

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIRD-CENTURY HERMENEUTICAL VIEWS IN RELATION TO ESCHATOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

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Stanley Gundry, in his presidential address published in the March 1977 issue of *JETS*, grapples with the relationship between hermeneutics and eschatology and attempts to provide some information to stimulate thinking in this area. It is the goal of this paper to take up the challenge of examining possible correlations between the two. My focus will be third-century developments as traced through the input of two leading figures of the period: Origen and Hippolytus. Discussion will obviously also include looking at some of their associates, such as Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus.

The primary direction of the paper will be an attempt to show that philosophical, cultural and geographic factors played a significant role in shaping the hermeneutic that led these men to their specific eschatological views. These factors would include the developmental process of thought in Alexandria, including the work of Philo and the neo-Platonic traditions for Origen. Also included would be the apostolic succession theology of Hippolytus and the attendant reliance on the traditional view of the Church both in relationship to hermeneutics and eschatology.

One caveat is in order: It is not my purpose to evaluate the validity of the hermeneutical and eschatological systems discussed. Rather, it is to show some of the factors involved in the complex development of two of the significant systems of hermeneutics of the third century and the resulting eschatological systems that develop out of them.

Even prior to the third century, when Christians were once again faced with persecution, interest in eschatology was already coming to the fore. Pelikan cites the Montanist movement in the latter part of the second century and its interest in the return of the Lord and the time of his return as an indication of the developing concern for the eschatological question.¹ Against that background, Dunbar puts the persecution into perspective:

Eschatological interest was therefore already in the wind at the opening of the third century when the shock of renewed persecution fell upon the church in the tenth year of Septimus Severus (either August 201 to August 202 or April 202 to April 203). This had its usual salutary effect of reminding Christians that their citizenship was in heaven: the result was an increase in interest in the events and chronology of the end times. One Christian writer named Judas composed an exposition of the Seventy Weeks prophecy of Daniel. The fulfillment of the prophecy was made to coincide with the opening of the Severan persecution, and

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¹J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971) 123.

the Antichrist was expected shortly to appear. It is not surprising that this period also produced the most extensive treatment of biblical eschatology found among the Fathers.²

Both Hippolytus and Origen were influenced by persecution, Origen by the Severan persecution mentioned above. His own father, Leonides, was martyred for the faith. According to Eusebius he too would have been a martyr for the cause of Christ had not his mother hidden his clothes so that he could not follow his father.³ Origen himself suffered under the persecution of Decius. After imprisonment at Tyre, Origen died in A.D. 254 from the effects of torture, shortly after receiving his freedom.⁴ Hippolytus met with banishment during the reign of Maximinus around 235. According to Church tradition he was sent to the mines at Sardinia where he died.⁵

In spite of this intense relationship to persecution shared by these men, each developed a unique hermeneutic methodology and resulting eschatology. It is my opinion that the reason for this lies in the philosophical, cultural and geographic differences that led these men to two contrasting sets of presuppositions on which they based their work. An examination of these differences is in order.

I. ORIGEN

Origen, unlike many of his contemporaries, was brought up in a Christian home and grew up within the context of the church. McGiffert indicates that he was most likely born in Alexandria in the late second century.⁶ He was probably schooled by his father, who provided him with an excellent education.⁷ Having grown up in Alexandria, Origen was exposed to the diversity of the city as described by Dewick:

From the time of Philo onwards, Alexandria had been the home of eclectic learning and an elaborate system of Biblical exegesis. . . . In the writings of the Alexandrian Fathers, we find the same cosmopolitan spirit, always ready to adopt new ideas from foreign sources: only in their case the adoption was far more discriminating and refined.⁸

Alexandria was the most important Greek city in the empire and the in-

²D. Dunbar, "Hippolytus of Rome and the Eschatological Exegesis of the Early Church," *WTJ* 45 (1983) 323.

³Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965) 240.

⁴Eusebius, *History* 273, 287.

⁵J. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983), 1. 84; see also P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 1. 759.

⁶A. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Scribner's, 1946) 177.

⁷Eusebius, *History* 239.

⁸E. Dewick, *Primitive Christian Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1912) 363.

tellectual metropolis during the time of Clement.⁹ Thus it seems certain that the traditionalism of the church would be diminished by the development of the eastern mindset.

