

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

Darren M. Slade,
Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, James N. S. “The Interpretation of Scripture in the Ante-Nicene Period: A Brief Conspectus.” *Interpretation* 12, no. 3 (July 1958): 272–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096435801200302>.
- Allison, Gregg R. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*. A Companion to Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.
- Conti, Marco, and Gianluca Pilara, eds. *1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. Vol. 5. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008.
- Eckman, James P. *Exploring Church History*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002.

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

⁶⁶ Fairbairn, “Patristic Exegesis,” 3–4, 9.

- Enns, Peter. "Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving Beyond A Modernist Impasse." *Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 263–87.
- Fairbairn, Donald. "Patristic Exegesis and Theology: The Cart and the Horse." *Westminster Theological Journal* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 1–19.
- Froehlich, Karlfried, ed., trans. *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*. Sources of Early Christian Thought. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Gil-Tamayo, Juan Antonio. "'Todo Esto Tiene Un Sentido Alegorico' (Ga 4,24). La Exegesis Antioquena de Galatas 4,21–31." *Scripta Theologica* 40, no. 1 (2008): 35–63.
- Gregory, Bradley C. "'The Sennacherib Error' in Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on the Twelve Prophets: Light from the History of Interpretation." *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 213–26.
- Hall, Christopher A. *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.
- Isbell, Charles David. "Saul the Sadducee? A Rabbinical Thought Experiment." *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 85–119. <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.voll.no2.01>.
- Kaiser, Walter. "Psalm 72: An Historical and Messianic Current Example of Antiochene Hermeneutical *Theoria*." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 2 (June 2009): 257–70.
- Kannengiesser, Charles. *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity*. 2004. One Volume ed. Reprint, Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Kelly, J. N. D. *Early Christian Doctrines*. 5th ed. New York: Bloomsbury, 1977.
- Kepple, Robert J. "An Analysis of Antiochene Exegesis of Galatians 4:24–26." *Westminster Theological Journal* 39, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 239–49.
- Knight, Jonathan M. "Alexandria, Alexandrian Christianity." In *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, edited by Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, 34–37. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- McGuckin, J. A. "The Exegetical Metaphysic of Origen of Alexandria." In *What is the Bible? The Patristic Doctrine of Scripture*, edited by Matthew Baker and Mark Mourachian, 3–19. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17mcsbk.5>.
- Mitchell, Margaret M. "Patristic Rhetoric on Allegory: Origen and Eustathius Put 1 Samuel 28 on Trial." *Journal of Religion* 85, no. 3 (2005): 414–45. <https://doi.org/10.1086/429573>.
- Morrison, John Douglas. *Has God Said? Scripture, The Word of God, and the Crisis of Theological Authority*. Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series 5. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006.

