascha is not only the fulfillment of the Exodus narrative; it is also the fulfillment of all history. For in explaining the "Pascha," Melito recounts the creation, the fall, the spread of sinful destruction throughout the world, and then he summarizes the "prior arrangements for [Christ's] own sufferings" in the patriarchs, in the prophets, and in the whole people. This recounting of the biblical narrative has as its purpose that the people might learn "who is the suffering one, and who shares the suffering of the suffering one, and why the Lord is present on the earth to clothe Himself with the suffering one and carry him off to the heights of heaven."14 Here the "suffering one" is Adam and all humankind who suffer with him, and the one "who shares the suffering of the suffering one" is Christ who is come from heaven in order that the "suffering one," that is, Adam, might be exalted to heaven with Christ. This is the meaning of the Christian Pascha.

In the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons (died about A.D. 200) we have an especially trenchant and thoroughgoing hermeneutical reflection that both elicits and, as well, is grounded in a narrative biblical theology. Irenaeus was facing a spiritualizing Gnosticism, which, in its rejection of God as the Creator, regarded all things of the created order and of the flesh, including all historical events and all literal words, as external symbol of that which was, in fact, real, namely the divine

¹⁴Melito of Sardis, On Pascha, 46.

¹³Melito of Sardis, On Pascha, 39-43, here especially 40.

Fullness, or Pleroma. Because no concrete and particular thing had any intrinsic meaning but was mere image of a higher, spiritual order, created things had no specific relation to one another. This meant that neither the actual works of God, nor the scriptural narratives had any meaningful order or sequence. This did not mean that the Gnostics did not quote the Scriptures; in fact, they used the Scriptures as much as the orthodox did. The problem was that the Gnostics, having no regard for the inherent order of things or the proper relation of one thing to another, "violently draw away from their proper connection, words and expressions and parables" to adapt the oracles of God to their own made-up storyline. They "disregard the order and connection of the Scriptures and dismember and destroy the members of the Truth," transferring passages, dressing them up in different ways, and making one thing out of another. In a well-known passage, Irenaeus likens the Gnostic use of Scripture to a person who, coming upon the pieces of a shattered statue, attempts to put the statue together again but arranges the pieces falsely so that they come to depict a fox, when in fact the original statue was of a king.15 However, should someone know the original statue and again arrange the pieces, but this time in proper order, the image of the fox would immediately be disproven as a proper rendering of the pieces. So it is for that person "who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the Truth which he received by means of baptism." This person will recognize the biblical names, expressions, and stories used by the Gnostics. But restoring each of them to its proper position and fitting them all into "the body of the Truth," he will both lay bare the false understanding of the heretic and restore to the Scripture its own intrinsic and true meaning.

To comprehend the full significance of Irenaeus' argument, we must briefly consider what he means by the phrase "the body of the Truth." The word "Truth" does not refer primarily

¹⁵Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I.8.1. An English translation is available in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume 1, The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), 315-567.

to the truth value of the church's doctrines or to the truth value of the statements of Scripture. For Irenaeus the "Truth" is the actual saving and revealing acts of God from the beginning work of creation to the incarnation of the Word and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The "Truth" is not the spiritual Pleroma of the Gnostic imagination; it is that which is real and concrete and historical and personal, precisely because it is the work of Him who is known only as our Creator. However, this "Truth" begins with the creation and moves through the election of Israel, the patriarchs, the giving of the law, the proclamation of the prophets, and finally receives its consummation in the reality of the incarnated Word and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The "Truth," therefore, has an intrinsic structure and sequence, an order given by God Himself in the facticity of His temporal, economic activity, which, again, reaches from creation to the coming of the Spirit in the incarnation of the Word and the constitution of the church. It was this economy, intended by God from the beginning, that was imprinted by the prophetic Spirit upon the minds of the prophets so that they foresaw and foretold, albeit in type and enigma, that the One through whom all was made would at the last times be made man. Similarly, when the last times had in truth arrived in the coming of the enfleshed Word and the Spirit, this economy took shape in the minds of the apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For that reason, the apostolic preachment proclaimed the Christ and the reality of the church as the consummation of the creative intent of the God, which He had foreshadowed and foretold in the election of Israel, the patriarchs, the giving of the law, and the proclamation of the prophets.16

In his Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching, Irenaeus begins by speaking of faith and "Truth." On the basis of Isaiah 7:9 (LXX), "If you do not have faith, you will not understand,"

¹⁶One may see Thomas F. Torrance, "Kerygmatic Proclamation of the Gospel: The Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching of Irenaios of Lyons," The Greek Orthodox Theological Review 37 (Spring-Winter 1992): 105-121, especially 108-109.

Irenaeus argues that faith rests on things that truly exist. "For we believe in the things that are, as they are, and believing in things that are, as they are, we keep firm confidence in them. Since faith is intimately bound up with our salvation, we must take great care to have a true understanding of the things that are."