One of those who influenced both the city of Alexandria and its church was Philo, a Jewish philosopher. He is significant because of his desire to reconcile Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato and the Stoics, with the OT. Like those who would follow, Philo found the allegorical method of interpretation useful in his quest.¹⁰ According to McGiffert, Philo used the allegorical method of interpretation to soften offensive material in the OT and to bolster his teachings by finding Biblical support through his method.¹¹ It is evident that he was part of the Hellenizing movement of the Jews of the Diaspora, who were attempting to show that their faith was not as barbarous as the Greeks might think. As Philo was influenced by Greek philosophies, so were others within the Alexandrian community.

In this city influenced by and accepting of a variety of intellectual and religious traditions, the philosophies of Plato and the Stoics found a home. Gonzalez determined these two philosophical traditions to have significant impact on the development of Christianity.¹² Platonic thought contributed the doctrines of the two worlds, immortality and the pre-existence of the soul, among other ideas.¹³ Stoicism contributed concepts such as the doctrines of the *logos* and natural law.¹⁴ These philosophical concepts can be found in the teachings of Origen.¹⁵

Alexandria also provided a place for neo-Platonic thought. Here again there is some indication of influence upon Christian thought. Kelly sums up the importance of neo-Platonism in relation to Christianity:

Two features of Neo-Platonism deserve to be stressed. As expounded by Plotinus, it represents an optimistic attitude to the universe. Material though it is, the world as we know it is good in his eyes; it is created and ordered by a higher soul and is held together by Nature. Though matter in itself is evil, the visible universe reflects the intelligible order, and as such should be accepted as the best of all possible worlds. Secondly, the religious bias of the whole Neo-Platonic conception is patent. Whatever exists is an "overflow" of the One, and pervading all reality, at its different levels, is the ardent longing for union with what is higher, and ultimately with the One itself.¹⁶

⁹McGiffert, *History* 177.

¹⁰J. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978) 8.

¹¹McGiffert, *History* 195.

¹²J. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 1. 48.

¹³Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Cf. *Against Celsus* 6 and 12 (ANF), 4. 466, 469.

¹⁶Kelly, *Doctrines* 20.

Plotinus, the best exemplar of neo-Platonic thought, followed the notion of myth and symbol and its necessary allegorical hermeneutic:

Myths, if they are to serve their purpose, must necessarily import time-distinctions into their subject and will often present as separate, powers which exist in unity but differ in rank and faculty, and does not philosophy itself relate the births of the unbegotten and discriminate where all is one substance? The truth is conveyed in the only manner possible, it is left to our good sense to bring it all together.¹⁷

It is against this background that the Christianity of Alexandria, and of Origen in particular, must be explored. Dewick, among others, suggests that Christian doctrine as developed under the methodology of the Alexandrian school was thoroughly infused with a new spirit,¹⁸ which would exhibit itself in a variety of ways including the development of a new interest in eschatology.

It is the Alexandrian school and the leader of that school that shaped the thinking of Origen. This tradition cannot be seen as separate from the philosophical developments of the Alexandrian community but rather was an extension of them into the sphere of Christianity. The philosophical, cultural and geographic influence of the city and its people came to bear on the hermeneutical and theological systems of Clement and his pupil Origen. While this influence may be considered good or bad depending on one's theological persuasion, it provides a new direction as viewed against the simplicity of an earlier age when the words of Scripture were sufficient as the canon of faith. The founder of the Alexandrian school approached Scripture in a new way, even though he was still firmly committed to the authority of the Word of God. McGiffert offers the following consideration of Clement's new methodology:

In his use of allegory Clement set the fashion for his pupil Origen and many other theologians who found in it as Philo had done a means of freeing Scripture from blemishes and securing divine confirmation for their own doctrines. Clement had a high regard for the Scriptures but he was not troubled by the scruples that beset later theologians and was not seeking support for his views. Had he written the Didascalos he might have used the Bible for this purpose as others did, but it is hardly probable, for he was never much concerned with the source from which truth came. It was its content rather than its provenance that interested him. In his hands therefore allegory was a more innocent thing than in the hands of many another.¹⁹

The field of eschatology did not escape Clement's allegorizing. In bringing his hermeneutic to bear on the doctrine of last things Clement tended to move the study to a new plane. He tended to restructure features that up to that point had been normative. At one point Clement declared that the psalmist's cry for immediate repentance could be viewed as a general call available throughout eternity.²⁰

¹⁷W. MacKenna, *The Essence of Plotinus* (New York: Oxford University, 1934) 200.