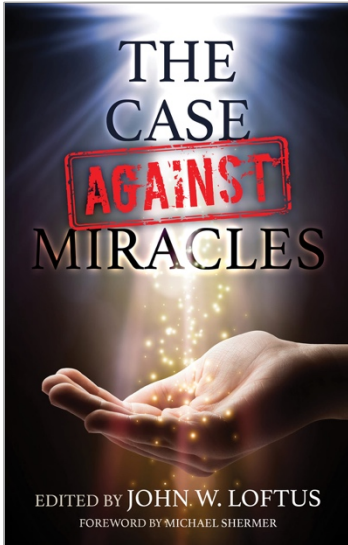
- Myers, Allen C., ed. "Interpretation, Biblical." In *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*. Rev. ed, 526–28. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987.
- Nassif, Bradley. "John Chrysostom on the Nature of Revelation and Task of Exegesis." In *What is the Bible? The Patristic Doctrine of Scripture*, edited by Matthew Baker and Mark Mourachian, 49–66. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17mcsbk.8>.
- . "The 'Spiritual Exegesis' of Scripture: The School of Antioch Revisited." *Anglican Theological Review* 75, no. 4 (1993): 437–70.
- Newman, Scott. "The Scandal of Reason—Part I: A Response to Post-Modern Evangelicalism." *Conservative Theological Journal* 1, no. 3 (December 1997): 254–67.
- Olbricht, Thomas H. "Greek Rhetoric and the Allegorical Rhetoric of Philo and Clement of Alexandria," in "Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible," ed. Stanley E. Porter and Dennis L. Stamps. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* 195 (2002): 23–47.
- Poythress, Vern Sheridan. "Divine Meaning of Scripture." *Westminster Theological Journal* 48, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 241–79.
- Russell, Donald A., and David Konstan, eds., trans. *Heraclitus: Homeric Problems*. Writings from the Greco-Roman World 14. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005.
- Ryan, Stephen D. "Psalm 22 in Syriac Tradition." *Letter & Spirit: The Bible and the Church Fathers, The Liturgical Context of Patristic Exegesis* 7 (2011): 157–72.
- Simonetti, Manlio. *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis*. Translated by John A. Hughes. New York: T&T Clark, 1994.
- Slade, Darren M. "Hagioprepēs: The Rationalizing of Saintly Sin and Atrocities." In *Sacred Troubling Topics in Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an*, edited by Roberta Sabbath, forthcoming. Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Stamps, Dennis L. "The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament as a Rhetorical Device: A Methodological Proposal." In *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, edited by Stanley E. Porter, 9–37. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.
- Torrance, Alexis. "Barsanuphius, John, and Dorotheos on Scripture: Voices from the Desert in Sixth-Century Gaza." In *What is the Bible? The Patristic Doctrine of Scripture*, edited by Matthew Baker and Mark Mourachian, 67–81. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17mcsbk.9>.
- Trigg, Joseph W. "Eustathius of Antioch's Attack on Origen: What is at Issue in an Ancient Controversy." *Journal of Religion* 75, no. 2 (1995): 219–38. <https://doi.org/10.1086/489567>.

- Valantasis, Richard. "Adam's Body: Uncovering Esoteric Traditions in the Apocryphon of John and Origen's Dialogue with Heraclides." *Second Century* 7, no. 3 (1989): 150–62.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. 1988. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998.
- Wood, Christine E. "Anamnesis and Allegory in Ambrose's *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis*." *Letter & Spirit: The Bible and the Church Fathers, The Liturgical Context of Patristic Exegesis* 7 (2011): 51–66.
- Yanney, Rodolph. "Spiritual Interpretation of Scripture in the School of Alexandria." *Coptic Church Review* 10, no. 3 (1989): 74–81.
- Young, Frances M. "The Rhetorical Schools and Their Influence on Patristic Exegesis." In *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*. 1989. Pbk. ed, edited by Rowan Williams. Reprint, 182–99. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511555350.012>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

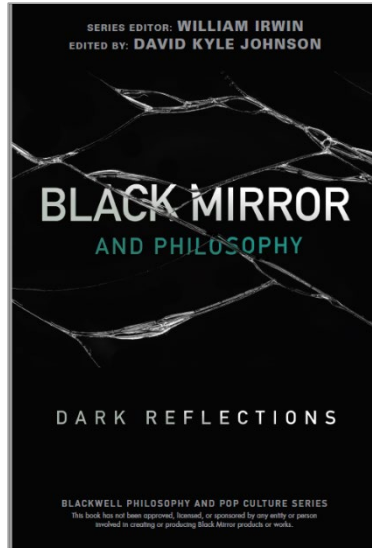
[Darren M. Slade](#) is the Co-Founder and Research Director for the FaithX Project, as well as a staff member at the Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design. Having earned his PhD from the Rawlings School of Divinity (Virginia), Dr. Slade is now a theological historian, systematician, and critical rationalist philosopher who specializes in historic-speculative theology, theoretical metaphysics, and the socio-political development of religious belief systems. His academic publications include topics ranging from the philosophy of religion, ancient Near Eastern and Second-Temple hermeneutical practices, church and Islamic history, and the psychology of religion. Several of his publications are available for free at darrenmslade.academia.edu.

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



The Case Against Miracles

Hypatia Press, 2019



*Black Mirror and Philosophy:
Dark Reflections*

Wiley Blackwell, 2019