However, this faith, which is grounded on the things that are, namely the Truth, is given in the real thing of baptism. The doctrine handed down from the apostles exhorts us "to remember that we have received baptism for remission of sins in the Name of God the Father, and in the Name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became incarnate and died and was raised, and in the Holy Spirit of God; and that this baptism is the seal of eternal life and is rebirth unto God, that we be no more children of mortal men, but of the eternal and everlasting God."18 Baptism into the Triune God is the summation and completion of that economy of works that were begun at creation and "in the end of times" were ended in the incarnation of the Word for the abolition of death, the bringing of life to light, and the effecting of the communion of God with man, and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a new manner upon humanity over all the earth renewing man to God. 19 We can see in this reflection of Irenaeus that the creed of the church is not merely a human production of faith; nor is it the result of a deduction process of reading the Scriptures. The creed, precisely in its trinitarian structure and sequence, is a summary of the "Truth," which reaches its consummation in baptism. The movement of the creed from Father, through Son, ending in the Holy Spirit, is nothing other than the very structure of God's economic activity, also proclaimed through the prophets and the apostles in the narrative of the Scriptures. Both statements are

¹⁷Irenaeus, *Epideixis* 3; one may also see Torrance, "Kerygmatic Preaching," 106-107. For a translation of the original, one may see *Saint Irenaios*. *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, translated from the Armenian with introduction and notes by J. Armitage Robinson (London, 1920).

¹⁸Irenaeus, Epideixis, 3.

¹⁹Irenaeus, Epideixis, 6; also Epideixis 7.

true: the creed is a summary of the prophet and apostolic Scriptures, and the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures are the canonical commentary on the creed. For this reason, the creed is a certain key for the interpretation of the Scriptures Moreover, the reality of baptism itself is a hermeneutical reality for understanding the Scriptures, for it is the reality of the death and resurrection of the incarnate Word for us, given to us by the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life. In baptism we enter "the end of times" and become ourselves that which the prophets foresaw and foretold.

So far we have remained within the patristic literature of the second century. However, the rich literature of the fourth and fifth centuries continues the same interpretive interest. As representative of the developed patristic argument, the work entitled "Concerning the Incarnation and Against the Arians," often attributed to Marcellus of Ancyra, is a good source. The Arians were using the passages concerning the poverty of the Son to argue that He could not be co-essential with God the Father: "How can He be similar [to the Father] or how is He from the essence of the Father, when it is written, 'As the Father has life in Himself, so He has given also to the Son to have life in Himself." There is a superiority, the Arians claimed, of the One giving over the one receiving. ²⁰ Therefore, such passages in Scripture that say that God gave something to the Christ indicate that the Word Himself was in some way promoted and improved, and that therefore the nature of the Word is alterable and not divine. However, writes Marcellus, "the entire and precise significance of Christianity is found in lowly words and deeds" (πάσα δὲ ἀκρίβεια τοῦ Χριστιανισμοῦ ἐν τοῖς εὐτελέσι ρήμασι καὶ πράγμασιν), and he quotes Paul to establish his hermeneutical and doctrinal principle: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, how, although He was rich, yet He

²⁰De Incarnatione Dei Verbi, et contra Arianos 1 (from now on, De Incarn. et c. Ar.). The Scripture passage cited is John 5:26. Other passages which the Arians were using included Mark 10:18; Matt. 26:32; Mark 13:32; John 10:36; Galatians 1:1. The text of De Incarnatione Dei Verbi, et contra Arianos may be found in Migne, Patrologia Graece, 26.984-1028.

became poor for our sakes, so that we by His poverty might become rich."²¹ In the light of this Pauline guidance, Marcellus undertakes to explain the "force of these words" (namely, the passages of lowliness) "according to our ability." When Paul says that "the Father has raised His Son from the dead" (Galatians 1:1), we learn also from John that Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," and that He said this concerning His body. Therefore, concludes Marcellus, in passages of lowliness and humility, what is said about the person of the Word, is said about His body. When it is written that the Father has given life to His Son, we are to understand that it is to Christ's flesh that life has been given.²² There follows a brief reflection on the incarnation:

For the Most High is not exalted (that is, the Son considered according to His own nature) but the flesh of the Most High is exalted. . . The Word of God does not receive the right to be called "God" by grace, but His flesh with Himself is called "God" (ἐθεολογήθη). It did not say that the Word became God, but that the Word was God. It says that the Word was eternally God, and that this very One who is God became flesh, in order that His flesh might become God the Word. 23

The incarnation is such that the flesh is not attached to the Word so that it exists in external relation to the Word, nor is the flesh merely possessed by the Word. Rather, the incarnation is such that the flesh is assumed into the Person of the Word, so that the flesh itself becomes Word. The man, Jesus, is the divine Word. Therefore, writes Marcellus, "When it is said in Scripture that the Son has received, or that the Son has been glorified, it is said because of his humanity and not because of His divinity."²⁴

²¹De Incarn. et c. Ar. 1. The quote from Paul is 2 Corinthians 8:9.

²²De Incarn. et c. Ar. 2.