¹⁸Dewick, *Eschatology* 363.

¹⁹McGiffert, *History* 178.

²⁰See *Exhortations to the Gentiles* (ANF), 4. 224.

It is into this hermeneutical milieu that Origen is thrust. He was a learned scholar steeped in the philosophical traditions of the Platonists and Stoics. He was fully cognizant of the work of Philo. He had been profoundly influenced by the theological system of neo-Platonism and tutored by the great Clement of Alexandria.

Building upon the foundation of his Alexandrian heritage Origen took the allegorical methodology to a more complete level. This tendency was evident from his early years:

His father Leonides was probably, as has been conjectured, one of the many teachers of rhetoric or grammar who abounded in that city of Grecian culture, and appears to have been a man of decided piety. Under his superintendence, the youthful Origen was not only educated in the various branches of Grecian learning, but was also required daily to commit to memory and to repeat portions of Scripture prescribed to him by his father; and while under this training, this spirit of inquiry into the meaning of Scripture, which afterwards formed so striking a feature in the literary character of the great Alexandrine, began to show itself.²¹

The tendency to allegorize, begun at his father's knee, was nurtured by the tutelage of Clement who, as has already been mentioned, was devoted to an allegorical hermeneutic as a way to move beyond surface meanings and understand the deeper meanings of Scripture. To fully understand the methodology of Origen, however, one must recognize the breadth of sources that he drew upon to develop his particular model. Trigg, a student of Origen, explains:

Stoic allegory, however, though it provided the method, provided neither the content nor the inspiration for Origen's allegory. . . . It is the Platonists who provided, in their understanding of myth and symbol, a religiously satisfying explanation of allegory. It was the Platonists who argued for the necessity of myths and symbols to convey philosophical truths otherwise inaccessible.²²

In his major work, *On First Principles*, Origen set forth his hermeneutic. He began by asserting his firm belief in the inspiration and authority of Scripture. It is suggested that he believed the literal inspiration of every word in Scripture.²³ Out of this understanding of inspiration Origen developed his allegorical methodology. Trigg summarizes:

If the Bible is inspired by God but appears in places to be irrelevant to our condition, unworthy of God, or simply banal, we may take it for granted that we have failed to grasp its inner sense. If no spiritual significance is apparent on the surface, we must conclude that the surface meaning, which may or may not be factual, is intended symbolically. Allegory is the method of interpretation that claims to yield the hidden, symbolic meaning.²⁴

In his quest for significant meaning Origen developed the notion that Scrip-

²¹McGiffert, *History* 178.

²²J. Trigg, *Origen* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983) 122.

²³Gonzalez, *Thought* 217.

²⁴Trigg, *Origen* 121.

ture had three levels of meaning, coinciding with his trichotomist view of man: bodily, psychological, and spiritual. The allegorical method was the means of uncovering these various levels of truth and so moving beyond the mundane or common level. In saying this he was not making light of the bodily level, for he believed that all three levels communicated God's truth.²⁵ Kelly explains these as the historical sense, which was useful for the simple; the moral sense, which provided instruction for the will; and the spiritual sense, which revealed the great teachings of the faith.²⁶

Gonzalez attempts to organize Origen's method of interpretation into four basic principles: (1) Every text is full of spiritual mysteries only uncovered through allegory; (2) God would never say anything within the body of Scripture that would be unworthy of himself; (3) Scripture is interpreted on the basis of the rest of the Scripture; and (4) the rule of faith must not be contradicted.²⁷ In consideration of this last point it must be said that Origen firmly believed in the authority of both Scripture and tradition. Unlike others who saw this as the limit of theological inquiry, Origen viewed such authority as the starting point from which to delve into a deeper understanding of God.²⁸

Origen revealed his opinion of those who would neglect his allegorical method and stay with the literalism of the traditional schools:

Now the reason those we have mentioned have a false understanding of these matters is quite simply that they understand Scripture not according to the spiritual meaning but according to the sound of the letter.²⁹

Out of the basic hermeneutic described above comes Origen's understanding of eschatology. His is a system that has no place for the traditional view of the end times. He instead offers a spiritual understanding of the end times and corollary doctrines. In reference to the message of the gospels concerning the consummation of time Origen offers his view that the real meaning of the *parousia* is Christ's revelation of himself and his deity to all men, both good and evil, which will produce an immediate indication of their true relationship to him.³⁰ McGiffert best summarizes Origen's eschatological system:

Origen had an elaborate eschatology. He believed in or at least hoped for the final restoration of all rational creatures, not only men but also demons, including even the arch fiend himself. The pains of hell are disciplinary in purpose and will be temporary only, not everlasting. When the present world has come to an end the material substance of which it is composed will be employed for the formation of another world in which the spirits of men not yet perfected will be still further disciplined and so it will go on until all have been redeemed when matter being

²⁵Cf. *On First Principles* 4. 2. 5-7 (ANF), 4. 256.

²⁶Kelly, *Doctrines* 73.

²⁷Gonzalez, *Thought* 220.

²⁸McGiffert, *History* 231.

²⁹Cf. *On First Principles* 4. 2. 2 (ANF), 4. 256.

³⁰Kelly, *Doctrines* 473.

unredeemable will finally be destroyed. The future life will be a life of the spirit; the flesh will have no part in it. The joys of heaven and the pains of hell will be mental not material.³¹

It should be noted that, according to Rufinus, Origen denied that he taught that the devil himself would be redeemed in the end.³² In any event Origen was strongly opposed to the chiliastic position, which had been the traditional view until he offered an alternative. It is he who is credited with making allegory, with its shift to amillennialism, the dominant method of Biblical interpretation until the end of the Middle Ages.³³

II. HIPPOLYTUS

One of Origen's most distinguished contemporaries was Hippolytus. These two men had crossed paths in Rome, where Origen went to listen to Hippolytus in A.D. 202.³⁴ They shared the same moral rigorism. Both of them held the view that the Church should not forgive those who were guilty of homicide, fornication or apostasy.³⁵ In spite of these points of intersection, Hippolytus and Origen developed along different lines in relationship to their hermeneutical and eschatological views.

Little is known concerning Hippolytus' background. It is believed that he was of Greek parentage, most likely pagan. The location of his birth is not known. Even his life as a churchman is subject to debate. Easton associates him with the bishopric in Rome,³⁶ while others connect him with the bishopric at Pontus near Rome.

It seems best to place him in association with Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons. In all likelihood he was a disciple of Irenaeus and therefore related to a school of thought in Asia Minor. That school and its leading figure have been described in the following manner:

This school was the outcome of John's ministry, and was distinguished by a firm grasp of Scripture, solid faith, conciliatory treatment of those within, and energetic polemics against heretics. Although the Johannine origin of Irenaeus' theology [and thus that of Hippolytus also] is worthy of emphasis, it must not be forgotten that Irenaeus was filled with the spirit and thoughts of Paul more than was the case with any other of the leading theologians of the day.³⁷

As a disciple of Irenaeus, Hippolytus was heavily influenced by his tutor's

³¹McGiffert, *History* 231.

³²Kelly, *Doctrines* 474.

³³McGiffert, *History* 227.

³⁴Gonzalez, *Thought* 235.

³⁵Ibid., p. 237.

³⁶J. Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (Cambridge University, 1934) 6.

³⁷O Heick, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 185.

understanding of inspiration and interpretation of Scripture. This in turn created a mindset influencing his eschatological development.

Irenaeus, the first to speak of the NT in the same way as the OT, held both canons in high esteem and believed that they were the inspired word of God. Yet to fully understand Irenaeus and the legacy that he leaves to Hippolytus one must recognize the interrelationship of Scripture and tradition in his thought. Irenaeus saw Christ as the supreme source of doctrine since it was he who revealed the Father. He in turn entrusted the doctrine of the Church to the apostles, and it was through them that it was disseminated.³⁸ This body, sometimes called "the rule of faith," was a basic summary of the essential elements of the Christian faith³⁹ and was handed down by the apostles to the Church as a means of communicating the truth of salvation. Irenaeus found the body of truth essential in refuting the heresies of his day. He contrasted this concept of tradition, which was open and public, with the secret tradition of groups such as the gnostics. In addition it was Irenaeus' understanding that heretics would take Scripture out of context, twisting its meaning to fit their own doctrines. Kelly links Irenaeus' development of the "rule of faith" and apostolic succession:

By this he meant, as his frequent allusions to and citations from it prove, a condensed summary, fluid in its wording but fixed in content, setting out the key-points of the Christian revelation in the form of a rule. Irenaeus makes two further points. First, the identity of oral tradition with the original revelation is guaranteed by the unbroken succession of bishops in the great sees going back lineally to the apostles. Secondly, an additional safeguard is supplied by the Holy Spirit, for the message was committed to the Church, and the Church is the home of the Spirit. Indeed, the Church's bishops are in his view Spirit-endowed men who have been vouchsafed "an infallible charism of truth" (*charisma veritatis certum*).⁴⁰

This concept tended to influence Irenaeus' outlook on interpretation. It cannot be said that he would fit into the historico-grammatical school of today. Rather, he depended on the continuity of apostolic authority to guarantee the appropriate understanding of Scripture. To that end he could suggest that Scripture must be interpreted in light of the "rule of faith"—that is, the tradition of the Church—which had been guarded by the Spirit in its transmission. This meant that valid exegesis was the prerogative of the Church since apostolic tradition, kept intact through the Church, was the real key to the Word of God.⁴¹

This understanding of the proper method of interpretation resulted in the acceptance of the chiliastic view. Since Scripture and the Church's unwritten

³⁸Kelly, *Doctrines* 36.

³⁹Gonzalez, *Thought* 158.

⁴⁰Kelly, *Doctrines* 37.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 38.

traditions are the same in content,⁴² the Church's teaching concerning eschatology must be used to take away any ambiguity associated with the Biblical record.

This foundation was passed on to his disciple Hippolytus who, like his tutor, was heavily influenced by tradition as well as Scripture where eschatology is concerned. For him Scripture is the touchstone of truth. Failure to give close attention to Scripture leads to self-deception and false teaching. But, like Irenaeus before him, he turned to the doctrine of apostolic succession to combat the esoteric traditions of the gnostics. Thus Dunbar, in reference to the hermeneutic of Hippolytus, can state: "It is the apostolic tradition, transmitted faithfully and, therefore, guaranteed by the succession of bishops, which insures the proper interpretation of Scripture."⁴³ This results in a reliance on the earlier eschatological traditions of the Church.

III. CONCLUSION

We have observed two theologians who lived contemporaneously and yet produced two distinct systems of hermeneutics. The one, Hippolytus, followed the traditional path of the Church, relying on the vouchsafed "rule of faith" handed down through apostolic succession. The other, Origen, wandered into novelty and independent thinking. It seems odd, therefore, that the one who produced the acceptable methodology for the Church that followed was Origen the wanderer.

Any discussion concerning the reasons for this must rest in speculation. Nevertheless, let us consider a possible answer to this dilemma.

Both theologians wrote at the beginning of the third century. They both experienced the crushing effect of the Severan persecutions and found their martyrdom in the persecution of other emperors. It is precisely this "sign of the end" that led a significant part of the Church to develop its chiliastic mindset. In the persecutions they saw indications that the end of history was approaching. Many associated the emperors of the various periods of persecution with the end of the age. Some even labeled one or another of them the antichrist. But the end did not come.

Given the lack of an immediate return of Christ, one of the main figures holding and writing about the traditional eschatological view became a schismatic, in effect isolating himself from the mainstream of the Church. His message became faint as the message of another grew stronger. Origen and the novel tradition he supported moved to the fore, at least in the southeast corner of the Mediterranean. Origen became a driving force in theology, even though he later was considered a heretic by the western Church.

About one hundred years after the time of Hippolytus and Origen, Constantine entered the scene and appeared to be the savior of the Church. The

⁴²Ibid., p. 39.

⁴³Dunbar, "Hippolytus" 339.

golden era of the universal evangel had arrived. The signs of the times yielded no antichrist, no tribulation. It appeared that Origen's concept of amillennialism, his optimistic view of the development of history, was the best representation of that present reality.