²³De Incarn. et c. Ar. 3.

²⁴De Incarn, et c. Ar. 4.

However, this Christological reflection does not simply serve to define the person of Christ, so that, as it were, in the narrative of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and exaltation He alone was being considered. This Christological reflection serves the interpretative task of perceiving in the Scriptures the narrative of salvation for us. And this was the huge difference between the Arian and the orthodox hermeneutic. While the Arians read the gospel narratives as though they were simply about the Son, so that the language of lowliness suggested immediately that He was by nature lowly, the orthodox read the gospel narratives within a different thematic context, namely, as the narrative of our salvation through Christ and, perhaps even more importantly, in Christ. As Marcellus writes: "The immortal God did not come to save Himself, but to save those who had died; and He did not suffer on His own behalf, but for us; so that for this reason did He take on Himself our lowliness and poverty, in order that He might by grace give to us His richness."25

And now comes the real point:

When He therefore says, "The Lord created me as the beginning of His ways," He is speaking concerning the church which is created in Him. For the Maker of all things is neither created nor made, but that which is made is being renewed in Him who is the Maker, as Paul said: "We are His workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus." ²⁶

And again, a little later:

Whatsoever the Scripture says that the Son received, it says concerning His Body, which Body is the first-fruit of the church. For Christ is the first-fruit. Therefore, when the first-fruit received the Name which is above every name, also the lump was raised with Him in power and was seated with Him, according to what was said: "He raised us and enthroned us with [Him]."²⁷

²⁵De Incarn. et c. Ar. 5.

²⁶De Incarn. et c. Ar. 6

²⁷De Incarn, et c. Ar. 12.

And where does this "raising" and "enthroning" take place? In his comments on John 17:11 ("Let them be one as we are one"), Athanasius gives an answer. Because the flesh of Christ is the constituting reality of the church, those united to it by way of baptism participate in eternal life "no longer as men but as proper to the Word" ($\mathring{1}\delta 101 \text{ To} \mathring{0} \Lambda \acute{0} \gamma 0 \upsilon$). This is because in baptism

our origin (γ ενέσεως) and our infirmity of flesh has been transferred to the Word. . . so that being born again from above through water and the Spirit, in Christ we are all made alive, the flesh no longer being earthly but having been made Word (λ ογωθείσης) through the Word of God who for us became flesh.²⁸

In a similar way, Leo the Great maintains that the personal unity of Christ's two natures reveals "the mystery of regeneration," for "through the self-same Spirit through whom Christ was conceived and born, we too, who were born through the desire of the flesh, might be born again from a spiritual source." In baptism the story of the restoration of humankind in Him who is the Second Adam becomes our story, that is, the story concerning us. Not that it happens in us again, as it was with Christ, but that we, being made one with Him, participate in His story, narrated apostolically, that is, canonically, in the narratives of the four Gospels.

Ambrose tells us that in the Church at Milan the newly baptized chanted Psalm 23 as they processed from the baptistry to the church for their first eucharist. This is what he says to those who a few days before traversed this way:

²⁸Athanasius, Orat. c. Ar. 3.33. The text of Orationes contra Arianos may be found in Migne, Patrologia Graece, 26.321-468. An English translation is available in "Four Discourses against the Arians" in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, volume 4, Saint Athanasius: Select Works and Letters, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 411-412.

²⁹Leo the Great, Epistle, 31.3, in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, volume 12, Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895), 45.

How often have you heard Psalm 23 and not understood it See how it is applicable to the heavenly sacraments: "The Lord feeds me and I shall want nothing; He has set me ir a place of pasture; He has brought me upon the water of refreshment; He has converted my soul. He has led me on the paths of justice for His own name's sake. For though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evils, for you are with me. Your rod is power, the staff suffering, that is, the eternal divinity of Christ, but also corporeal suffering; the one created, the other redeemed. You have prepared a table before me against them that afflict me. You have anointed my head with oil; and my chalice which inebriates me how goodly it is!"³⁰

This is a perfect example of an ecclesial and sacramental reading of the Scriptures. It is not allegory, a fanciful imposition of meaning upon an otherwise clear and literal meaning of an Old Testament text. It is to read that Old Testament text in the light of its full and consummated intention, that in those acts that Christ instituted that He might be for us in them, we are the true referents of the Scripture. They speak of us.

According to the seventh century Gelasian Sacramentary, after the exorcism those to be baptized receive the four Gospels. "Stand in silence and listen attentively," proclaimed the deacon, as he then read the beginning verses of the four gospels. After this, the baptizands receive the creed and are told, "With attentive minds you must learn the creed, and what we hand on to you just as we received it, you must write on the pages of your heart rather than on any easily destroyed material." To read the Gospels aright is to know the creed, and to know the creed is to know the content of the Scriptures. Christians knew this in the early middle ages. It is time that we learn it again.

³⁰Ambrose, On the Sacraments 5:13. An English translation is available in Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works, translated by Roy J. Deferrari (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 269-328.